From my unpublished MA dissertation on Concordancing.

4.4 The lexical phrase

It would seem then that while concordancer output gives us a clearer understanding of how language is put together in use (although it cannot reveal the discourse functions of any particular piece of text), it does not get us very far in our search for pedagogical prescriptions, and, indeed it can easily lead us astray. Although I would agree largely with this conclusion, I think the case for using lexical phrases as a key element in language instruction is extremely strong; the work of Nattinger and DeCarrico strikes me as an important development which is both radical and far-reaching. While Sinclair, Biber, Willis and others take too narrow a view of language competence, lexical phrases (more carefully described and better analysed units than earlier descriptions of formulaic language) occupy a crucial place in the continuum between grammatical rules and lexical items, and can therefore help to re-define language competence, and to identify pedagogically core parts of the language on which to base our instruction.

In Knowledge of Language and Ability for Use (1989) Widdowson, having argued that Chomsky's and Hymes' views of competence are not commensurate (since one is interested in an abstract system of rules, and the other in using language) suggests that there are eight, not four aspects to Hymes' competence: knowledge of each aspect, and ability in each one. He then reformulates these as grammatical competence (the parameter of possibility) and pragmatic competence (the rest), and characterises knowledge in terms of degrees of analysability, and ability in terms of accessibility. Although both analysability and accessibility are necessary components, analysability has its limits. Nattinger and DeCarrico (after Pawley and Simon) draw attention to lexical phrases which are subject to differing degrees of syntactic variation. It seems that a great deal of knowledge consists of these formulaic chunks, lexical units completely or partially assembled in readiness for use, and if this is true, then not all access is dependent on analysis. Gleason (1982) suggested that the importance of prefabricated routines, or "unopened packages" in language acquisition and second language learning has yet to be recognised.

If we accept this view then communicative competence can be seen in a fresh way. Widdowson says this:

Communicative competence is a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. (Widdowson, 1989) Communicative competence is a matter of adaption, and rules are not generative but regulative and subservient. (ibid)

Competence consists of knowing how the scale of variability in the legitimate application of generative rules is applied - when analysis is called for and when it is not. Ignorance of the variable application of grammatical rules constitutes incompetence. (Widdowson, 1990)

Our criteria for pedagogical prescription do not have to change as a result of this new formulation of competence, but I think we are nearer to identifying pedagogically key units of language - parts of the language that activate the learning process. The suggestion is that grammar's role is subservient to lexis, and this implies a radical shift in pedagogical focus. If, as Widdowson thinks, we should provide patterns of lexical co-occurrence for rules to operate on so that they are suitably adjusted to the communicative purpose required of the context, then Nattinger and DeCarrico's work, which identifies lexical phrases and then prescribes exposure to and practice of sequences of such phrases, can surely play a key role. They present a language teaching program based on the lexical phrase which leads students to use prefabricated language in a similar way as first language speakers do, and which they claim avoids the shortcomings of relying too heavily on either theories of linguistic competence on the one hand or theories of communicative competence on the other.

Though the focus is on appropriate language use, the analysis of regular rules of syntax is not neglected. (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992)