The *Best of Password* collection

About the *Best of Password* collection

2. Collections

FLAX organizes documents into *collections* ranging from one or two documents to millions of them. Typically, language teachers either build a small collection themselves with a handful of documents that they choose, or make use of collections that others have built or ones distributed with FLAX as samples. Collections need not be small, however; underpinning the FLAX system is digital library technology that can accommodate vast collections, including entire libraries. First we look at how collections are used – by both students and teachers. Later we will see how to create them (Chapter 6).

The top picture opposite shows the "browsing" page of a FLAX collection entitled *The Best of Password* (this collection is distributed with the software). Beneath that is the "home page," which is where you go when you click the *About Collection* button in the control bar near the top of the page. The other buttons let you access the documents in different ways. (Some of them do not always appear; it depends on how the collection was built.)

This is what the buttons do:

- *Search* enables you to search the collection for particular documents, paragraphs, or sentences that contain particular words; or search for particular collocations
- *Browse* lets you browse the documents by title
- *Activities* takes you to language games that have been built for the collection, and allows you to create new ones
- *Collocations* lets you study the collocations in the documents
- *Wordlist* presents the words in the collection, sorted by how often they occur
- *My Cherry Basket* shows you any collocations ("cherries") that you have collected.

As the home page explains, this collection contains articles published in *Password*, a New Zealand magazine for new speakers of English that contains articles, exercises and teaching notes.[3]

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[3] Published by Puriri Press as *The Best of Password 7*, edited by H. Denny, A. Sachtleben and V. Yee. We gratefully acknowledge the editors' permission to build and distribute this collection. To subscribe to *Password*, please visit http://www.password.org.nz.

"Adventure sports," a document in the *Best of Password* collection

2.1 Documents

There are 20 documents in the *Best of Password* collection. Here is one, called "Adventure sports." Most of them address topics relevant to New Zealand, and this is no exception. It is often helpful for teachers to create their own collections that contain documents relevant in a local context, or focused on a particular topic area (such as business, or geology). That way, students can work with documents they can easily relate to, and learn vocabulary and expressions used in that context. You will soon learn how to create collections of your own documents (Chapter 6).

The text talks about adventure sports in New Zealand. The illustration shows the original form of the document; you can also display a version in which collocations are highlighted. The tab labeled *wordlist* highlights certain words in the document: ones in the top 1000 English words, or the top 2000, or academic words (you can choose). The *adjective* tab highlights collocations that begin with an adjective. *Noun, preposition* and *verb* do the same for other parts of speech. Not all such collocations are highlighted because part of speech detection is done automatically, and is not infallible. (For example, sentence-initial nouns are tagged as proper nouns and excluded from collocations.) We will learn more about collocations and how they are identified later (Section 4.2).

The accompanying image illustrates white-water rafting and rock-climbing. It is easy to associate images with documents when creating your own collections. Often just one image is associated with each document, and it is displayed at the beginning as an introductory illustration (as here). Sometimes people make collections where each "document" is an image, along with a caption or some explanatory text. It is possible to associate several images with a document, in which case they are equally spaced throughout it. The documents you include in FLAX collections are intended to be simple: controlled image placement is not possible. You can also associate YouTube movies with documents.

Audio versions of the document are available too. If the player widget above the document image is activated, FLAX reads the document to you. In fact, there are two audio versions of documents in this collection: one in British English (as shown) and the other in New Zealand English (accessed by the menu). This facility allows students to listen to documents as well as read them – but you can include any audio accompaniment, not just a spoken version. Being able to listen to documents enables various "dictation" activities. When creating your own collections it is up to you to provide appropriate audio files, if you want. You need to record them separately, not in FLAX.

Searching the *Best of Password* collection for the word "young"

Searching for collocations that involve the word *identity*

2.2 Searching

When you press the *Search* button you get a standard box into which you type a word (or words) to seek. The illustration shows a search for the word "young." In this case four documents are returned, and their titles are shown. Clicking the second one, for example, leads to the "Adventure sports" article we saw earlier. The only difference is that (depending on your Web browser setup) the search term – the word "young" – is highlighted in yellow wherever it appears in the document.

Searching is case-insensitive: the result is the same whether the query uses capital letters or small letters (*Young* is the same as *young*). However, you need to get the ending right – *computers* is *not* the same as *computer*. And if you specify more than one word, documents that contain any of them are returned. If you want to look for a phrase like *adventure sports* you need to put it in quotation marks.

Searching in FLAX is fast: even collections with millions of documents are searched almost instantly. If it seems slow for you, that's because of the network connection, not the searching itself. FLAX is built on digital library technology that is extremely efficient for large collections.
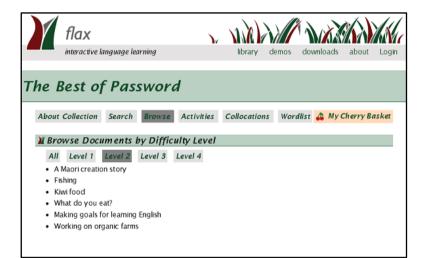
As well as searching articles and titles, you can also search collocations. You do this by pulling down the menu labeled *Search for articles* and selecting *collocations*. For example, a search for *identity* returns three collocations:

- *retain their identity*
- *keeping their identity*
- *cultural identity*.

Each of these appears in an article in the collection. The first two involve verbs, and are shown in the bottom image; the third involves an adjective and appears under the *Adjective* tab. Alongside each is shown the context in which it appears. There are ways of exploring collocations further – e.g., clicking *retain* in the second example brings up many other collocations that use this word. There are ways of seeking documents that contain that particular collocation on the Web. And there are ways of "picking" the collocation and putting it into your own basket of favorite collocations. We will learn more about these when we look at FLAX's collocation facilities (Section 4.2).

Browsing the *Best of Password* collection: Level 1 documents

Browsing the *Best of Password* collection: Level 2 documents

2.3 Browsing

The *Browse* button on the collection's home page lists all the documents in it. We saw earlier the twenty documents in the *Best of Password* collection. Clicking any one displays the document, just as before.

Each document is assigned a difficulty level by the user when the collection is created. The illustration shows the Level 1 and Level 2 documents separately. In this example the levels range from 1 to 4, easy to hard. However, you can type in your own levels when you create a collection, so that instead of numbers the levels might be the words *easy*, *moderate*, and *hard*. When you create a collection it's up to you to decide what difficulty scale to use.

You can see just the documents at a particular difficulty level using the buttons on the browsing page above the list of document titles.

2.4 Activities, collocations, wordlist, cherry basket

The remaining four navigation buttons on the collection's home page are discussed later.

- *Activities* takes you to language games that have been built for the collection, and allows you to create new ones.

  FLAX activities are discussed in Chapter 4. This button does not appear if you are working in Moodle, where language activities are instead integrated into the course and you create new ones using Moodle's *Add an activity* menu.

- *Collocations* lets you study the collocations in the documents.

  Collocations are small sequences of words that often appear together. They are discussed in Section 4.2.

- *Wordlist* shows you the words in all the documents in the collection.

  You can look at all the words, or just the words in various standard lists – the most common 1000 or 2000 words in English, or the academic words. This is discussed in Section 5.2.

- *My Cherry Basket* shows you the collocations ("cherries") that you have collected.

  FLAX provides a facility for "picking" favorite collocations and saving them in a kind of notebook that we call a cherry basket. These are discussed in Section 5.5.