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ColloCaid: Assisting Writers with Academic English Collocations

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Collocations seem to be among the most frequent look-up needs of users of written academic English (Yoon 2016; Granger and Paquot 2017). Although there are a number of lexicographic tools and resources that can enhance the use of academic English collocations (e.g. McCarthy and O'Dell 2008; Flax Library; Ackermann and Chen 2013; Mayor 2013; Lea et al. 2014; Granger and Paquot 2015), writers may not be aware of such aids or may not be sufficiently aware of the lexical shortcomings of their emerging texts so as to trigger the need to seek help when needed (e.g. Frankenberg-Garcia 2011, 2015; Laufer 2011). Moreover, even if users did wish to look up a collocation while writing an essay, dissertation, thesis, research article or similar, doing so could interrupt their thoughts and distract them from getting their ideas down on paper (Yoon 2016).

To address this problem, we are developing a smart-lexicography tool that integrates dictionary and text-editor architectures to help writers with academic English collocations. ColloCaid is a web-based text editor that prompts users of academic English to look up collocations as they write, or, alternatively, allows writers to check the collocations of existing drafts (Frankenberg-Garcia 2018, Frankenberg-Garcia et al. 2019; Lew et al. 2018). Unlike predictive text, ColloCaid does not autocomplete sentences, but rather nudges writers to seek collocations that express their intended meanings.

In the first part of this presentation, we outline how we have drawn on a combination of academic word lists and corpora (Paquot 2010, Ackermann and Chen 2013, Gardner and Davies 2014, Durrant 2016) and on lexical analysis software (Kilgarrieff et al. 2008, 2014) to compile our lexicographic database, and we explain how we have integrated collocation cues into a text editor on the basis of previous research (e.g. Miller 1956, Dziemianko 2014, Frankenberg-Garcia 2015, Boers and Webb 2017). We finish this part with a demo of our prototype, which is ready for testing. Next, we report on explicit feedback on a beta version of ColloCaid provided by experts (lexicographers, EAP tutors and academics) and users of academic English in Spain, Brazil, Poland and the UK. We present a first-hand account of ColloCaid's usability measured against the widely used System Usability Scale (Brookes 1996), which enables us to compare ColloCaid with other interactive tools, and we summarize users' impressions on the lexical coverage and usefulness of the tool. In line with our emphasis on user-centred design, we conclude the paper by inviting eLex delegates to test the tool for themselves, and let us know what they think while development is still in progress.

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