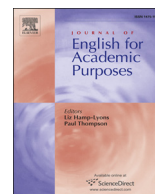


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The effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences in augmenting L2 learners' academic writing skills: A quantitative research study



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ABSTRACT

To date, experts in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have paid extensive attention to the vital role formulaic sequences can play in augmenting second language (L2) learners' academic writing skills. However, empirical testing of such a role is rarely attempted in research. This quantitative research study is an attempt to investigate the effects of focused instruction of formulaic sequences on twelve L2 learners' academic writing skills. The study results suggest that an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences can enhance their subsequent acquisition and promote L2 learners' tendency to integrate this language phenomenon in their writing. Moreover, formulaic sequences may increase L2 learners' writing proficiency because they function as frames to which L2 learners might resort when approaching a writing task to compose an academic piece of writing.

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Research has increasingly focused on the effectiveness of formulaic sequences, defined as prefabricated chunks that are stored in and retrieved from the memory as wholes (Ding, 2007; Wood, 2006; Wray, 2002), in augmenting L2 learners' academic writing skills. These formulaic sequences, which may constitute as much as 52.3% of written discourse (Erman & Warren, 2000), play a vital role in improving L2 learners' writing proficiency and enhancing their performance in academic contexts (Jones & Haywood, 2004; Lewis, 1997). However, the growing interest in such a role has not been empirically investigated to any great extent yet in research into learner academic writing, specifically, paragraph and/or essay writing. In an effort to address this, the present study aims to explore how the mastery of different types of formulaic sequences can help L2 learners manipulate academic discourse in academic reports. The study was conducted over a ten-week period with twelve participants from four different first language (L1) backgrounds and different proficiency levels. It involved the participants in focused instruction on formulaic sequences for 90 min a week for ten weeks, a total of 900 min. Three timed written paragraphs were elicited from each participant at three different points in time. The elicited texts were evaluated blindly by three judges, and the textual data were quantified and analyzed statistically.

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1. Literature review

1.1. The formulaic nature of language production

It has been generally accepted that language is not entirely creative, rule-governed, or composed afresh each time it is produced (Barlow, 2000; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wood, 2001; Wray, 2002). That is, despite the creative nature of language that theoretically enables them to produce and interpret an infinite set of utterances, proficient language users tend to utilize particular utterances in their language production and disregard all other possible grammatical expressions that would seem to be equally useful to express the same concept (Lewis, 1997; Wray, 2000). With the burgeoning of new linguistic theories which have mainly focused on performance rather than on competence per se, the concept of creativity of language has been situated over time and has been augmented, at least partially, by what is known to be the formulaicity and/or idiomaticity of language production (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Lewis, 1997).

The formulaic nature of language production has been a focus as a result of the growing interest in usage-based SLA theory which demonstrates, with reference to native speakers' obvious tendency to bypass all generative rules available in language and repeatedly deploy the utterances common in their speech community, that language production is at least partially formulaic rather than being entirely constructed from scratch by virtue of grammar rules (e.g. Weinert, 1995). Formulaic sequences, as evidenced by corpus-based analysis of language use, are as well widespread in written discourse, particularly academic writing (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, & Maynard, 2008; Li & Schmitt, 2009).

The indisputable existence of formulaic sequences in L1 discourse means that this language phenomenon is to be considered a cornerstone of any full account of SLA (Jones & Haywood, 2004). Experts in the field of second language acquisition have argued that formulaic sequences constitute a major part of L2 learners' linguistic repertoire, and, hence, they are believed to play a vital role in L2 learners' speech fluency and pragmatic competence, among other aspects of language proficiency (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Wood, 2006, 2010; Wray & Perkins, 2000).

1.2. Formulaic sequences and academic writing skills

The effectiveness of formulaic sequences in promoting L2 writing skills has been predominantly ascribed to the nature of academic prose which, unlike creative writing, e.g. poetry, in which the writer's success resides in his/her ability to juxtapose ideas in entirely novel, unfamiliar, and fresh utterances, is characterized by the high frequency of common lexical sequences (Jones & Haywood, 2004; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010). As Lewis (2000) suggests, "in academic writing, where the focus is almost exclusively on accurate communication of information, among colleagues with a shared background in a particular topic, standard words, phrases, collocations and other chunks are an essential prerequisite for effective communication" (p. 189).

This view of academic discourse, as replete with formulaic sequences, implies that academic writing skills surpass the mastery of lexicon and syntax to encompass the successful implementation of formulaic sequences that are viewed as the building blocks of academic discourse (Biber, 2006; Corson, 1995; Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012). In this respect, formulaic sequences can be viewed as a cornerstone of successful academic writing skills, particularly those of L2 writers, because they represent the frequent expressions which L2 writers need to employ in that register (Ellis & Simpson-Vlach, 2009; Lewis, 1997; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012). For example, it has been suggested that although L2 learners' generated sentences are grammatically correct, they are judged to be unnatural or odd because they do not adhere to the formulaicity which is characteristic of a well-formed academic piece of writing (Lewis, 1997; Li & Schmitt, 2009). As Li and Schmitt (2009) put it, "formulaic sequences like *as a result* and *it should be noted that* are central to the creation of academic texts ... As important building blocks of the characteristic features of academic texts, the absence of such formulaic sequences may indicate the lack of mastery of a novice writer in a specific disciplinary community" (p. 86). Not only does such deviation affect the quality of a piece of writing, but it may also negatively influence the overall evaluation of L2 users in academic contexts (Lewis, 1997; Li & Schmitt, 2009).

Jones and Haywood (2004), in turn, point out that EAP programs should be designed in a manner that provides L2 students with the opportunity to acquire, master, and internalize a considerable number of formulaic sequences, since L2 students' acceptable academic performance is contingent on their successful use of lexicon which represents academic discourse. To demonstrate their viewpoint, they refer to Cowie (1992) who hypothesizes that "it is impossible to perform at a level acceptable to native users, in writing or in speech, without controlling an appropriate range of multiword units" (p. 10).

Ellis et al. (2008) note that research on EAP has revealed that each academic discipline has a high frequency of lexical sets and, thus, learning to write effectively in a particular discipline is germane to mastering these recurrent sets. To elaborate on this notion, they explain that L2 writers may have advanced knowledge of grammar and lexicon; however, the sentences they generate, although grammatically correct, may sound unnatural and foreign. The difficulty in attaining nativelike academic style can be attributed to L2 writers' unawareness of the collocations and formulaic sequences that are representative of their fields. In this regard, Ellis et al. (2008) hypothesize that in addition to their mastery of grammar rules and lexicon, L2 learners "have to know the common collocations and lexical bundles, too, not only to increase their reading speed and comprehension ..., but also to be able to write in a nativelike fashion" (p. 277).

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