



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>

Investigating Lexical Bundles Used by EFL Learners (A Study of a Group of EFL Arab Learners in Malaysia)

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Received: 11/ 4/ 2025, Accepted: 28/5 /2025, Online Published: 25/ 7/ 2025

Abstract

Language learning is a complex and time-intensive task. Learners need to be aware of multiple aspects of the language to become competent users. On the lexical level, learners encounter different ways of learning words, including lexical bundles. This study investigates the lexical bundles used by a group of Arab EFL learners in an informal, friendly discussion (a spoken register) during the academic year 2023-2024. Three master's students were randomly selected for this study. Their informal conversation was analysed in terms of structural and functional usage. The results showed that proficiency level is a factor in the use of lexical bundles; the more proficient the learners, the more they use those formulaic sequences. The study advocates raising awareness of lexical bundles, as this could assist EFL learners and improve their language skills. Examining

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the utilisation of lexical bundles in various conversational settings and competence levels will require further research.

Key Words: Lexical bundles, Arab EFL learners, structural and functional analysis, formulaic sequences.

دراسة الحزم المعجمية التي يستخدمها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية
(دراسة لمجموعة من الطلبة العرب متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ماليزيا)

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المستخلص

تعلم اللغة مهمة معقدة وتستغرق وقتاً طويلاً. المتعلمون بحاجة لمعرفة وإدراك مجالات اللغة المتعددة ليكونوا مستخدمين أكفاء. على المستوى المعجمي يواجه المتعلمون طرق مختلفة لتعلم المفردات، بما في ذلك الحزم المعجمية. هذه الدراسة تبحث استخدام الحزم المعجمية من قبل مجموعة من العرب المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية بصورة غير رسمية، محادثاتهم ودية (تسجيل الكلام المنطوق) خلال السنة الدراسية 2023-2024. ثلاثة طلاب في الماجستير اختيروا بصورة عشوائية لهذه الدراسة. تم تحليل محادثتهم الغير رسمي من حيث الاستخدام البنوي والوظيفي. بينت النتائج بان مستوى المهارة عنصر في استخدام الحزم المعجمية; كلما كان المتعلمون اكثر كفاءة كلما زاد استخدامهم لتلك التسلسلات الصيغية. تدعو هذه الدراسة لزيادة الوعي بالحزم المعجمية الذي بدوره قد يساعد المتعلمين الاجانب للغة الانكليزية ويحسن من مهاراتهم اللغوية. ان دراسة استخدام الحزم المعجمية في مختلف اطر المحادثات ومستوى الكفاءة سيتطلب المزيد من البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحزم المعجمية، متعلموا اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية من العرب، التحليل البنوي والوظيفي، تسلسلات صيغية.

1. INTRODUCTION

Acquiring a second language, such as English, involves mastering vocabulary through various word combinations. Among these, lexical bundles—the focus of this study—constitute a distinct category of frequently occurring multi-word sequences. Cortes (2015, p. 205) defines lexical bundles as "uninterrupted strings of three or more words that frequently recur in a register, identified empirically by running a computer programme on a corpus of language texts." Their prevalence in speech provides linguistic advantages, as they exhibit strong grammatical cohesion, enabling them to integrate into fundamental structural categories (Cortes, 2004). Lexical bundles can be classified based on structural (how they are formed) and functional (the communicative role they serve) characteristics.

The role of lexical bundles in language production is significant, as they contribute to meaning construction and enhance discourse coherence (Hyland, 2008). In spoken discourse, these bundles are often stored and retrieved holistically from the mental lexicon (Nekrasova, 2009). The ability to effectively use such formulaic sequences is associated with achieving native-like proficiency (Dufon, 1995; House, 1996, as cited in Nekrasova, 2009). Traditional measures of lexical development—such as lexical variation (vocabulary range), lexical density (content word proportion), and lexical sophistication (use of rare words)—often fall short in distinguishing between levels of second-language proficiency. Consequently, examining lexical bundles as extended collocations provides a more nuanced understanding of learners' language output.

Several studies have investigated lexical bundle usage from various perspectives, including high school reading materials (Lasmita, Harahap, & Arsyad, 2023), gender-based variations (Kanglong & Afzaal, 2020), and proficiency-related differences (Li, Zhang, & Reynolds, 2023). However, most research has focused on learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), with relatively limited investigation into Arab EFL learners.

Recently, number of studies have investigated the use of lexical bundles in varied registers and genres using corpus-based approaches (Ruan, 2017; Wang, 2017; Wright, 2019). A ground-breaking study by Biber et al. (2004) compared lexical bundles in academic and formal spoken discourse. Cortes (2004) studied bundles usage in theses and professional authors' scholarly papers in social and natural sciences. Likewise, Hyland (2008a) conducted big picture studies on bundles' structural and functional properties in research articles and student theses in diverse fields. Kwary et al. (2017) focused on bundle use in research articles in various topics such as zoology, biology, physics, and chemistry. These studies have collectively indicated that the functional distribution of lexical bundles is highly context-dependent and varies substantially across academic genres and disciplines. So, recently, the studies, however, have been conducted on written academic discourse or formal spoken registers with relatively less emphasis on informal spoken English, especially for non-native speakers. Research directly on the use of lexical bundles in informal, friendly interactions by Arab EFL postgraduate students, who are a group that frequently employs English as a lingua franca in multicultural environments like Malaysia, still needs more investigation. This study plugs the gap by investigating the structural and functional characteristics of lexical bundles in spontaneous informal conversations among this under-researched learner group.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between English proficiency levels and the use of lexical bundles in spoken discourse among Arab EFL learners. Specifically, it investigates whether higher proficiency correlates with increased use of lexical bundles.

A higher level of English proficiency is associated with a greater use of lexical bundles in spoken discourse. The suggested questions are:

1. What are the most frequently used lexical bundles among Arab EFL learners in spoken discourse?
2. How does the use of lexical bundles vary among learners?
3. To what extent does English proficiency influence the use of lexical bundles in spoken discourse?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of lexical bundles was first introduced as frequently co-occurring sequences of words in discourse: “...*word forms often co-occur in longer sequences, called lexical bundles*” (Biber et al. 1999, p. 989). Subsequent studies by Biber et al. (2004) and Biber (2006) expanded on this definition, proposing comprehensive taxonomies for classifying lexical bundles based on structural and functional criteria.

One of the key studies in this area is Juknevičienė (2009), which compared the use of lexical bundles between Lithuanian EFL learners and native English speakers across three proficiency levels. The findings indicate that non-native learners rely on a more restricted set of lexical phrases, often overusing familiar, “safe” bundles in their writing. In contrast, learners with higher English proficiency—or native speakers—tend to employ a more diverse range of lexical bundles. This suggests that lexical bundle usage is closely linked to language proficiency, with more proficient speakers demonstrating greater variability and accuracy in their use.

The structural classification of lexical bundles, as outlined in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al., 1999), remains a foundational framework in lexical bundle research (Cortes, 2002, 2004; Hyland, 2008a, 2008b). This classification originally divided lexical bundles into 12 major structural categories. However, for the purpose of this study, a modified version of this model is adopted, consolidating these categories into two broader groups: phrasal and clausal lexical bundles.

Regarding functional categorization, this study follows the taxonomy developed by Cortes (2002) and later refined by Biber et al. (2003, 2004, 2007). This classification identifies three primary functions of lexical bundles:

- i. Stance bundles – Expressing attitudes, certainty, or epistemic stance.
- ii. Discourse organizers – Structuring discourse and guiding the flow of information.
- iii. Referential expressions – Referring to entities, concepts, or actions within discourse.

Further insights into lexical bundle use among L2 learners come from Granger (1998, p. 151), who examined non-native speakers' academic essays and found that "*learners use fewer lexical chunks than their native-speaker counterparts and exhibit less sensitivity to collocational relationships.*" The findings suggest that lower and intermediate learners demonstrate limited awareness and use of lexical bundles, while more advanced learners show greater competence in integrating these multi-word expressions into their speech and writing.

Previous research consistently underscores the significance of lexical bundle competence in second language proficiency. Advanced learners tend to identify and use lexical bundles more effectively, while lower-proficiency learners rely on a restricted set of repetitive expressions. This relationship between proficiency and lexical bundle use forms the core focus of the present study, which investigates how Arab EFL learners at different proficiency levels employ lexical bundles in spoken discourse.

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The frequency-driven method is usually employed in lexical bundle research. However, the frequency cut-off thresholds differ across studies. For instance, Biber and Barbieri (2007) set a threshold of 40 happenings per million words, whereas Hyland (2008) assumed a 20 per million words benchmark. Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010) presented an additional criterion of cohesiveness, dropping the frequency cut-off to 10 per million words. These differences highlight the differing methodological approaches to recognising and analysing lexical bundles.

The current study follows a frequency-driven approach to lexical bundle identification, as frequency serves as a key indicator of linguistic importance. High-frequency lexical bundles play an essential role in spoken discourse, as they reflect conventionalized language use and enable fluency. Recognising the most frequent lexical bundles provides awareness into which word sequences are necessary for communication, distinguishing common, naturally occurring structures from less conventional ones. For example, commonly used bundles such as "what do you think" and "I don't know" illustrate two key characteristics of lexical bundles:

1. They are usually non-idiomatic, meaning their interpretation depends on literal rather than figurative meaning.
2. Most of the times, they have lack in the grammatical structure, functioning instead as prefabricated discourse units.

Building

on this method, the current study recognises the five most commonly used lexical bundles in spoken discourse among Arab EFL learners. It adopts that learners who produce a higher frequency of these bundles show greater English language proficiency. Thus, a comparative analysis will be conducted to find the relationship between English proficiency levels and the frequency of lexical bundle use in spoken registers.

4. METHODOLOGY

The current study examines the use of lexical bundles among Arab EFL learners, focusing on their structural and functional characteristics in spoken discourse. A qualitative research method will be used to explore the relationship between English proficiency levels and the frequency of lexical bundle usage in informal speech.

4.1. Participants

The current study focused on three Arab postgraduate students registered in a master's program at a public university in Malaysia. All the students were 24 years old and had varying levels of English proficiency, assessed through two standardized tests:

- The Malaysian University English Test (MUET)
- The Test on Communication in English (UPM-TOCIE)

The student's proficiency levels were classified based on their test scores:

- Student A: Band 3 in both MUET and UPM-TOCIE
- Student B: Band 4 in both MUET and UPM-TOCIE
- Student C: Band 3 in both MUET and UPM-TOCIE

4.2. Data Collection

To examine their use of lexical bundles in spoken registers, the students engaged in a spontaneous conversation on the topic: *"One Chance to Travel to One Country."* The conversation was occurred in an informal setting and recorded by using audio equipment. No visual recordings were made, the study focused on linguistic content rather than non-verbal cues. To ensure natural speech patterns, the students were not told that lexical bundle usage was the primary focus of the study.

4.3. Data Analysis

The audio recordings have been transcribed into textual data for analysis. To identify lexical bundles, the N-Gram Phrase Extractor, a computational tool for linguistic analysis, has been employed. This program removed three- and four-word lexical bundles based on their frequency within the transcribed conversations. The current study applied a minimum occurrence threshold of one within a corpus of approximately 1,500 words.

Following the extraction, the most frequently occurring lexical bundles have been identified and analysed in this study. A comparative analysis study was conducted to show the relationship between English proficiency levels and the frequency of lexical bundle usage among the participants.

The data analysis in the current study focuses on three key aspects of lexical bundles

1. **Frequency** – The occurrence rate of lexical bundles in spoken discourse.
2. **Structural Classification “attitudinal stance bundles “** – The syntactic patterns of lexical bundles.

3. **Discourse Functions “functional (discourse-related) bundles”** – The communicative roles of lexical bundles in conversation.

4.4. Frequency

The lexical bundles are categorised into three-word and four-word bundles, and their frequency of use by each participant is displayed in the following tables.

Table 1: Three-Word Lexical Bundles

Lexical Bundle	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
A lot of	5	6	2
I agree that	1	2	2
I hope that	2	2	1
We have to	1	4	2
A good idea	1	2	1
Total	9	16	8

The three-word bundles most used were “*a lot of*,” “*I agree that*,” and “*we have to*.” Candidate B demonstrated the highest frequency of lexical bundle use in this category (16 occurrences), particularly with “*a lot of*,” indicating greater proficiency and fluency in using such lexical combinations. The candidates A and C used these bundles with less frequency, likely reflecting a lower level of proficiency or different speech patterns. At the same time, the table below shows the four-word lexical bundles which are used by the same candidates.

Table 2: Four-Word Lexical Bundles

Lexical Bundle	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
I would like to	1	4	2
At the same time	1	4	2
What do you think	1	2	1
You might want to	1	2	1
It depends on you	2	3	1
Total	6	15	7

In the four-word bundles, “*I would like to*” and “*at the same time*” were the most frequently used, particularly by Candidate B (15 occurrences). The data propose that higher proficiency is connected with more frequent and varied use of lexical bundles, including the four-word bundles. The candidates A and C used four-word bundles less frequently, indicating that they might be less comfortable using these complex structures in informal conversation.

4.5. Structural Classification “attitudinal stance bundles “

Lexical bundles in spoken records usually reflect personal expressions, attitudes, and desires, aligning with the interactive nature of the conversation. The structural classification of lexical bundles in the current study follows established frameworks (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Cortes, 2004), which classify them into:

These bundles **express feelings, desires, preferences, or obligations**. They reflect the speaker’s **stance** in the conversation.

Lexical Bundle	Function	Examples
I would like to	Desire	shows strong desire or intention “I would like to visit...”
You don’t have to	Reduce obligation	Softens obligation or gives advice (e.g., “You don’t have to spend...”)
You might want to	Suggestion	Used for showing polite and giving soft advice
We have to	Obligation Necessity	OR Express necessity like “We have to send ten emails today”
I hope that	Expectation OR wish	Expresses wishes or hope in a positive way

These bundles reproduce the speaker’s own stance. Higher-proficiency speakers (like Candidate B) use a greater variability and frequency of stance bundles.

4.5.2. Discourse Functions “functional (discourse-related) bundles”

Lexical Bundle	Function	Examples from Data
At the same time	Sequence OR disparity	“At the same time, I need to ask her”
What do you think	Collaboration	“What do you think about it?”
A lot of	Referential expression	“A lot of people like football”
I agree that	Agreement	“I agree that we can eat sushi.”
A good idea	Valuation	“It’s a good idea, right?”

These bundles support building ideas and manage conversation. This usage provides supporting fluency, turn-taking, and elaboration in informal spoken interaction.

4.5.1. Analysis of the Six Most Frequent Lexical Bundles

This section categorises and examines the six most frequently occurring lexical bundles used in the participants’ spoken discourse. These bundles were nominated based on their frequency and importance across the three participants, as extracted using the N-Gram

Phrase Extractor tool. Each bundle is discussed below in terms of its frequency, structural pattern, and discourse function.

1. A lot of – Referential/Quantity

The lexical bundle “*a lot of*” was the most frequently occurring referential expression, used by all three candidates at varying frequencies. This phrase is commonly used to indicate quantitative emphasis or broad generalisations.

▪ **Candidate A:**

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

Frequency: 2 occurrences

▪ **Candidate B**

- “*Nowadays, a lot of people like to watch Korean dramas or TV shows.*”
- “*In this program, it has introduced a lot of nice places in Korea.*”
- “*She gained a lot of knowledge during her working holiday.*”
- “*She met a lot of people.*”
- “*She did a lot of exciting things like bungee jumping.*”
- “*There are a lot of interesting places for us to discover in Asian countries.*”

Frequency: 6 occurrences

Candidate B’s frequent use of “*a lot of*” aligns with her higher English proficiency level (Band 4 in both MUET and UPM-TOCIE), suggesting that a more proficient speaker is more likely to employ referential expressions to elaborate on ideas and provide detailed descriptions.

▪ **Candidate C**

- “*There are a lot of advantages of travelling, lol.*”
- “*We have to prepare a lot of documents.*”

Frequency: 2 occurrences

Like Candidate A, Candidate C used “*a lot of*” sparingly, which may reflect a lower tendency to elaborate using referential expressions than Candidate B.

2. I would like to – Attitudinal Stance (Desire)

Attitudinal stance bundles have been used to express personal preferences, desires, or intentions. The most frequently occurring bundles in this classification is *I would like to*, which had been employed by Candidates B and C to articulate their travel preferences.

- **Candidate B:** “*If I had a chance to travel to a country, hmm... I would like to choose Korea.*”
 - This bundle reflects **her personal preference and desire** to visit Korea.
- **Candidate C:** “*I would like to visit European countries because I have never been to a country with four seasons. I would like to experience four seasons.*”
 - In this instance, the lexical bundle is used twice to express her strong preference and aspiration to travel to Europe and experience seasonal changes.

3. At the same time – Discourse Organiser (Simultaneity)

This type of bundle is used in elaborating ideas, sequencing events, and expressing simultaneity. Prepositional phrase expressions, in particular, contribute to cohesion and logical progression within discourse.

Example: *at the same time*

- This bundle has been used by Candidate A (once) and Candidate B (twice) to indicate simultaneous occurrences or dual perspectives:
 - **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.*”
 - **Candidate B:** “*At the same time, you can learn German again. It is a good idea, right?*”

4. What do you think – Discourse Organiser (Topic Engagement)

The phrase *What do you think* was frequently employed by all three candidates as a discourse organiser to introduce new topics or seek opinions. However, Candidate B used this phrase more frequently than the others, indicating a stronger inclination towards engaging others in discussion and managing discourse flow.

- **Candidate B:** “*What do you think, Candidate C? There are a lot of interesting places for us to discover in Asian countries. What do you think about it?*”
 - Here, Candidate B uses the bundle to engage Candidate C and prompt her perspective on travel destinations.
- **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 utilises the discourse organiser to seek validation and align personal experience with peer perspectives.
- **Candidate C:** “*Save money and still can enjoy a lot, hahaha... What do you think about it?*”
 - This instance illustrates Candidate C's use of the phrase to reinforce her stance on financial considerations and elicit agreement or further elaboration from others.

Interestingly, topic introduction/focus organisers were commonly used, while **no topic elaboration/clarification lexical bundles** were observed in the conversation. This suggests that while the learners actively introduced topics and sought opinions, they did not employ discourse organisers to expand or clarify points explicitly.

5. You might want to – Directive/Hypothetical Expression

This type of bundles begin with first- or second-person pronoun which followed by a dependent clause fragment, usually serving to mitigate statements, express hypothetical scenarios, or project future intentions.

Example: *you might want to*

- The above bundle has been used by all three candidates in discussions about travel decisions:
 - **Candidate A:** “*I need to think about it because after I graduate, I might want to find a stable job first. So, I have no time to do Uber.*”
 - **Candidate B:** “*I feel very stressed in my studies, so I might want to travel with you guys.*”

- **Candidate C:** *“You might want to know the culture of that country because... umm... different countries have different cultures.”*

6. You don't have to – Obligation Expression

Directive stance bundles convey obligation, necessity, or restrictions. The phrase *you don't have to*, commonly used to give advice or minimise obligations, was used twice by Candidate A as a form of directive guidance in the conversation.

- **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 you like and enjoy it.”*

These instances indicate that Candidate A is offering reassurance and reducing the perceived necessity of financial concerns or overthinking in travel decisions.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Depending on the data which are presented in Tables 1 and 2, Candidate B, compared to the other participants, used more common lexical bundles. This line up with the assumption that a higher level of proficiency is associated with a greater use of lexical bundles. Candidate B, who achieved Band 4 in both the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) and the Test on Communication in English (UPM-TOCIE), confirmed the most frequent use of these lexical bundles. Conversely, the candidates A and C, who both received Band 3 in both tests, used fewer lexical bundles. This proposes that a lower proficiency level results in less frequent and varied use of lexical bundles in spoken registers.

The common lexical bundles had been recognised using a frequency-driven approach, focusing on three- and four-word lexical bundles. During the 15-minute informal conversation recorded among the three UPM master's students, several lexical bundles were frequently used. The most common three-word bundle identified was *“a lot of”*, which was used 13 times throughout the conversation. This bundle is classified under referential expressions, specifically under the category of specification of attributes, which refers to the quality specification of entities being discussed.

In terms of functionality, the candidates primarily used lexical bundles for expressing personal feelings, desires, and uncertainties, which is typical in informal conversations with close peers. For instance, one candidate expressed her uncertainty regarding whether she needed more time to think about her decision to travel, showing the personal and subjective nature of some lexical bundle usage.

Most of the lexical bundles in the conversation did not form complete structural units. Only about 15 per cent of the bundles could be considered complete phrases or clauses. Rather, most lexical bundles functioned as bridges between two structural units. These bundles typically began at the boundary of a clause or phrase, and the last word of the bundle often served as the first element of a subsequent structural unit. This structural

characteristic highlights the fluid and connecting nature of lexical bundles in conversational speech, serving to smooth transitions and maintain the flow of dialogue.

The results of the current study are consistent with the hypothesis, which recommended that a higher proficiency in English leads to a greater use of lexical bundles in spoken communication. In addition, the data showing Candidate B's higher frequency of lexical bundle usage is conclusive evidence of her knowledge of English compared to the other participant.

Besides, the current study emphasises the role of lexical bundles in helping learners express themselves more fluently in informal, spontaneous conversations. The frequent use of these bundles not only reveals a higher level of proficiency but also suggests that these sequences are essential for natural, coherent communication.

6. CONCLUSION

The main aim of the current study is to examine whether the level of proficiency in English influences the use of lexical bundles among EFL learners, specifically three UPM master's students. The results strongly support the hypothesis that a higher level of proficiency in English is linked with a greater frequency of lexical bundle usage. Lexical bundles play a critical role in spoken and written contexts, contributing to clearer and more coherent communication. The use of these bundles can help the learners express themselves more naturally, making interactions with others more fluent and smoother.

On the other hand, it is important to note that formulaic language, which includes lexical bundles, is not always easy to classify into clear-cut two-, three-, or four-word units. Linguists have long debated the boundaries and varying degrees of formulaic language, making it a complex study.

The results of the current study significantly improve our understanding of how lexical bundle usage correlates with language proficiency. While the current study provides valuable insights, there are certain limitations, notably the small sample size (only three students). Future studies should address these limitations and explore additional variables that can influence lexical bundle usage. Expanding the sample size and examining other possible factors could yield a more comprehensive understanding of the role of lexical bundles in language proficiency.

Despite its limitations, the current study offers encouraging implications for language learners. It underscores the importance of lexical bundles in language acquisition and encourages students to include these patterns in their spoken and written English. By doing so, learners can increase their clarity and fluency in communication.

In conclusion, lexical bundles are a vital part of language learning, and further research should continue to examine the factors that influence their usage. These results could help EFL teachers and learners alike understand the value of these structures in enhancing language proficiency and communication effectiveness.

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