"I need it now!" Developing a formulaic frame phrasebank for a specific writing assessment: Student perceptions and recommendations

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of research has demonstrated the use of formulaic language in teaching English for academic purposes to participate in discipline-specific communities. However, time-pressured, first-year undergraduates seeking support for writing may prefer a targeted writing resource for their current assignment. In this paper, I detailed the successful development of an assignment-specific academic phrasebank, which provides examples of open-slot, formulaic frames grouped according to the process required to complete an Individual Development Narrative (IDN) essay. Over two cycles of action research ($n1 = 285$, $n2 = 213$), first-year health science students offered their perceptions of the Cycle 1 phrasebank and recommendations for improvement primarily relating to promotion, content, and layout. Considering these three factors led to the development of a self-accessed resource in cycle 2 that received a more positive evaluation and uptake from students. These findings may assist future course design and facilitate increased student uptake of support for development of academic writing, especially in large classes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The context — Academic phrases in first year writing

When teaching English for academic purposes, "adopting methods which include an explicit understanding of spoken and written texts makes language both more relevant and immediately useful to learners in their studies" (Hyland, 2006, p. 92). However, one of the challenges in providing such resources is that students often do not perceive them as relevant and useful. The idea of user experience views people as central to the successful use of a resource, and should be considered in its design (Rosenzweig, 2015). In the current study, I included student experiences during development of a resource to exemplify specifically useful written text using formulaic frames, which are important for academic writing.

The ability to understand and generate written discourse within a disciplinary community requires knowing the community's conventions of how to phrase knowledge (Hyland, 2012). Language contains groups of words that co-occur more frequently than by chance. These have been called, among other terms, *formulaic sequences* (Wray, 2002). However, there is variation of how formulaic these sequences can be, as they may range from fixed expressions to word sequences that permit

some transformation through insertion, deletion, or substitution (Read & Nation, 2004). One such phraseological variation is a formulaic frame, or phrase frame in which multi-word sequences have open slots (Cunningham, 2017; Fillmore, 1979).

The Manchester Phrasebank (http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk) is a current online resource that contains examples of formulaic frames. This resource offers a collection of general academic phrases from several disciplines organised into sections and moves of academic writing. However, these examples omit much of the contextual information, leaving students to select an appropriate example for their writing context on their own. If students are not confident with their ability to select a suitable phrase, they may perceive the resource as not relevant or useful for their assignment. The context in which these phrases occur is also an important aspect of acquiring understanding and use of these phrases. Advocates of situated cognition argue that purposeful learning requires authentic activities within authentic contexts (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Students may perceive their current assignment as a more authentic context than joining a future disciplinary community. Therefore, an assignment-specific (contextualised, authentic activity) phrasebank could provide an alternative, effective way to make formulaic frames explicitly and immediately useful to students in local contexts. The local context of this study is a medium-sized health science faculty in the South Pacific, in which first-year students take three core courses requiring a written essay. The three concurrently taught courses were introductory writing and research (WR), human development (HD), and health and environment (HE).

1.2. The issue — Academic writing support for large classes

At this faculty, there are three major reasons why students need further writing support in their three core classes. Firstly, due to large enrolments (700—1500), there is limited individual contact time with teachers both in and out of class time. Secondly, students are mostly unfamiliar with the disciplinary discourse needed to write the required essays. Finally, availability of learning support staff is limited. Therefore, the study stemmed from the proposal by the teaching staff and I that students could benefit from a self-accessed resource introducing examples of phrases suitable for their written assignments. The resource developed over preliminary, first and second action research cycles. Fig. 1 illustrates the research cycles.

1.3. Innovative practice — A targeted academic phrasebank

Considering the students' learning context and importance of formulaic language in academic writing, I developed an academic phrasebank to provide examples of formulaic frames grouped under the general sections and specific moves and steps required to complete specific written essays in the WR course. The course required a 1250-word critical essay on a topic of the students' choice, and a 750-word reflective writing essay on their enquiry process. In this preliminary cycle, I created a targeted phrasebank by consulting the assignment instructions and learning outcomes to determine the general sections,
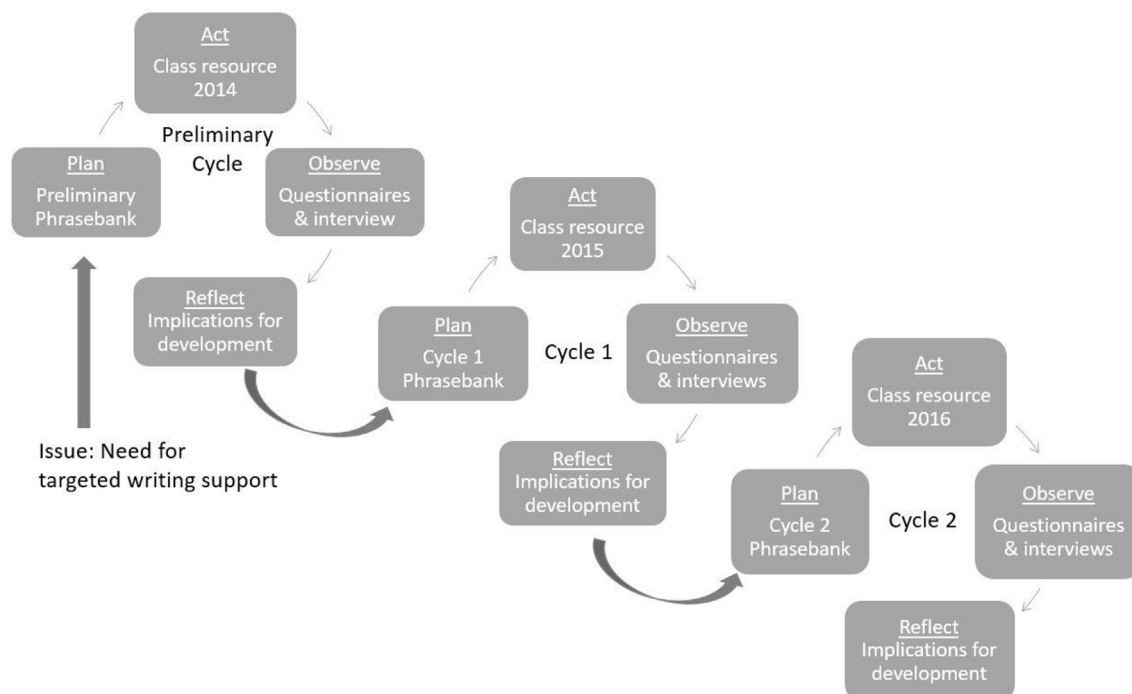

Fig. 1. The action research cycles.