

CORPUS-INFORMED VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT FOR IELTS ACADEMIC WRITING TASK 2

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Abstract

IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 requires learners to use vocabulary accurately, flexibly and appropriately while developing coherent academic arguments. However, many EFL learners rely on memorised vocabulary lists, isolated synonyms and formulaic expressions, which may result in repetition, inappropriate word choice and collocational errors. This short study examines the potential of corpus linguistics as a pedagogical approach to developing lexical competence in IELTS Task 2 writing. An integrative review of research on corpus-based language learning, Data-Driven Learning (DDL), academic vocabulary and IELTS assessment was conducted. The findings indicate that corpus consultation can help learners identify authentic collocations, lexical bundles, grammatical patterns and register differences.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; IELTS Writing Task 2; vocabulary development; collocation; lexical bundles; Data-Driven Learning; EFL writing

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a central component of successful IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 performance. The official IELTS assessment framework evaluates Lexical Resource according to the range, accuracy and appropriacy of vocabulary used by candidates. Higher-band writing requires flexible and precise lexical choices rather than merely the presence of sophisticated words. A persistent problem among EFL learners is the tendency to learn vocabulary as isolated items. Students may memorise lists such as “important–significant–crucial–essential” without understanding differences in collocation, grammatical behaviour or register. Consequently, learners sometimes use advanced-looking words inaccurately. Boulton's meta-analysis of 64 studies and 88 samples found substantial overall effects for corpus-based Data-Driven Learning, although the author also identified the need for further research concerning long-term transfer.

The present mini-article therefore focuses specifically on corpus-informed vocabulary development for IELTS Task 2.

2. Methodology

An integrative literature-review approach was adopted. Research on corpus-based language learning, DDL, academic vocabulary, lexical bundles and IELTS writing assessment was reviewed. Three analytical areas were established:

1. ****Collocation**** – combinations of words that commonly occur together;
2. ****Lexical bundles**** – recurrent multiword sequences;
3. ****Context and register**** – appropriate use of vocabulary in academic discourse.

Research findings were then related to the lexical requirements of IELTS Writing Task 2.

3. Results

The review indicates that corpus-based instruction can improve learners' awareness of how vocabulary functions in authentic contexts.

For example, instead of simply teaching: **increase = rise = grow** learners can search a corpus and observe patterns such as:

- * increase significantly;
- * increase rapidly;
- * a significant increase;
- * an increase in demand.

This demonstrates that lexical knowledge involves more than knowing definitions. Learners also need knowledge of grammatical patterns and collocations. Corpus research on academic writing has similarly demonstrated the importance of lexical bundles. L2 student writing tends to have a more restricted repertoire of recurrent word combinations than published academic writing. This suggests that learners can benefit from systematic exposure to academic phraseology. A corpus-based lesson can therefore follow this sequence: Target word → Corpus search → Concordance lines → Collocations → Noticing → Controlled practice → IELTS paragraph → Revision.

The systematic review by Lusta, Demirel and Mohammadzadeh found that corpus-based learning has considerable pedagogical potential but that learners may experience difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, large amounts of corpus data and inductive interpretation. The review consequently emphasises tailored tasks, supplementary guidance and collaborative learning.

4. Discussion

Corpus instruction can also help learners avoid inappropriate attempts to use “advanced vocabulary”. A word should not be selected merely because it appears sophisticated. Its frequency, collocation, grammatical pattern, register and meaning in context should be considered. Nevertheless, corpus use should not be completely unguided. Lower-proficiency learners may find concordance data difficult to interpret. Therefore, teachers should provide focused questions such as:

- * Which words occur most frequently with this item?
- * Is the expression formal or informal?
- * Which grammatical structure follows it?
- * Can you find two examples suitable for an IELTS essay?

Thus, the teacher remains an important mediator between corpus evidence and learner understanding.

5. Conclusion

Corpus linguistics offers a promising approach to improving lexical competence in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. Its principal advantage is that it exposes learners to authentic patterns rather than isolated vocabulary items. Through collocation analysis, concordancing and lexical-bundle investigation, students can develop more precise and context-sensitive vocabulary.

However, corpus-based learning should complement rather than replace conventional IELTS instruction. The most effective approach is likely to combine corpus exploration with explicit vocabulary teaching, writing practice, feedback and revision.

Future empirical research should investigate whether corpus-informed vocabulary instruction produces measurable improvements in IELTS Lexical Resource scores, lexical diversity, collocational accuracy and long-term retention.

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