Developmental Changes in English Language Teaching: A Lexical Analysis of *ELT Journal* Article Abstracts

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1. Introduction

During the last few decades, English language teaching has made great progress under the influence of communicative language teaching. This approach has been accepted favorably and followed by leading applied linguists and teachers as the most effective one among those in general use. In fact, many important innovations have been brought into the language classroom. With the passage of time, however, its classroom practice as well as theory seems to have changed to a considerable extent. It is interesting at the beginning of the new century to examine what has been taking place in actuality.

This paper attempts to collect a corpus of lexical data from *ELT Journal*, and compare it with the British National Corpus (BNC). This is intended to explore what developmental changes have been made in the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language. *ELT Journal*, which is one of the best-known journals for professional English teachers in the world, seems to serve this purpose best in that it seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The subsequent two sections give a brief description of the background to this work and the research method that has been applied. The rest of this paper is divided into two parts. The first half is devoted to a synchronic analysis of function words, and aims to clarify how they reflect the structure of journal article abstracts. The second half focuses on a diachronic analysis of content words, and intends to grasp what have been the issues of the last two decades of the 20th century. Finally, suggestions are given for ways in which journal article abstracts might be adopted for use in an EFL teacher education course.

2. Background

Cohesion in English has been in focus in applied linguistics for many years since the 1970s. Halliday & Hasan (1976) classified cohesion in English into two broad categories: grammatical and lexical. Halliday (1994) amended the classification later and subdivided it into the following: reference, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The last category or lexical cohesion drew less attention than the other three in the beginning, but came to be recognised as "the single most important form of cohesive tie (Hoey, 1991, p. 9)." This paper is based largely on this linguistic theory of text organization.

3.1 Lexical cohesion and repetition

Lexical cohesion, which is the most dominant type of cohesion in English, is defined in a variety of ways. Bloor & Bloor (1995, p. 100) refer this as "the cohesive effect of the use of lexical items in discourse where the choice of an item related to the choices that have gone before." Nunan (1993, p. 28) defines this concept more simply as follows: "Lexical cohesion occurs when two words in a text are semantically related in some way—in other words, they are related in terms of their meaning." It can be concluded that this type of cohesive effect can be achieved by the choice of vocabulary.

Lexical cohesion is divided into repetition, synonymy and collocation. Among the three categories, repetition is the most direct form of lexical cohesion. There is no room for doubt that the same words can

be regarded as repeated, e.g. *run* and *run*. This paper puts derivational variants together as one item, e.g. *run*, *runs*, and *ran*, and treats these variants as the same repetition item. Halliday (1994) also recognises a lexical item, which is not in the same morphological shape, as repeated, e.g. *dine*, *dining* and *dinner*. In order to make a statistical account less difficult, however, this type of "complex repetition" (Hoey, 1991) will not be regarded as repeated in this analysis.

3.2 Repetition and keywords: theme development

Hoey (1991) states that repetition exerts a considerable cohesive influence on the development of a theme or topic. He emphasises the importance of repetition in a text as follows:

> In the first place, sentences appropriately connected by repetition, however far apart, should make some sense or show some clear relationship together. Secondly, it should be possible to trace the development of a theme by bringing together the sentences that share lexis. (p. 75)

Salkie (1995, p. 3) also states that one thing that makes texts coherent is "repeating important words." He mentions that some words, content words in particular, should be repeated if they play an important role in terms of text coherence. It follows that an analysis of lexical cohesion in text, primarily by counting repetitions, can be instrumental to the topical make-up of a text. If we regard all the abstracts in *ELT Journal* as one text and count the frequency of content words, we can assume what topics or themes are in fashion in the field of English language teaching at a given period. Herein lies the great significance in checking what content words are used frequently in a text.

3. Research Method

This statistical investigation of journal article abstracts is based mostly upon *ELT Journal* on CD-ROM released by Niche Publications UK Ltd in 2001. The disc carries all the articles in *ELT Journal* published in the period between 1981 and 2000. The abstracts of these articles are to be investigated in this study. Some articles are lacking in abstracts for some reason or other, and they are excluded from the data. The author takes in those abstracts from the CD-ROM, and combines the texts into one large text file. The data is then analysed based on a concordance which is generated with the assistance of KWIC Concordance for Windows Version 4.6. Once a corpus is collected, the next step is to use a program to read through the data and output a list of word forms and their total number of occurrences in order of frequency.

In order to grasp the developmental changes and statistical trends in the specific field, the last two decades of the twentieth century are divided into four periods: 1981-1985, 1986-1990, 1991-1995, and 1996-2000. These periods are called Period 1, Period 2, Period 3 and Period 4 respectively in this article. The following table gives statistical information on the total numbers of issues, abstracts, and words contained in them in each period.

	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4
Years	1981-1985	1986-1990	1991-1995	1996-2000
Issues	16	20	20	20
Abstracts	117	146	141	142
Words	11,747	15,029	13,119	15,592

It should be noted that only one issue in 1981 and three issues in 1982 were published for some unknown reason. As a consequence, 76 issues were published in the four periods mentioned above. The whole corpus contains a total of 55,487 words and 546 abstracts, and the average number of words per abstract is 101.6.

4. Synchronic Analysis

Table 1 shows the 50 most frequent words in *ELT Journal* abstract corpus. These words, which are not lemmatized, are arranged according to their frequency of use in this text. The figures in the right in each column show how many times individual words appear in the whole corpus of the sample abstracts in *ELT Journal*.

Table 1

1-10		11-20		21-30		31-40		41-50	
the	3411	language	570	their	329	learners	200	how	155
of	2693	on	458	students	326	classroom	197	has	147
and	1866	are	444	teaching	323	have	175	approach	146
to	1623	article	439	English	321	they	167	not	143
in	1544	it	420	by	314	at	166	communicative	124
a	1268	as	411	an	290	these	162	training	122
is	775	which	383	teacher	266	or	159	used	122
this	682	be	371	learning	209	more	158	development	119
for	674	with	341	from	208	some	158	materials	119
that	650	teachers	333	can	202	use	156	course	117

4.1 Function words: pronouns

It is interesting to compare the above data with part of a corpus of written English from the British National Corpus. There is a close similarity in the frequency of function words between the two corpora of written English. As is expected, the most frequent words in English are such function words as *the, of, and, a, to* and *in*. However, we can notice several differences in the use of some pronouns when compared with the frequencies of words in the reference corpus. Table 2 shows the quantitative data illustrating the ratios of four pronouns in the two corpuses. The figures in brackets indicate the number of occurrences of them in the *ELT Journal* corpus.

Table 2

	ELT Journal	BNC (Written)
this	1.23% (682)	0.45%
I	0.14% (80)	0.65%
you	0.01% (6)	0.48%
we	0.20% (113)	0.28%

The first information we can get from the above list is that the four pronouns *this, I, you, we* appear at a significantly different rate. People are encouraged to avoid first person pronouns in traditional formal writing (Spencer & Arbon, 1996). This advice is followed by *ELT Journal* article abstracts in which the personal pronouns *I* and *we* are used less frequently. In place of these pronouns as sentence subjects, the word *author* (s) appears 52 times, followed by *writer* (s) 32 times, and *researcher* (s) 11 times respectively. The low frequency of such pronouns seems to make the text so impersonal as to distance the reader from the text. The same explanation applies to the low frequency of the pronoun *you* in this academic writing.

The pronoun *this*, on the other hand, is used three times more frequently in this text. It is worth noting that *this*, which is often placed before a noun, is used as part of the subject of a sentence in place of *I*. The strong collocation of "this paper" or "this article" is observed in the abstracts of this journal. This explanation can account for the higher occurrence of *this*.

4.2 Content words: genre-specific words

When the function words are deleted from the above list, the content words become apparent. Content words "refer to a thing, quality, state, or action and which have meaning when the words are used alone" (Richards and Schmidt, 2000). These words are semantically so significant that they contribute effectively to making a text more genre-specific. To put it simply, different content words are used in a different genre of a given text. The main focus in this section, therefore, is placed upon checking what frequent content words appear in text.

Table 3 below shows the top 50 frequent content words in *ELT Journal* article abstracts. Content words are mainly nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. It is sometimes difficult, however, to distinguish these from function words unless we check individual words in context. Such words as *be-verbs*, *there*, and *have* can be either function words or content words in a different context. These are excluded from this list to avoid statistical deviation. As is mentioned earlier, derivational variants are grouped together as the same repetition item in this table. On the other hand, such words as *reading, speaking, writing*, and *listening* are genre-specific to the field of English language teaching so that they are regarded as independent items.

Table 3

1-10		11-20		21-30		31-40		41-50	
teacher	600	classroom	210	communicative	124	such	103	EFL	90
language	595	approach	187	development	128	writing	103	other	90
article	454	suggest	154	need	119	reading	102	provide	89
student	391	activities	149	course	174	skill	101	research	87
use	361	describe	148	also	116	give	98	experience	82
teach	343	test	146	paper	113	practice	94	analysis	76
English	321	study	144	programme	113	group	93	question	76
learner	309	discuss	137	based	112	task	93	work	76
learn	241	material	133	process	108	text	93	project	75
make	211	train	129	problem	104	ELT	92	foreign	74

It is possible to divide the above frequent content words into two categories. The former is vocabulary specific to the genre of article abstracts, and the latter to the genre of English language teaching. Table 4 shows which category individual frequent content words belong to. They are all arranged according to their frequency rates. It should be noted, however, that such words as *need, experience, question and work* are rather difficult to classify, and so are excluded from the list below.

Table 4

Abstract-related	ELT-related
article, suggest, describe, discuss, paper, problem, research, analysis.	*teacher, language, student, teach, English, learner, learn, classroom, approach, activity, test, study, material, train, communicative, development, course, programme, based, process, writing, reading, skill, practice, group, task, text, ELT, EFL, project, foreign.*

The following words are missing on the above list because they are less frequent, but still important as abstract-related words: *discussion, issues, result* and *focus*. By the same token, the less frequent ELT-related words are as follows: *strategy, context, ESL, native, role, evaluation, education, cultural, content, role, awareness, listening, communication, feedback, principles, methodology*.

Some of the above-mentioned content words take on typical forms of these genres. The word *activity*, for example, is used as *activities* 103 times out of 149. The other words which are used mainly in plural forms are as follows: *materials* 120/133, *strategies* 57/72, and *skills* 88/101. Another interesting example is the word *base*, which is used as *based* in 110 cases out of 112. It is more commonly used as such compound words as *accuracy -based, activity-based, classroom-based, computer-based, content-based, corpus-based, data-based, discourse -based, fluency-based, genre-based, grammar-based, intuition-based, literature-based, skills-based, learner -based, strategies-based, structure-based, task-based*.

5. Diachronic Analysis

The preceding section is devoted to making a quantitative analysis of content and function words in the abstracts in *ELT Journal*. Here in the current section the 20-year period is divided into four, and the most frequent content words will be analysed in each period. Table 5 shows that these words in each period are arranged according to their frequency of use. It should be noted that only the 25 most frequent words are listed in each period owing to lack of space.

Table 5 (not lemmatized)

Period 1 (1981-1985)		Period 2 (1986-1990)		Period 3 (1991-1995)		Period 4 (1996-2000)	
language	126	language	154	language	115	language	160
article	106	article	145	teachers	102	article	113
English	91	students	101	teaching	80	teacher	97
teaching	87	English	93	students	77	teachers	95
students	72	teachers	83	English	72	teaching	90
teachers	60	teacher	74	article	71	learning	78
learning	43	teaching	69	teacher	66	students	78
use	42	learners	57	classroom	54	classroom	67
communicative	40	classroom	45	paper	53	English	67
learners	37	use	43	learning	48	learners	65
teacher	35	learning	42	development	43	based	50
approach	31	reading	40	learners	40	approach	49
materials	30	writing	35	materials	38	course	43
classroom	29	activities	34	self	36	development	43
used	28	also	34	learner	33	training	42
second	26	communicative	34	training	33	use	42
such	26	training	33	use	33	also	38
foreign	25	approach	32	approach	32	ELT	37
skills	24	used	31	used	31	paper	37
learner	23	process	29	other	27	study	37
other	23	describes	28	study	27	used	34
activities	22	foreign	28	also	26	cultural	33
analysis	22	development	27	different	26	materials	32
also	20	study	26	course	24	such	32
discussed	20	based	25	such	24	group	31
tests	20	programme	25	writing	31		
work	20	such	25				

This paper attempts to answer the following three questions worth considering. One of them is which term is more common in each period, the communicative approach or communicative language teaching. Another question is which of the four language skills, i.e. reading, speaking, listening and writing, has been dealt with more extensively as a subject of research in the past articles in *ELT Journal*. Finally, a total of 10 ELT topics, which come up to mind at random, are taken up for discussion.

5.1 The communicative approach or communicative language teaching?

The two terms seem to be interchangeable (Richards & Schmidt, 2000). Larsen-Freeman used the former in his early book (1986), and changed it into the latter in his revised edition (2000). Table 6 illustrates which term is used more frequently in each period. The communicative approach was dominant in the 1980s, and communicative language teaching came to be used at an equally frequency in the 1990s.

Table 6

	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4
the communicative approach	13	8	4	7
communicative language teaching	0	3	6	6

5.2 Four language skills

Table 7 shows the frequency ratio of each language skill in the whole text in each period. The figures in brackets indicate how often each skill appears in each period. The writing skill comes out on top even though students are least interested in it (JACET, 2000). This is probably because writing can be easy to deal with for investigation since "written discourse is fixed and stable" (Ur, 1996, p. 159). On the other hand, researchers seem to be less interested in the speaking skill since it is difficult to design and administer classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech.

Table 7

	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Total
reading	0.14% (16)	0.27% (40)	0.09% (12)	0.18% (28)	(96)
writing	0.14% (17)	0.23% (35)	0.17% (22)	0.20% (31)	(105)
speaking	0.09% (10)	0.04% (6)	0.05% (6)	0.07% (11)	(33)
listening	0.15% (18)	0.06% (9)	0.01% (1)	0.12% (18)	(46)

5.3 Topics in fashion

The last question is what technical terms in ELT are used more frequently in each period. The corpus data is divided into four periods. On top of that, the data from the first issue of 2001 to the third issue of 2003 is also analysed for this particular reference. The figures show the ratio of each item in each corpus, and the figures in brackets indicate the number of occurrences of individual items in each period.

Table 8

	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	2001-
communicative	0.34 (40)	0.23 (34)	0.16 (21)	0.16 (25)	0.11 (10)
materials	0.26 (30)	0.13 (19)	0.29 (38)	0.21 (32)	0.07 (6)
syllabus	0.16 (19)	0.05 (8)	0.03 (4)	0.03 (4)	0.02 (2)
strategies	0.08 (9)	0.12 (18)	0.05 (7)	0.14 (22)	0.09 (8)
awareness	0.03 (3)	0.07 (11)	0.14 (18)	0.12 (19)	0.12 (11)
process	0.02 (2)	0.19 (29)	0.12 (16)	0.19 (30)	0.22 (20)
context	0.01 (1)	0.04 (6)	0.09 (12)	0.12 (19)	0.15 (14)
task (s)	0.08 (9)	0.11 (17)	0.17 (22)	0.29 (45)	0.20 (18)
culture (s)	0.03 (3)	0.06 (9)	0.11 (14)	0.09 (14)	0.39 (36)
children	0.03 (4)	0.01 (2)	0 (0)	0.02 (3)	0.08 (7)

Such words as *communicative* and *syllabus* were quite fashionable in the first half of the 1980s. However, as time went by, they became less common. On the other hand, the words *task, awareness* and *context* came to be used more frequently in the 1990s onward. These terms suggest that English language teaching puts more emphasis on learners than teachers in the classroom these days. The concept *process* caught the spotlight in the second half of the 1980s, and regained its strength in the second half of the 1990s onward. The frequency of *materials* and *strategies* has fluctuated in popularity, depending on different periods. Teaching English to children is just beginning to take root in *ELT Journal*. In the new century *culture* seems to attract much attention, together with such compound words as *biculture* and *multiculture*.

6. Conclusion

This paper has made two lexical analyses of journal article abstracts. The first is a synchronic analysis

of the data, and it suggests that this genre has two types of vocabulary: ELT-related one and abstract-related one. The second is a diachronic analysis of the data, and it has revealed that English language teaching has undergone substantial changes during the period between 1980 and 2003.

Both analyses imply that article abstracts are very useful for Japanese college students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language as well as professional English language teachers. One of the reasons is that those article abstracts provide technical terms that they need as the core vocabulary for their studies. By being exposed to such authentic English, they can keep abreast of current topics in that field. The other reason is that the journal article abstract is a rich potential source of material for developing students' ability to master basic rhetorical devices for writing essays on English language teaching.

The analysis in this paper is limited to *ELT Journal*. It is hoped that many more journal article abstracts will be investigated for further study.

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