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Published: 01/06/2018

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Lew, R., Frankenberg-Garcia, A., Roberts, J. C., Rees, G., & Sharma, N. (2018). *Beyond a Static Dictionary: Helping Writers with Academic English Collocations*. Abstract from The 12th International Conference of the Asian Association for Lexicographers, Krabi, Thailand.

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Beyond a static dictionary: Helping writers with Academic English collocations

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Subfield: 1. electronic and digital revolution in lexicography

Keywords: writing assistant; collocation; academic writing; English for Academic Purposes

Abstract

One consequence of the digital revolution in lexicography is that there is less use of stand-alone dictionaries, with the emphasis moving to digital tools geared towards very specific tasks (Lew 2015: 7). Writing stands out as amongst the most demanding tasks requiring lexical support, with academic writing a particular challenge, given that there are no native users of academic language (Hyland 2006; Kosem 2010; Frankenberg-Garcia 2017).

Our Collocaid project addresses the demand for collocational information during the writing of academic English texts (English for Academic Purposes, or EAP), given that academic language has distinct conventions to general language. The project is strongly corpus-based. First, a list of relevant collocational bases (aka nodes) has been created, drawing on existing corpus-based academic vocabulary lists (in particular Gardner and Davies 2014). At the next step, the list of salient and useful collocates for these lexical nodes are being identified in corpora of academic English.

Our tool will be implemented as a real-time writing assistant, designed to prompt writers of EAP texts with appropriate collocates whenever they need help, while being minimally disruptive to the writing process. To that end, we are building on insights from recent research in information visualization (Roberts et al. 2017), as well as enriching our lexical database with negative information, that is typical collocational errors attested in corpora of novice academic writers. We are planning to conduct usability studies of the prototype of the tool so that EAP writers get the optimal degree and type of prompting to produce more idiomatic texts without disrupting their writing process. We hope to have our initial prototype ready for Asialex 2018, and would like to demonstrate it during the conference and receive expert feedback from the delegates.

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