

Like That? The Problem With Coursebook Vocabulary

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The importance of learning multiword lexical phrases for the development of fluent language capabilities is now widely acknowledged, largely due to advances in corpus linguistics. It has been noted, however, that this research is often not adequately understood and applied in pedagogical contexts. Many coursebooks, for example, still include high-frequency words without reference to the highly frequent patterns and phrases they are found in; the lexical phrases and single items that are included are often selected subjectively and without reference to corpus data. The present study illustrates this problem and how it can be remedied using examples from the researcher's own teaching context. Also included is a corpus-based, comparative analysis of the highly frequent word *like*, in which findings from a corpus of ELT coursebooks were evaluated against a corresponding phraseological analysis using the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

言語を流暢に運用する力を身につけるにあたり、複数の語からなる「定型句」を学習することの重要性は、コーパス言語学研究の進展により今や広く認められているが、これらの研究が常に実際の指導の場面で適切に理解され応用されているわけではない。例えば、多くの教科書に登場する高頻度語は、その語が高い頻度で出現するパターンやどのような句の中で出現するのかということに言及せずに使われ、定型句は、コーパスのデータに準拠せず主観的に選ばれていることがしばしばである。本研究では、高頻度語である「like」について発表者自身の指導例やコーパスに基づく比較分析を行いながら、この問題に焦点を当てる。また、ELT教科書のコーパスに基づいたデータを、それに対応した大きな参照コーパスを用いた語法分析に基づいて評価する。

It has been nearly 30 years since Sinclair and Renouf (1988) first proposed the lexical syllabus, suggesting learners of English focus on the most frequent words in the language, including their main patterns of usage and most frequent collocations. The importance of learning multiword lexical phrases is now widely acknowledged, largely

due to advances in corpus linguistics, which have shown that speakers rely heavily on multiword lexical phrases for real-time communication and these phrases play an important role in the development of fluency. Although these revelations have radically transformed the way in which we view language, O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter (2007) noted that this does not necessarily mean corpus linguistics research is adequately understood and applied in pedagogical contexts. Many coursebooks writers, for example, continue to select vocabulary without reference to the patterns and phrases they are found in, and the lexical phrases that are included are often selected subjectively and without reference to corpus data (Koprowski, 2005); this extends to the selection of single items as well. In the current study, this problem is illustrated with examples from a specialized corpus of communicative ELT coursebooks and a corresponding comparative analysis using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, see <<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>>).

Prefabricated Lexical Patterns

It is now widely accepted that a large part of the mental lexicon of native and highly fluent speakers consists of prefabricated lexical phrases, or chunks, treated as single units for the purposes of real-time language processing (Sinclair, 1991; Willis, 1990; Wray, 2002). Pawley and Syder (1983) were the first English-based researchers to propose this phraseological view of language in their seminal paper investigating nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. Through conversational discourse analysis, they concluded that native speakers rely on a stock of hundreds of thousands of lexicalized sentence stems to overcome the limitations of human memory and processing capabilities that would severely limit real-time communication. Additionally, they provided numerous examples of language in use, supporting their claim that although speakers may in fact be able to produce an infinite number of possible utterances, they only use a limited number of these, which are prefabricated and commonly shared in the language community. This is why the utterance *Would you like to become my spouse?*—although technically allowable and grammatically correct—sounds quite odd to a native speaker compared to the standard *Will you marry me?* (pp. 196-197).

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This new view of language was controversial at the time, as it directly contradicted the widely held Chomskyan view of language production in which speakers were thought to construct utterances in a slot-and-filler manner, based on their knowledge of grammatical rules. With the advent of large computerized text corpora, however, this phrasal view of language has been validated, most notably by Sinclair (1991) in his pioneering work with the COBUILD corpus project in the early 1980s, in which he proposed the *idiom principle*, stating that language users have access to “a large number of semi-pre-constructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments” (p. 110).

The Lexical Syllabus

Following the proposal and corpus-backed validation of the idiom principle, researchers began to look at ways in which the implications of formulaic language could be applied to language teaching. The lexical syllabus was first introduced by Sinclair and Renouf (1988) and more fully explored by Willis (1990) and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992). Richards and Schmidt (2003, p. 307) define a lexical syllabus as a vocabulary syllabus that is organized in terms of the most important, frequent, or useful vocabulary items in a language, often organized according to levels (e.g., the first 1000 words, the second 1000 words, etc.).

Sinclair and Renouf (1988) argued that the main focus of study for language learners should be the most common patterns and collocations of the most frequent words. They noted that more often than not, different forms of a lemma (e.g., *move, moves, moved, moving*) carry different meanings. The authors claim that these are essentially different words that should be treated separately in language courses. Citing corpus data, they demonstrated how word pairs such as *certain/certainly, near/nearly, and detach/detached* behave very differently. They also criticized textbook writers for not paying enough attention to delexical verbs like *have* and *give* that tend to collocate with certain nouns and adjectives and are used more often than their more concrete lexical forms.

ELT Coursebook Vocabulary Selection Process

The literature reveals a long-standing discord, or mismatch, between research and the content of English language teaching materials. An investigation of ELT materials conducted by Littlejohn (1992) found the influence of applied linguistics on coursebooks to be relatively weak; Chalker (1994) was unable to find significant content or organizational differences between coursebooks from the 1950s and 1960s, when structuralism was

still dominant, and coursebooks from the 1990s when communicative language teaching had supposedly taken over. More recently, this mismatch was found to extend to the vocabulary selection process by Koprowski (2005), who argued that nearly a quarter of the multiword lexical items included in contemporary ELT coursebooks were “of limited pedagogic value to learners” (p. 322), in that they occur very infrequently and in limited contexts.

Koprowski’s (2005) study involved a comprehensive examination of the lexical syllabuses of three coursebooks in which he assigned a usefulness score for each multiword lexical item based on frequency and range, which refers to the number of text types that a word is found in, using the 330-million Bank of English corpus. Acknowledging that commercial textbook publishers are certainly aware of the importance of multiword lexical items, as evident in their abundant inclusion in coursebooks, Koprowski concluded that the selection process is highly subjective and often conducted without reference to corpus data, resulting in “an unprincipled and careless selection process” (p. 328). The following analysis is aimed at demonstrating that this flawed selection process remains a problem not only for multiword lexical items, but for single vocabulary items as well.

Coursebook Analysis Corpora

Two corpora were used for the following coursebook analysis, the ELT Coursebook Corpus (ELTCC), a specialized corpus consisting of a selection of contemporary ELT coursebooks, and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a large reference corpus used for comparative analysis.

ELT Coursebook Corpus

The ELTCC was constructed specifically for this investigation. It consists of just over 540,000 words and contains 15 complete coursebooks from eight different series with either two or three levels, ranging from beginner to intermediate. All the coursebooks are oral communication focused and published by large international publishers. Once compiled, the ELTCC was used to conduct phraseological analyses of selected words and phrases in order to determine their treatment in coursebooks, using basic concordance software.

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Corpus of Contemporary American English

The Corpus of Contemporary American English was used as a reference corpus to conduct corresponding phraseological analyses with the results from the ELTCC in order to answer the question: Is the treatment of coursebook vocabulary natural, or is it significantly different from how this vocabulary is used in real communication? It is claimed that the COCA is the largest corpus that is freely available and the only corpus of American English that is both large and balanced (Davies, 2015). It currently contains 520 million words in five equally divided subcorpora (spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic) and 20 million words for each year from 1990 to 2015, allowing for analysis of both range and historical changes in frequency.

Nice Talking With You

One example of questionable lexical selection comes from my own teaching experience with *Nice Talking with You* (NTWY; Kenney, 2012), a two-level communication-based series that is aimed at helping students have real and natural conversations. I often find it necessary to amend the Words and Phrases sections, which are mostly made up of single words without any further contextual information. In addition, there are often lexical items that seem of little to no use to the learner. To illustrate this point, the second unit of NTWY2, entitled “My Place,” focuses on talking about where you live, describing your apartment or house, and talking about your hometown. Only six of the 29 items are made up of more than one word, and one of the single words included in Words and Phrases is *yuppie*, which seems particularly out of place. The word only occurs in the entire ELTCC two times and both of these occurrences are from NTWY2, once in the vocabulary list and once in a matching exercise that produces the sentence: *I live near a lot of tech companies, so a lot of my neighbors are yuppies* (Kenny, 2012).

Table 1 shows the frequency and range for *yuppie/s* in the COCA. The data confirms that *yuppie/s* is indeed infrequent, occurring only 814 times in 520 million words, that is, 1.75 times per million words. It is found in all five text types, indicating a good range, but it is used more in printed than in spoken English. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that the usage of *yuppie/s* has steadily declined since 1990, from 3.38 words per million to 0.58 words per million. It can be concluded from this data that *yuppie/s* is not a very useful word, and a more frequent and useful word could have been chosen for the topic of discussing where one lives.

Table 1. Frequency and Range of *Yuppie/s* in COCA

Count method	All	COCA subcorpora				
		Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic
Frequency	814	100	184	206	281	43
Per million words	1.75	1.05	2.03	2.16	3.06	0.47

Note. COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English; Frequency = occurrences in 520 million words.

Table 2. Frequency of *Yuppie/s* by Time Period in COCA

Count method	Time period				
	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2015
Frequency	351	179	171	88	70
Per million words	3.38	1.73	1.66	0.86	0.58

Note. COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English; Frequency = occurrences in 520 million words.

One of the supplementary words that I present to my students when doing this unit is the noun *rent*. In Table 3, we can see that *rent* is nearly seven times more frequent than *yuppie/s*, with 5524 occurrences, and it has a better range, occurring in all five subcorpora with words per million ranging from 6.84 in spoken English to 21.71 in newspaper English. In Table 4, we see that the usage of *rent* has remained relatively stable since 1990, averaging 12 occurrences per million words for each year.

Table 3. Frequency and Range of *Rent* in COCA

Count method	All	COCA subcorpora				
		Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic
Frequency	5524	654	1307	926	1991	646
Per million words	11.90	6.84	14.45	9.69	21.71	7.09

Note. COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English; Frequency = occurrences in 520 million words.

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Table 4. Frequency of *Rent* by Time Period in COCA

Count method	Time period				
	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2015
Frequency	1374	1326	1090	1244	1367
Per million words	13.21	12.82	10.59	12.19	11.24

Note. COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English; Frequency = occurrences in 520 million words.

It seems likely from the corpus data that the choice to include *yuppie/s* in the Words and Phrases list was made subjectively and without reference to corpus data. The corpus data also shows the noun *rent* would be a far more useful word for discussing where one lives. Of course, replacing an infrequent isolated word with a more frequent one still does little in the way of presenting students with useful multiword items. A simple corpus search of *rent* as a noun reveals *pay* as its most frequent collocate, found in phrases such as *pay my/the rent* and *pay \$600 for rent*. Simply including a few frequent collocates and phrases to each vocabulary item, in line with Sinclair and Renouf’s (1988) lexical syllabus, would significantly improve the vocabulary selection and be much more useful to the learners for both their fluency and accuracy.

Comparative Analysis of *Like*

The next word analyzed for this study was the highly frequent word *like*, which was chosen as a contrast to the low frequency of *yuppie/s* and also because it is often one of the first verbs taught to new learners: *What kind of _____ do you like?; I like _____; Do you like _____?* Table 5 shows the frequency data for *like* from both the COCA and the ELTCC.

Frequency

In the COCA, *like* is used most frequently as a preposition, occurring over 766,000 times, making it the 74th most frequent word in the corpus. This is followed by the verb *like*, which occurs over 193,000 times and ranks as the 208th most frequent word in the corpus. The ELTCC has not yet been tagged for part of speech and can only show the overall frequency of *like* across all its usages, with 1,942 occurrences, making it the 36th most

frequent word in the corpus. This frequency data indicates a discrepancy between how *like* is presented in ELT materials and how it is actually used.

Table 5. Frequency Ranking of *Like* by Part of Speech in COCA and in ELTCC

COCA (953,647 times)	ELTCC (2,144 times)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 74th preposition • 208th verb • 1123rd conjunction • 1684th adjective • 2702nd adverb • ??? noun (0.4%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 36th overall

Note. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) frequency = occurrences in 520 million words; ELT Coursebook Corpus (ELTCC) frequency = occurrences in 540,000 words.

The discrepancy between *like* in the COCA and *like* in the ELTCC is even more pronounced when the frequency data is sorted by meaning as shown in Table 6. Of all the various functions and phraseology of the word *like*, the general meaning can be split into two distinct categories: similarity (preposition, conjunction, adjective, adverb) and enjoyment or wants (verb, noun). The two corpora show complete opposite frequencies for the two meanings. In the COCA *like* is used to show similarity 78% of the time, and 22% of its usage is verbal to show enjoyment and wants. In the ELTCC on the other hand, *like* is mostly presented as a verb, 72% of the time, with only 28% of its occurrences used to convey similarity. It appears from this data that the usage of *like* meaning *similar* is underrepresented in ELT teaching materials.

Table 6. Frequency of *Like* by Meaning in COCA and ELTCC

Meaning	COCA (953,647 times)	ELTCC (2,144 times)
similarity	78%	28%
enjoyment/wants	22%	72%

Note. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) frequency = occurrences in 520 million words; ELT Coursebook Corpus (ELTCC) frequency = occurrences in 540,000 words.

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Phraseology

The phraseology of *like* was examined in both corpora using their respective collocation functions. Table 7 shows the most frequent left collocations of *like* from the COCA and the corresponding frequency from the ELTCC. From this data it is clear that the most common usage of *like* in the COCA is to introduce similes with prepositional verbal phrases that combine a verb with *like*, the most common verbs being the verbs of perception: *look*, *feel*, and *sound*. The biggest discrepancy here between the two corpora occurs with *looks like*. Although *looks like* is the most frequent verb-*like* construction in the COCA, it occurs with less than half the frequency in the ELTCC. The bigger discrepancy here, however, is that in addition to describing something visually, *looks like* is also used to evaluate propositions, as in *It looks like they won't be joining us*. Of the 11 occurrences of *look like* in the ELTCC, it is used only one time to evaluate a proposition in this way.

Also frequently collocating with *like* are *something* and *things* to form the vague expressions *something like that*, and *things like that*. This appears to be one area of language use that coursebooks are starting to incorporate, as the frequency in the ELTCC is similar to the frequency in the COCA.

Finally, the *I/he/she was like* construction occurs in the COCA very frequently; the frequency data for this item in Table 7 comes from the spoken English subcorpora only, which highlights the fact that *like* occurs in spoken English over five times more often than it does in written English (Adolphs & Carter, 2003). Here, *was like* is being used pragmatically as a discourse marker to signal reported speech, taking the place of *said* in casual discourse. There are no instances of this usage in the ELTCC.

Table 7. Most Frequent *Like* Phrases in COCA and Corresponding Frequency in ELTCC

Phraseology	COCA		ELTCC	
	Frequency	Per million words	Frequency	Per million words
looks like	22,429	50	11	20
feel like	20,631	46	31	57
looked like	19,209	43	2	4
something like	14,937	32	13	24
things like	9883	21	13	24
sounds like	9,612	21	27	50
feels like	5,107	11	1	2
I/he/she was like	1963*	20	0	0
shaped like	1,562	3	0	0
smells like	878	2	0	0

* = Occurs only in the Spoken subcorpus.

Note. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) frequency is in 520 million words; ELT Coursebook Corpus (ELTCC) frequency is in 540,000 words.

Next, the most common collocates occurring with *like* in the ELTCC were observed and compared with results from the COCA as shown in Table 8. As expected from the high frequency of verbal usage of *like* in the ELTCC, the most common patterns containing *like* are used to convey enjoyment (*I like*) and wants (*I'd/would like*). Although these patterns of course occur relatively often in the COCA, they are much more common in the ELTCC.

Another discrepancy between the corpora that highlights the overrepresentation of *like* as a verb in the ELTCC is *likes and dislikes*. This nominalized pattern is quite uncommon in the COCA, occurring only 0.43 times per million words. It is one of the most frequent phrases with *like* in the ELTCC, however, occurring 92 times per million words. The reason for this high frequency is due to the repeated use of the expression in the title or directions for speaking activities in one of the coursebook series.

The only frequently recurring pattern with *like* as a preposition in the ELTCC, *expressions like*, also comes from activity directions such as *Respond with expressions like . . .* and

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is presumably not explicitly presented to learners as useful vocabulary. This is one of the few examples of *like* being used prepositionally to show similarity, but this particular usage occurs very infrequently in the COCA, with only 0.09 instances per million words. Comparing a small, specialized corpus such as the ELTCC to a large reference corpus will of course highlight usage differences that are characteristic of a language subgenre. However, considering that the goal of the coursebooks included in the ELTCC is to emulate natural, conversational English, as stated in many of their descriptive blurbs, this discrepancy highlights the underrepresentation of *like* as a preposition in the ELTCC.

Table 8. Most Frequent *Like* Phrases in ELTCC and Corresponding Frequency in COCA

Phraseology	ELTCC		COCA	
	Frequency	Per million words	Frequency	Per million words
I like	182	337	21,815	47
do you like	163	302	2,443	5
I'd/would like	58	107	22,284	48
likes and dislikes*	50	92	193	0.43
really like	35	65	3,196	7
I don't/didn't like	34	63	6,699	14
expressions like*	19	35	44	0.09

* Largely occurs in the titles and directions for speaking activities in one of the textbooks.

Note. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) frequency = occurrences in 520 million words; ELT Coursebook Corpus (ELTCC) frequency = occurrences in 540,000 words.

The data show that there is a notable discrepancy in the usage of *like* in the two corpora and that it is overrepresented as a verb and underrepresented as a preposition in the ELTCC when compared to the COCA.

Discussion

The examples and corpus analysis outlined above support Koprowski's (2005) observation that coursebook vocabulary is often selected subjectively and without referring to corpus data. This can lead to poor choices and presents the learners with vocabulary

items that are of little pedagogic value and not very useful for authentic communication, such as the word *yuppie* for talking about where you live. Additionally, highly frequent words such as *like* are often highly frequent due to their phraseological nature: They are included in numerous multiword items and perform various functions. Many coursebooks, however, fail to include the most frequent patterns and phrases associated with the vocabulary they include and in the case of *like*, fail to highlight its other meanings and functions besides its verbal use. This is backed up by research on student errors conducted by Wu (2016), who found that students often use polysemous words in only a single way. In the examples given by Wu below, the students did not seem to know the prepositional use of *like* and its frequent phraseology: *look like* N and *no* N *like* N/PRON.

- *a. He look as if another person.
b. He looks like another person.
- *a. I think there is no actor such as him.
b. I think there is no actor like him. (p. 7)

The obvious solution to this problem of coursebook vocabulary selection is to incorporate Sinclair and Renouf's (1988) recommendations for creating lexical syllabuses. Considering that it is now standard procedure to base dictionaries on corpus data, it seems only logical that ELT coursebooks and materials should at least be corpus informed. It is not enough to simply include a word and not refer to an appropriate corpus to check its most useful patterns. For example, in addition to the standard inclusion of *like* as a verb, it would be of benefit to the learners to include at least some instances of *look like* to show the evaluation of propositions as well as for visual description. A simple corpus check would also tell the coursebook author that *yuppie* might not be the most efficient word to include in a unit based on describing where you live (or any unit or topic for that matter). It would be more helpful to choose more frequent words and to include their most frequent patterns and collocations.

One criticism of the lexical syllabus is that an overreliance on corpus data and frequency can lead to coursebooks that are not engaging and appear to be what Marc Helgesen, a coursebook author, called "machine-assembled" (personal communication, 2015). Helgesen argued that coursebooks, and oral communication coursebooks in particular, are designed to do a lot more than present vocabulary, grammar, and functions. They are also designed to organize tasks and interactions that are essential to creating a friendly classroom atmosphere. He noted that most books are meant to break the ice and get

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students talking to each other early in the course; discussing likes and dislikes is a good way to do this. This likely contributes to the overrepresentation of the verbal usage of *like* in the ELTCC and the coursebooks.

In his discussion on graded readers, Viney (2015) made a similar argument against the exclusive use of word lists based on frequency for vocabulary selection:

Teachers have said, “It’s easy. Why don’t they just use frequency counts?” But it’s not easy at all. The demands of graded readers are different. You need words like *said, told, whispered, shouted, screamed* as soon as the past tense is available. Words for dramatic events—*gun, fire, sword, murder*—might be more important than *salt* and *pepper*. (para. 8)

Sinclair and Renouf (1988) addressed this line of criticism of the lexical syllabus. While advocating the importance of frequency for vocabulary selection, they acknowledged that frequency should not be the only tool used, noting that the 200 most frequent words are function words that are semantically empty. They conceded that words outside the target frequency band will need to be added such as those relating to everyday domestic reality and classroom procedure words.

It seems, then, that there is a place, albeit a limited one, for subjectivity in the selection process, but I maintain that there needs to be a specific need for any subjectively chosen items. In Koprowski’s (2005) critique of vocabulary selection, for example, he lists *do judo* as an item that is not particularly useful to learners. However, it is useful in Japan where “I played judo in high school” is a common error made by university students talking about their past club activities.

Conclusion

I have made the argument in this paper that the vocabulary selection process for ELT coursebooks is usually flawed and have provided examples to back up Koprowski’s (2005) claim that the selection process is often conducted subjectively and without referring to corpus data. Although Helgesen (personal communication) and Viney (2015) make valid points in defence of ELT materials, it seems that there is certainly room for improvement. Coursebook writers can address the selection problem by following Sinclair and Renouf’s (1988) recommendation of presenting students with the most common patterns and collocations of the most frequent words in the language. However, although this should be the main factor in determining the lexical syllabus for the majority of the items in a coursebook, there will still be a need for a certain number of subjectively chosen items, but careful consideration should be made regarding each item’s usefulness.

Bio Data

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