

## **Innovative and Efficient Construction Grammar**

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However unique the architecture, no modern structure is ever built completely from scratch. Incorporation of some prefabricated pieces enables builders and other manufacturers to quickly and efficiently create effective structures or products. Much recent research on formulaic expressions and collocations has shown that academic discourse and text can be successfully built with a broad range of pre-fab sentence chunks and commonly-occurring expressions. Construction grammar in language teaching and learning presents a whole unit approach to conventionalized form-meaning pairing. This presentation suggests a number of practical applications of current research to make the teaching of academic language more efficient and effective. An easy technique that language teachers and researchers can rely on with great effect is to have students build up a range of stock expressions to be used in context, as needed. A range of common active and passive phrases, sentence chunks, or collocational expressions can be combined with other pre-fab constructions to use both in speaking or writing: e.g. in combinations with modal verbs or infinitives such as can/may be made/used/done, is considered to be/shown to be/known to be.

### **A PREAMBLE: CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND EFFICIENT TEACHING**

The theoretical and practical foundations for the approach to second language (L2) teaching and learning discussed below lie in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar. Construction grammar is an approach to analyzing and teaching language that emerged primarily due to wide-spread disenchantment with the neglect of the quality of production in communicative teaching (see, for example, Hinkel, 2003, 2006; Widdowson, 2003). In construction grammar, the main unit of language, both in speaking and writing, is the grammatical construction, and not incremental grammar and vocabulary elements that require rules to combine them into phrases and sentences. Construction grammar in language teaching and learning presents "a whole unit" approach to all kinds of conventionalized form-meaning combinations (or pairing). That is, the grammar of English is made up of various construction sets, e.g. phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases, and collocations, which can be taught and learned as pre-fabricated expressions (e.g. Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Wray, 2002; Wray & Perkins, 2000). The greatest benefit of construction grammar is that it allows language teachers to work with more efficient pathways in practical language teaching (Hinkel, 2009).

Grammar instruction that has the goal of preparing students for professional activities and academic studies in English-speaking countries needs to be designed to develop learners' practical and useful skills, directly relevant to producing written and academic text. Teaching grammar for writing cannot take place in isolation from the lexical and discourse features of text, e.g. the verb tenses in academic prose are determined by the type of context in which they are used: the present tense is useful in citations of sources but not in descriptions of case studies (Hinkel, 2002).

Most importantly, grammar instruction has to take place in tandem with instruction on vocabulary and academic collocations. A great deal of research carried out on the effectiveness of learning grammar in contextual multi-word constructions (Lewis, 1993, 1997; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). The goal of practice (practice, and practice) with

grammar constructions is to help learners develop productive fluency in academic writing and, to some degree, automaticity in generating academic prose.

In the 1980s, Cowie (1988, p. 131) analyzed a large body of authentic English data. He found that thousands of multi-word units of language (also called chunks) remain stable in form across much of their range of occurrence and that thousands of others "tolerate only minor variations," which are themselves regular and predictable in their uses (see the Appendix for a sample of sentence and phrase stems).

To date, a large body of research has established the fact that effective L2 usage in academic and other contexts demands relatively advanced language proficiency. For this reason, applications of construction grammar models to L2 pedagogy do not need to conflict with those that have proven to be fruitful and expedient in any setting where L2 is taught and learned. In practically all cases, teachers have the ultimate responsibility for curricular and instructional decisions that have an indelible effect on students' learning. Classroom instructors are the ones who are best suited to implement appropriate, relevant, and effective instruction. They are the best judges of the applicability of particular curricular models that can be combined with other approaches to provide the greatest benefit for the students. In virtually all academic and learning contexts, however, producing reasonably fluent and accurate spoken and written L2 text requires students to attain a relatively advanced range of vocabulary and grammar features. As every L2 user knows from experience, attaining a necessary level of proficiency takes focused instruction and concerted effort from both teachers and learners. And expediting this process at least to some extent definitely couldn't hurt. Construction grammar is another tool, highly effective and efficient in many settings, that teachers can use to help students get to where they want and need to be in their language proficiency.

## **CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR: FOUNDATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

- Cognitive linguistics establishes connections between sets of constructions -- in the form of lexical strings -- and thus enables a greater control of learner grammar in speech and writing. That is, when working with whole constructions, both form and function are essential, e.g. morphosyntactic features of language (word forms), as well as meaning and pragmatic functions. For example, *the author of the book states that...* vs. *this guy in the book is talking about...*
- The language system and everyday language usage do not entail assembling (or building) structures, based on a myriad of rules, in the process of communication. To use an example, many tiny and medium sized pieces of language need to be assembled in such an introductory sentence string as in:

*The increasing interest in xxx has heightened the need for ... / to ...*

In this example, the following opportunities for language errors arise immediately. These can be errors with articles, active/passive forms of adjectives, prepositions, tenses and verb forms, noun and verb form confusion, you name it:

The increasing interest in xxx has heightened the need for [noun]... / to [verb]...

All these opportunities for errors can be eliminated by means of an approach adopted in construction grammar (more on this below).

- Instead of assembling a great number of constructions while producing spoken or written text, construction grammar instead relies on "storing" them, as prototypical constructions, i.e. lexical strings with substitutable parts, and deploying as needed in context. For example:

*the author/book/article ~~ states/comments/notes/continues/observes/  
points out/indicates*

- These constructions range from the highly regular and systematic to the almost completely idiomatic, e.g. collocations. For example, the uses of *little/a little*, *few/a few*, or *some/several* are far more regular than *an interest has arisen* or *many educators/scientists/analysts have recently turned to*, which are (almost) collocations. (These cannot be grammatically assembled from their constituent elements.)
- In construction grammar, there is no clear-cut division between regular and collocational / idiomatic expressions. That is, such thorny issues as regular, irregular, and collocational constructions can be simply taught and learned as whole units, thus skipping the entire difficult and error-prone process required for assembling them.
- Constructions can be deployed in writing, for example, as written genres require. For example, *Hey dude* vs. *Dear Dean Powells* can be appropriate and requisite in various genres of writing, but confusing the two may not be the best way to proceed.
- Instruction in construction grammar actually teaches the forms and associated principles based on which both native and nonnative speakers can control contextually-appropriate language production. That is, novice L2 users, native and nonnative alike, have to learn these, too, in high school or college.

According to Wray and Perkins (2000) and Wray (2002), in L2 teaching prefabricated chunks can and should be treated as various types of "word strings" that are to be stored and retrieved whole from memory. Many adults can recite L1 or L2 poems or texts that they learned several decades earlier, and there is little reason to doubt that L2 learners are quite capable of similar feats in their L2 production.

## **WHAT? MEMORIZE?**

According to Ellis (1997, p. 129-130), collocational chunks can consist of entire memorized sentences or phrases that include from four to ten words, and these can allow learners to create new constructions to add to their stock of expressions. In this sense, for learners, grammatical constructions, such as commonly occurring sentences, clauses, and phrases, can be "viewed as big words" and memorized as lexicalized stems. Many of these preconstructed sentences and phrases are "institutionalized" because they occur more frequently in certain types of discourse than in others (Hinkel, 2004, 2009, 2011; Nation, 2001, 2009; Pawley and Syder, 1983).

The number of such memorizable constructions and sentences is limited only by one's available time and diligence. Research has also demonstrated that memorizing long chunks of text "is at its simplest the equivalent of memorizing so many long 'words,' but only if no grammatical analysis (e.g. segmentation) is ever performed on these items, "a virtual impossibility in the contexts of creative second language learning" (Ellis, 1997, p. 129-130).

## KEY ADVANTAGES

In light of the fact that language instruction almost always takes place under great time constraints for many teachers and learners, it is important to maximize language gains and make learning as efficient as possible.

- Using language chunks in instruction and learning is likely to be one of the few available expedient routes to relative L2 accuracy and fluency that leads to production and subsequent automatization (Hinkel, 2004).
- For language learners, a tremendous advantage in construction grammar lies in expedited learning and reduced work load. For example, high-frequency constructions, collocations, phrases, and expressions can be learned as whole units, instead of just their elements that have to be further assembled during the process of language production (Hinkel, 2011).
- Differences and similarities between constructions allow learners to create new construction units in various combinations or to modify those that are already "stored away."
- For L2 learners and academic writers, common or frequently repeated problem areas, say, with articles and prepositional phrases, or sentence fragments (incomplete sentences), can also be relatively easily avoided, if these are dealt with as whole constructions, instead of being incrementally assembled.
- In language teaching, a very efficient perspective is to look at grammar and vocabulary as a continuum of constructions, from the highly systematic and regular (e.g. 3rd person singular verbs or subject-verb agreement) to the much more fixed, such as collocations, or idioms (e.g. *change is in the air*, or *this evidence sheds a great deal of light on current technological advancements*).

The construction grammar approach to language teaching can be used with language elements of all shapes and sizes, from tiny bits, such as word prefixes and suffixes to phrases to whole sentences or even sets of sentences, including the perennial areas of difficulty, such as metaphors and idioms.

## TEACHING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE WITH PREFABS

To some extent, the uses of specific linguistic features may depend on the discipline and context in which spoken or written text is produced. Predictably, business case studies, reports in biology or chemistry, or descriptions of experiments in psychology may contain a higher number of past tense verbs than a paper that discusses generally applicable observations. For example, most introductory textbooks in philosophy, sociology, economics, or biology include high numbers of present tense verbs (Hinkel, 2004, 2011; Nation, 2001).

Despite some amount of variation that can be identified in the linguistic features of texts across disciplines and particular academic subgenres, many researchers have identified what some call recurring features of L2 and academic register and text (Nation & Webb, 2011). Other studies of L2 and academic text have identified a range of lexical and grammar features that required focused instruction and concerted effort from both teachers and learners (Nation, 2001, 2009; Widdowson, 2003).

Among the most urgent language features that require persistent and intensive instruction, the following occupy a top priority. All these can be taught and learned in conjunction with the

phrases and sentence stems (see Appendix) where they tend to occur. These language elements include:

- Expanding the productive repertoire of common nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs typically found in academic and formal prose (e.g. *analysis, consistent, development, evidence, rapid*)
- Contextual functions and uses of verb tenses in discourse
- Functions and uses of passive phrases in academic text
- Functions of adverbs in pivoting discourse and information flow
- Backgrounding information in subordinate clauses
- Textual features of cohesion and coherence in discourse
- Functions and uses of hedging devices in academic prose

(Based on Hinkel, 2002)

Although at first glance teaching the features of academic discourse and text may seem difficult and somewhat overwhelming, the greatest advantage is the fact that written and academic discourse is highly conventionalized. With the ground work in prefabs and follow-up practice, producing academic prose in both speech and writing is actually relatively easy.

A great deal of research carried out on the effectiveness of learning grammar in contextual lexicalized chunks and sentence stems, i.e. whole sentences and phrases, and recurrent patterned expressions, has shown that these are fundamental to both L1 and L2 learning and use (Ellis, 1997; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Stock grammatical and lexical chunks can become an efficient means of expanding L2 learners' language range, particularly when they are also taught how to substitute discrete elements appropriately and in practical ways. For example, the fact that the function of noun clauses is similar to that of simple nouns can be addressed by means of substitutions in patterned expressions common in academic prose:

*The experiment/ data/study shows that xxx increases(with yyy) / an increase of xxx/ the growth/rise of xxx.*

Heightening learners' awareness of the structure of complete sentences in academic prose (as opposed to fragments), as well as important distinctions between conversational and formal written register, should represent ongoing instructional objectives at all levels of proficiency. In grammar learning, becoming aware of how structures are used, combined with explicit teaching, can provide an additional benefit because learners can notice structures that otherwise they may simply miss.

For a vast majority of L2 learners, the task of becoming proficient users of L2 academic vocabulary may not be attainable within the time commonly considered reasonable for the completion of their academic preparatory studies. A more reasonable and attainable goal in increasing the vocabulary range in students' L2 writing is to work with lexical substitutions that learners can use in constructing texts in most writing tasks across all disciplines. For example, the number of reporting verbs that can be employed to mark paraphrases is around a dozen, and they can be learned with relative ease while working on a writing assignment, e.g. *the author says, states, indicates, comments, notes, observes, believes, points out, emphasizes, advocates, reports, concludes, underscores, mentions, finds*, not to mention phrases with similar textual functions, such as *according to the author, as the author states/indicates, in the author's view/opinion/ understanding, or as noted/stated/mentioned*.

## A FINAL WORD

As Wilkins (1972, p. 102) comments, learning a L2 in lexical and grammatical units (chunks), instead of discrete words or word elements, can often "cover in half the time what is ... expected from a whole year's of language learning." It is important to note, however, that despite the cognitive, linguistic, and psycholinguistic evidence that memorizing language chunks represents an effective and unrestrictive means of expanding learners' lexical and grammatical ranges, a cultural and "pedagogical bias" exists against the idea of memorization of long chunks of text (Hinkel, 2002, 2009; Nation, 2001; Peters, 1983).

In recent years and in the context of applications of construction grammar to L2 teaching, research has shown that making substitutions within formulaic expressions and memorizing long chunks of text is far more efficient and effective than learning to assemble new linguistic strings in the process of language production.

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## APPENDIX

### Sentence Stems for Written Academic Discourse

The teaching of sentence and phrase structure needs to co-occur with instruction on vocabulary and common academic collocations. Using stock sentence stems in actual writing can become probably one of the most efficient ways of expanding L2 writers' vocabulary and grammatical repertoire, particularly when supplemented with substituting their discrete elements. Grammatical constructions, such as commonly occurring sentences, clauses, and phrases, can be "viewed as big words" and memorized as lexicalized stems.

All sentence stems presented below can be used in teaching and learning a range of grammar constructions, vocabulary, and discourse patterns prevalent in academic and formal prose.

#### Openings/Introductions

*The central issue in xxx is yyy ...*

*The development of xxx is a typical/common problem in ...*

*Xxx and yyy are of particular interest and complexity ....*

*For a long time xxx, it has been the case that yyy*

*Most accounts/reports/publications claim/state/maintain that xxx*

*According to Smith/recent (media) articles/reports/studies, xxx is/seems to be yyy.*

*One of the most controversial/important/interesting issues/problems/xxxS (recently/in recent literature/media reports) is yyy.*

#### Thesis/Topic Statements

*The purpose of this essay/paper/analysis/overview is to xxx*

*e.g. take a look at/examine/discuss yyy.*

*The main emphasis/focus/goal/purpose of the/this essay/paper/project is to xxx*

*e.g. is to analyze/provide an overview/discussion of xxx*

*This paper describes and analyzes ... xxx.*

*This paper discusses/examines/investigates xxx.*

*This paper claims/shows that xxx is / is not yyy.*

*This essay/paper addresses/examines/*

*is designed to*

*analyze/provide an overview of/take a look at xxx.*

*My aim in this paper is to ...*

*In this paper, I/we report on/discuss ...*

*I intend/will demonstrate/show/explain/ illustrate that xxx*

*My (basic/main/most important) argument/claim is largely/essentially that xxx*

### **Secondary purpose**

*The primary aim/purpose of this paper is xxx. In addition, it examines/discusses...yyy  
Additionally, yyy is discussed/examined.*

*A secondary aim of this paper is to yyy.*

*Another reason/point/issue addressed/discussed in this paper is yyy.*

### **Rhetorical Mode/Discourse Organization Statement**

*This paper (will) compare(s)/describe/illustrate xxx first  
by analyzing/comparing/demonstrating yyy (that yyy is zzz),  
then by yyying zzz, and finally by yyying aaa)*

*This paper first analyzes/discusses xxx,  
followed by an examination/illustration/overview of yyy and zzz.*

### **Other Types of Sentence Stems for Essay Development**

#### **(1) Assertion**

*It can be claimed/said/assumed that xxx*

*It seems certain/likely/doubtful that xxx*

*I/we maintain/claim that xxx*

#### **(2) Agreement with the author/source**

*As XXX perceptively/insightfully states /*

*correctly notes /*

*rightly observes /*

*appropriately points out,*

*xxx is/seems to be yyy (adjective/noun)*

*I/we rather/somewhat/strongly agree with/support (the idea that) xxx*

*XXX provides/lends support to YYY's argument/claim/conclusion that zzz*

#### **(3) Disagreement with the author/source**

*I/we rather/somewhat/strongly disagree with XXX/ that yyy.*

*As XXX states (somewhat) unclearly/erroneously,*

*XXX does not support YYY's argument/claim/conclusion about zzz/that zzz*

*Although XXX contends that yyy, I/we believe that zzz*

*However, it remains unclear whether ...*

*It would (thus) be of interest to learn more about yyy/how ...*



#### **(4) Comparison**

*Both xxx and yyy are (quite) similar in that zzz.*  
*Xxx is like/resembles yyy*  
*Both xxx and yyy are/seem to be zzz (adjective/noun).*  
*Xxx and yyy have/share some aspects of zzz.*  
*Xxx is similar to / not unlike yyy (with respect to zzz).*

#### **(5) Contrast**

*Xxx is (quite) different from yyy (in regard to zzz).*  
*Xxx is not the case with yyy/the same as yyy.*  
*Xxx does not resemble yyy (in regard to zzz).*  
*Xxx contrasts with yyy (with regard to zzz.)*  
*Xxx is unlike yyy in that/with respect to zzz.*

#### **(6) Recommendations**

*Let me recommend/suggest that xxx be/have/do yyy*  
*What I want/would like to recommend/suggest is that xxx*  
*One suggestion is/may be that xxx (do yyy)*

#### **(7) Citing sources/Supporting arguments, claims, conclusions, and generalizations**

*As proof/evidence/an example (for this), (let me cite/quote xxx)*  
*According to xxx,*  
*As XXX says/claims,*

*XXX provides evidence/support for yyy / that yyy*  
*XXX demonstrates that yyy*  
*shows evidence for yyy / that yyy*  
*Xxx is an illustration/example of yyy.*

#### **(8) Citing sources/Referring to external sources of knowledge**

*It is/has been (often) asserted/believed/noted that xxx*           *(YYY, 2003)*  
*It is believed that xxx*   *(YYY, 1999)*  
*It is often asserted that xxx*  
*It has been noted that xxx*

#### **(9) Classification**

*Xxx can/may be divided/classified into yyy (and zzz. )*  
*Xxx and yyy are categories/divisions of zzz.*  
*There are xxx categories/types/classes of yyy.*

## **(10) Generalizations**

*Overall,*

*In general,*

*On the whole,*

*Generally speaking,*

*In most cases,*

*One can generalize that xxx*

*For the most part,*

*With the exception of xxx,*

*With one exception,*

## **(11) Closing statement**

*In sum/conclusion,*

*To sum up/conclude,*

*To tie this (all) together,*

(Adapted from Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992))