Using Corpus-Linguistics Findings in the Classroom: A Rationale With Practical Applications

ESL instructors, curriculum designers, and materials writers must make decisions about which linguistic features to teach and the sequence in which to present them. Historically, ESL professionals have had to rely on intuitions about language use and frequency to guide them in making these decisions. Recently, however, corpus-linguistics studies have provided information about the language actually used by speakers and writers in natural situations, including the relative frequencies of features and words. Because more frequent grammatical structures and words will be more useful to students both receptively and in production, this information has great potential for advancing ESL instruction. This article emphasizes the importance of frequency information for the teaching of ESL and offers suggestions for change. In addition, it provides practical applications for teaching certain features and words that corpus linguistics has shown to be quite frequent; their frequency, however, is not yet commonly reflected in materials and practice.
However, we have found that the frequency of these particular features is not usually reflected—in either the order in which they are covered or the amount of attention they receive—in ESL teaching materials. Therefore, in this article we begin each section with a recommendation for a change in current materials and practice. We then focus on research findings related to the frequency of certain structures or words. Most of these data come from the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999), which is based on the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. Within this corpus are four different language categories, or registers: conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose.

Each section of this article includes information about current materials and practice (based on informal surveys of popular teaching materials, especially grammar series), followed by a rationale for the recommended change. Finally, for each feature we provide practical suggestions for carrying out our recommendations in the classroom.

I. Introduce Question Tags to ESL Learners at an Early Stage of Instruction

Question tags (e.g., She’s so sweet, isn’t she?) are one of the three main types of questions. The two other types are full independent clauses (e.g., Do you want to come with me? and Where’s my phone?) and fragments (e.g., What?).

Frequency Findings From Corpus Research. Questions of all types are much more frequent in conversation than they are in news or academic prose—about 45 times more frequent. In fact, a large part of everyday conversation consists of questions. According to the LGSWE, in conversation there is on average at least one question per every 40 words. Only about one-half of all questions in conversation are full independent clauses; the other half consist of fragments and tags. One in every four questions is a question tag, a statistic that many find surprising (Biber et al., 1999, p. 211).

Current Materials and Practice; Rationale for Change. Despite their high frequency in everyday conversation, question tags are usually not introduced in ESL textbooks until the mid- or high-intermediate level or even later. This is probably due to the structural complexity of question tags. However, because they are so common, it is advisable for students to start on them at lower levels.

Teaching Suggestions. It is possible to introduce tags in low-level classes if we reduce the number of choices that students have to make to form them. Question tags in sentences with the verb be are the simplest since no auxiliary is necessary. The following activities give students the opportunity to practice basic question-tag forms without having to learn all of the details of the grammar rules. In Activity 1A, the tags are all negative and students need only to choose the correct form of be in the simple present and the correct pronoun. Then in Activity 1B, they just need to use do you? or don’t you? In both activities, they are using tags to ask for confirmation of information that they are fairly certain about. (At this level, it is not necessary to discuss contrasts in intonation and meaning, that is, question tags for checking information versus those asking for confirmation.) Note that since question tags are essentially
never used in written form except in fiction, it is appropriate to introduce and practice them orally. It is unnecessary for students to master the written form.

**Activity IA. An Activity for Question Tags With the Verb Be**

First, ask the students to look around the room at their classmates. Then have them write down information that they think they know about the classmates in simple present statements with the verb be. Examples:

Yukiko is from Japan.  
Maria and Jesus are from Mexico.  
Sam is a mechanic.  
Alex is from Ukraine.  
Leticia is married.  
Sonia is a nurse.

Next, put the students into pairs to talk about their classmates. Their task is to use question tags to check the information they have. Examples:

Yukiko is from Japan, isn’t she?  
Maria and Jesus are from Mexico, aren’t they?  
Sam is a mechanic, isn’t he?  
Alex is from Ukraine, isn’t he?  
Leticia is married, isn’t she?  
You’re a nurse, aren’t you?

**Activity IB: An Activity for Question Tags About Likes and Dislikes**

This activity offers practice with question tags for talking about likes/dislikes. In this activity, the only tags students will need to use are don’t you? and do you? Give them these directions, pictures, and examples:

**Directions:** How much do you know about your partner? Look at the pictures below. Decide which foods your partner likes or doesn’t like. Check with your partner to see if you are correct by using question tags.

![Pictures of various foods](image)

**Examples:**  
A: You like ice cream, don’t you?  
B: Yes, I do.  
A: You don’t like fish, do you?  
B: No, I don’t. OR Yes, I do (like fish).

Once students have learned these responses, you might teach them to respond to negative questions, for example, You don’t like fish, do you? with a response such as Actually, I do (like fish), stressing the word do.

The same activity can be used for students to check on activities their partners like or do not like. You can use pictures if you have them or just list the activities on the board as in this example:

running  playing tennis  hiking  swimming  fishing  
skiing  sunbathing  playing soccer  playing basketball  
sewing  walking  reading  listening to music  dancing

Then, as students learn new verbs and tenses, continue to explain and encourage practice using question tags.
II. Include Noun + Noun Sequences (Nouns as Premodifiers of Other Nouns)

Beginning at Low Levels

A noun phrase is made up of a head noun, any determiner(s) it might have, and, optionally, any premodifiers and/or postmodifiers. There are four types of premodifiers of nouns: general adjectives (e.g., little children), -ing participial adjectives (e.g., interesting programs), –ed participial adjectives (e.g., satisfied customers), and nouns (e.g., car accident).

Frequency Findings From Corpus Research. Noun phrases are less complex in conversation than they are in news and academic prose. In conversation fewer than 15% of noun phrases have any modifiers; in contrast, in academic prose almost 60% of noun phrases have modifiers (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 578-579). Of the types of premodifiers of nouns across all registers, general adjectives are most frequent. However, nouns are also very commonly used as premodifiers. In fact, nouns account for almost 40% of all premodifiers in news and about 30% of all premodifiers in academic prose. Participial premodifiers (that is, -ing and –ed adjectives) are relatively uncommon (Biber et al., 1999, p. 589).

Current Materials and Practice; Rationale for Change. Even though participial adjectives are relatively uncommon, many grammar series cover their use as premodifiers at an intermediate level. However, most series do not include the topic of nouns as nominal premodifiers until a higher level, if at all, even though they are relatively quite frequent.1 One reason for this might be that materials writers and teachers believe that noun + noun sequences are fairly simple structures that do not need much explicit instruction or explanation. But in fact these sequences can be quite complex because they have the possibility of carrying a wide variety of logical relationships, the meaning of which may not be obvious to our students. The following are a few of the many different categories.

Composition (N2 is made from N1): paper cup
Source (N2 comes from N1): spring water
Purpose (N2 is for the purpose of N1): leg warmer, candle holder
Partitive (N2 is a part of N1): team member, rabbit ears
Time (N2 occurs during the time of N1): summer vacation
Objective (N1 is the object of the process described in N2): waste disposal, or
(N2 is the object of the process described in N1): pilot project (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 590-591)

Having a clear understanding of the various meaning relationships is important for our students, especially those who will need to read and write academic prose.

Teaching Suggestions. Corpus research has found that there are four nouns, government, police, home, and world, that are extremely productive—they combine with more than 100 different head nouns—and that are also extremely frequent in their use as noun premodifiers. There are 12 additional nouns (business, car, city, council, family, health, labor, market, party, record, security, and TV) that are very productive and relatively frequent (Biber et al.,
1999, pp. 592-594). These groups of nouns are a good starting point for intro-
ducing the topic of nouns as noun premodifiers. They can be presented early
on, and instructors should focus on helping students understand the meaning
relationships between them.

**Activity IIA. Noun + Noun Sequences**

Read the first sentence. Then use two nouns from the first sentence to complete the second sentence with a noun + noun combination.

1. Jane works in a building that is owned by the government. She works in a government building.
2. Jeffrey is the manager of the business. He’s the __________ _________.
3. I watched an interesting program on TV last night about World War II. I watched a __________ _________ about the war.
4. Greta listens to the radio to find out about events that are happening in the world. She wants to hear about __________ _________.
5. Obesity is a serious problem that affects the health of many Americans. Obesity is a __________ _________ for many Americans.

**Activity IIB. Noun + Noun Sequences**

Use the nouns in the boxes to complete the sentences with noun + noun sequences. Choose the first noun from the Noun 1 box and choose the second noun from the Noun 2 box. You may use the nouns more than once.

**Noun 1**

family health home business police

**Noun 2**

food officer business owner care card loan car vacation

1. A card with information about how to contact a person at his or her workplace is a __________ card.
2. The money that the bank lends you to buy a house is called a __________ _________.
3. A business that is owned by a family is a __________ _________.
4. Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez and their children went on a __________ _________. last summer. They went to Hawaii and relaxed on the beach.
5. Someone broke into our neighbors’ house and stole their computer. When they called 9-1-1, a __________ _________ came to investigate.
6. __________ _________ is very expensive in this county. It often costs more than $100 to visit the doctor for only a few minutes.
Activity IIC. The Meaning of Noun + Noun Sequences
Work with a partner. Read the sentences. Then explain the meaning of the boldfaced noun + noun combinations. There may be more than one correct way to explain the meaning.

1. There are many government buildings in downtown Sacramento, California. Buildings where government employees work. OR Buildings owned by the government.
2. Vladimir and Natalya went to the bank to take out a home loan so that they would have money to buy the house.
3. Anna’s mother made a delicious chocolate cake for dessert.
4. Andrea and Iain are world travelers. They have visited many countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas.
5. Skiing is Herman’s favorite winter sport.
6. Always remember to lock the car doors when you park in the city.

Activity IID. Meanings of Noun + Noun Sequences
Noun premodifiers can have many different meaning relationships with the nouns they modify. Here are some examples:

Purpose: The second noun is for the purpose of (is used for) the first noun. Example: pencil sharpener = a tool that sharpens pencils

Composition: The second noun is made from the first noun. Example: leather shoes = shoes made from leather

Source: The second noun is from the first noun. Example: spring water = fresh water that comes from a spring in the mountains

Content: The second noun is about the first noun. Example: history books = books about history

Look at the boldfaced noun + noun sequences in the sentences below. Decide what the meaning relationship is between the two nouns. Then write purpose, composition, source, or content, and describe the meaning relationship.

1. We ate some fruit salad after lunch. composition—a salad made of fruit
2. I read a newspaper article about the election. ___________________
3. The students wrote book reports in their reading class. ___________________
4. The children have to wear a blue school uniform for elementary school. ___________________
5. Please put the coffee cups on the table. ___________________
6. The salad looks very pretty in that glass bowl. ___________________
III. Introduce the Most Common Lexical Verbs Early and Give Them More Attention Than Less Common Verbs

Lexical verbs are “full” or main verbs. (In addition to lexical verbs, there are two other verb classes: the primary verbs be, have, and do, which can function as auxiliaries or as main verbs, and modal verbs, e.g., can and will, which can function only as auxiliaries.)

**Frequency Findings From Corpus Research.** The 12 most common lexical verbs are *say, get, go, know, think, see, make, come, take, want, give,* and *mean.* (The verbs *be, have,* and *do* are also common in their role as main verbs, expressing a variety of meanings.) These lexical verbs occur much more frequently in conversation than in the other registers—in fact, these 12 verbs together account for almost 45% of all lexical verbs in conversation (Biber et al., 1999, p. 373). Clearly, these common verbs will be very useful for students who are in the early stages of learning English (Biber & Reppen, 2002).

**Current Materials and Practice; Rationale for Change.** Surveys of English-language teaching materials show that most of these 12 verbs are not introduced at low levels and that they are not covered as thoroughly as they should be based on their frequency. Looking at the verbs, one can see why there has been a tendency to avoid or postpone presenting them. To begin with, except for the verb *want,* they are all irregular. The verb *get* is the single most common verb in conversation, which may be attributed to the fact that it has many different meanings and uses, so it is not simple to deal with. *Say* is the most common verb overall, and it is quite common in conversation, largely because of its use by speakers to report the speech of others. Reported speech can be quite complex grammatically. The verbs *know* and *think* are usually followed by noun complement clauses, for example, *I didn’t know what she meant* or *I think he wants another hamburger,* and these are also considered to be complex kinds of sentences. Despite their complexities, we need to, and can, find ways to present all of these common verbs and structures at low levels. Now that we know how frequent and useful they are, we realize that avoiding or postponing them is probably not the best way to deal with them.

**Teaching Suggestions.** The suggestions given in this section are for the verb *say.* Suggestions for *make, know,* and *think* are in Sections IV and V.

Reported speech can be introduced to students at lower levels by beginning with situations in which it is not necessary to “backshift” tenses. These situations include when the original speech is about a general truth; is about something that is still true, for example, a preference or a habit; or is about the future. Another situation is when the time of reporting is soon after the time of the original speech, for example, in the classroom, just after students have gotten information from a partner in a pair-work activity. To elicit reported speech, simply adapt the direction line and example in your textbook, as shown in Activities IIIA and IIIB. Then, as students learn new tenses, continue to explain and encourage them to use reported speech with backshifts.
III. Example Activity for Reported Speech

In this activity, Part C of this simulated textbook page has been adapted.

CONVERSATION: Talking about your lives now

A. Match each question to its answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why do you like English class?</td>
<td>a. I play soccer or tennis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you go shopping on weekends?</td>
<td>b. Because I learn a lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How often do you go out to dinner?</td>
<td>c. My parents and my brothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What time do you get up in the morning?</td>
<td>e. At 6:30.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How do you get to school?</td>
<td>g. To Mexico to visit my cousins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What do you do on Saturdays?</td>
<td>h. Yes, I usually do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. When do you study?</td>
<td>i. Once a week.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Now work with a partner. Take turns asking and answering the questions in A. Give answers that are true for you.

C. Tell the class about you and your partner.
   Examples:
   “Elena studies after class. I usually study late at night.”
   “I help my sister with her children on Saturdays. Elena works at a store.”

This is our suggestion for adaptation:

C. Tell the class about you and about what your partner said.
   Examples:
   “Elena said she studies after class. I usually study late at night.”
   “I help my sister with her children on Saturdays. Elena said she works at a store.”
III. Example Activity for Reported Speech

In this activity, Part B of this simulated textbook page has been adapted.

**WHAT DID YOU DO LAST WEEKEND?**

A. Getting Ready: Read the list of questions about last weekend and choose eight of them to ask your partner. Check (✓) the questions you want to ask.

B. In Pairs: Taking turns with your partner, ask and answer the questions you chose.

- _Did you play any sports last weekend?_  
- _Did you work out at the gym?_  
- _Did you watch any TV programs?_  
- _Did you go to the mall?_  
- _Did you download any new songs?_  
- _Did you call any friends?_  
- _Did you have a picnic?_  
- _Did you send any e-mails?_  
- _Did you clean your bedroom?_  
- _Did you spend time on the Internet?_  
- _Did you do any cooking?_  
- _Did you go to any parties?_  
- _Did you go to the library?_  
- _Did you do any homework?_

For example:

![Image of Magda and Diego] Did you watch any TV programs last weekend?

Yes. I watched “The Challenge of Champions.” It was good.

![Image of Diego and Magda] Diego watched “The Challenge of Champions” on TV. It was good.

This is our suggestion for adaptation:

C. As a Class: Report to the class what your partner said about last weekend.

![Image of Magda and Diego] Diego said he watched “The Challenge of Champions” on TV. He said it was good.

![Image of Diego and Magda] Magda
IV. Emphasize Collocations at Every Level of Instruction

The term “collocation” has to do with which words go most frequently with other words. That is, collocations are patterns or common associations between words in which the words tend to occur together more frequently than they would be expected to by chance.\(^2\) Collocations come in a variety of types. For example:

- noun + verb (a question arose)
- verb + noun (make a mistake)
- adjective + noun (a distinguished career)
- noun + noun (horse race)
- verb + adverb (quarrel bitterly)
- adjective + preposition (good at)
- noun + preposition (a recipe for)
- verb + preposition (think about)
- adverb + adjective (severely limited)

**Findings From Corpus Research.** Corpus research provides us with insight into the collocational patterns that distinguish one word from another. For example, the adjectives little and small are usually considered to be synonyms. However, the set of nouns that typically follows each of these adjectives is quite different: In conversation, little tends to collocate with baby, bit, devil, thing, and while, yet small tends to collocate with amount, part, piece, print, and world (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 988-989).

**Current Materials and Practice; Rationale for Change.** A few types of collocation such as verb + preposition combinations, for example hear about, and adjective + preposition combinations, for example good at, seem to be fairly well represented in textbooks. However, most other types of collocations are rarely given sufficient or appropriate emphasis in ESL teaching materials. Learning which words collocate with other words is a significant part of learning a language. If our students are to achieve nativelike fluency in English, they must have extensive collocational knowledge.

**Teaching Suggestions.** Whenever possible, take opportunities to raise awareness and encourage noticing of collocations. Avoid activities that allow students to put words together in improbable or inventive combinations; focus instead on activities that reinforce the common patterns of natural language. When students learn new words, they should also learn their “partner” words, or words that frequently combine with them. For example, when students learn an adjective, they can also learn how to modify it with amplifiers, that is, degree adverbs such as very, really, absolutely, and totally. Amplifiers are not interchangeable—certain ones collocate more or less strongly with certain adjectives and not at all with others; for example, very short is probable, but severely short is not; likewise, highly interesting is probable, but highly amazing is not (Kennedy, 2003). Once students have been introduced to a collocation, try to give them repeated exposure to it.

Activities IVA and IVB are suggestions for introducing the concept of collocation and practicing collocations. Activity IVB, a Jeopardy-type game for practicing expressions with make, take, and have, is an enjoyable way for students to get repeated exposure to collocations they have been introduced to; an added benefit is that they get practice in forming questions.

**Activity IVA. A Way to Introduce the Concept of Collocation**

Choose some words that are synonyms (e.g., small and little) or words that may be confusing to students (e.g., brush, clean, and wash). Write those
words on the board and then elicit expressions with them. Write the expressions under the words as your students come up with them, for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>brush</th>
<th>clean</th>
<th>wash</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>brush your hair</td>
<td>clean your room</td>
<td>wash your hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brush your teeth</td>
<td>clean the floor</td>
<td>wash your face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clean the bathroom</td>
<td>wash the dishes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add expressions and assist the students as necessary. After you have created lists of expressions, encourage students to use these expressions in class activities and/or in assignments. There are many other word pairs or groups you may want to use for this activity, including little and small; large and big; high and tall; low, short, and deep; watch, see, and look at; and look, seem, and appear.

**Activity IVB. An Activity for Practicing Collocations (Collocation Quiz Game)**

**Directions:** Play this game with expressions that you have already introduced. Students can play in groups of three, with one judge (or game-show host) and two competitors, or in groups of five, with one judge and two teams of two players. Beforehand, prepare piles of cards on some main topics, as shown in the example game below. (Expressions with make, take, and have are used in the example, but you can create your own game with any expressions you have taught and would like your students to practice.) In this game, only the judge se sees the answers. The judge turns over the question cards one at a time so that both players or teams can see them. Players can either take turns answering or they can hit the desk or a bell (Jeopardy-style) to determine who will answer the question. Students can keep the cards they answer correctly and at the end the team or player with the most cards wins, or points can be assigned to each card and the judge can keep score.

**Alternatives:** You can make this game easier by having students play Charades with the expressions instead. You can make it more difficult by adding more topics, mixing the expressions (e.g., expressions with take or make in one topic), or playing it as a Pyramid-type game instead (that is, one in which students play in pairs, with one partner explaining the meaning without saying the expression while the other one tries to guess the correct expression).

**Example Collocation Quiz Game With Three Topics:** Expressions with make, expressions with take, and expressions with have.

Sample topic card:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions with make</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to earn a salary at work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample question card:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions with make</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to earn a salary at work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answer (on answer key): What is “to make money”?
Possible expressions and answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>make</em></th>
<th><em>to earn a salary</em></th>
<th><em>Expressions for answer key</em></th>
<th><em>to make money</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to pull the sheets and blanket up neatly</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to make the bed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to choose between two or more possibilities</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to make a decision</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to telephone someone</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to make a call</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to decide on a time and place to get together with friends or family</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to make plans</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to try to do something</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to make an effort</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>take</em></td>
<td><em>to stop working for a while</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take a break</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to wash oneself with water sprayed from overhead</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take a shower</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to spend a lot of hours or minutes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take (a long) time</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to bring air into your lungs in order to relax</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take (a deep) breath</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to write down information for somebody else when a person calls her or him</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take a message</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to sleep during the day</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to take a nap</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>have</em></td>
<td><em>to satisfy your thirst</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have a drink</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to eat a meal in the evening</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have dinner</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to think of a possibility</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have an idea</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to discuss something with someone</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have a talk</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to give birth to an infant</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have a baby</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>to get very angry</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>to have a fit</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. Introduce and Practice Lexical Bundles at Low Levels

“Lexical bundles” is the term that the LGSWE uses for sequences of three, four, or five words that have a statistical tendency to occur together and that recur frequently. Lexical bundles can be thought of as extended collocations.

**Findings From Corpus Research.** In conversation, a large number of lexical bundles follow this structural pattern:

pronoun subject + verb phrase + the start of a complement clause

(I don’t know why …, I thought it was…, I want to [do/get/go/see/be/know] …)

The following are typical sentences with these types of bundles:

*I don’t know why* she’s mad at Lisa.  
*I don’t know why* Colin came.  
*I thought it was* really interesting.  
*I thought it was* a Monday.  
*I want to go* home.  
*I want to see* what happens  
(Biber et al., 1999, Chapter 13)

You can see that the verbs in conversational bundles are among those most common lexical verbs listed in Section III. In the bundles, the verbs mark personal stance, that is, they report things such as personal feelings, beliefs, opinions, or desires (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1003). They are very useful chunks of
language that we use in a formulaic way in conversation to express our thoughts or to ask others about their thoughts.

**Current Materials and Practice; Rationale for Change.** These types of sentences are almost never introduced at low levels because they are considered to be relatively complex. Because they are so frequent and useful, especially in conversation and academic discussions, these complementation patterns need to be introduced early and then receive continued attention through subsequent stages of instruction.

**Teaching Suggestions.** Lexical bundles with pronoun subject + verb phrase + start of a complement clause are very common in conversation. Teachers can introduce them early by presenting them as a “chunk” + a simple statement, for example, I don’t know why + he’s angry and I don’t think + she’s at home.

**Activity VA. Lexical Bundles With Think and Know**

Begin by showing ambiguous pictures to the students. Ask them wh- or yes/no questions with do you think. Encourage students to speculate and discuss using I think ….I don’t think ….I don’t know …. for example, Student A: I think it’s a bird. Student B: I don’t think it’s a bird. (OR I don’t think so.) I think it’s a butterfly. Student C: I don’t know what it is!

![Image of ambiguous pictures]

**Activity VB. Lexical Bundles With Think and Know**

Have students look at photos of ordinary (that is, not famous) people and speculate about things such as their ages, jobs, feelings, personalities, where they live, and so forth, using I think ….I don’t think ….I don’t know …. for example, I don’t think she’s a teacher. I think she’s a nurse.

![Images of ordinary people]
Conclusion

In spite of the usefulness to students of learning frequent language forms and features, it has proven to be a challenge to bring these structures into the ESL classroom because there is a disconnect between their actual frequency and their treatment in English-language learning materials. In some cases, for example, noun + noun combinations and collocation, the features are not given sufficient attention because their frequency and importance are not recognized. In other cases, for example, question tags and lexical bundles with verb + noun clause, the language forms continue to be taught very late in the language-learning cycle because they are considered to be too complex for beginning or intermediate students. However, as our suggestions show, there are ways to bring the benefits of corpus research to students, even at beginning levels. Teachers can use our suggested activities as they are or, better still, use them as a framework or inspiration for developing their own activities—ones uniquely suited to the needs and interests of their students.

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Endnotes

1 An exception is the grammar series by Betty Schrampfer Azar, published by Pearson Education, in which nouns as premodifiers are included in Basic English Grammar, a book for beginning students.

2 The LGSWE distinguishes collocations from idioms. Idioms are “relatively invariable expressions with meanings that cannot be predicted from the meanings of the parts.” One type of idiom is certain fixed expressions such as *kick the bucket.* This type of idiomatic phrase is not common (Biber et al., pp. 988, 1024-1026).

References


Appendix

Sources for More Information or Activities


