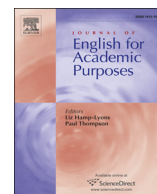


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Learning academic formulaic sequences



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 November 2014

Received in revised form 10 April 2015

Accepted 12 April 2015

Available online

Keywords:

Formulaic sequences

EAP

Writing

EFL

Vocabulary

Teaching

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a classroom-based study that explored the effect of explicit, vocabulary-focused instruction on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' recognition, cued output and spontaneous use of academic formulaic sequences (FS). In addition, the study aimed to shed some light on which type of classroom activity might be most beneficial. Data were collected among second-year EFL business students (L1 = Dutch) in a classroom-based experiment during students' regular English classes. A pretest posttest within-subject design was adopted. Twenty-four pedagogically relevant FS were selected and offered in three types of activities: 1) recognition activities, 2) cued output activities, or 3) a combination of recognition and cued output activities. Learning gains were measured in a recognition test, a cued output test, a writing test and students' end-of-year assignment (= spontaneous productive use). The findings revealed that students made significant learning gains from pretest to posttest. In addition, analyses of students' end-of-year assignments showed that students spontaneously used a considerable number of FS in their assignment. Finally, the results tentatively suggest that activities including cued output resulted in higher learning gains than recognition activities.

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1. Introduction

Corpus studies have revealed the omnipresence and importance of formulaic sequences (FS) in academic writing. FS are frequent "combinations of at least two words favored by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization" (Erman & Warren, 2000, p. 31). In academic writing, they are used to realize functional units of academic genres. Their use allows writers to signal stages in their discourse, to display the appropriate level of formality and to meet the expectations of the academic community (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Jones & Haywood, 2004). Mastery of academic FS is crucial if one wants to succeed as an academic writer. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners struggle with the appropriate use of such sequences, making their academic prose come across as inappropriate and too chatty (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008). Learners do not seem to acquire FS incidentally, even if they know individual items comprising them, which may suggest that an explicit learning approach is called for (Meunier, 2012). However, few studies on practical applications have been published so far (Hyland, 2012).

In order to address this gap, the current study explores the effect of vocabulary-focused instruction on EFL learners' recognition, cued output and spontaneous use of academic FS. An ecologically valid, classroom-based experiment, resembling a real-life learning experience, was set up, in which learners engaged in explicit vocabulary activities focusing on academic FS. Learners' progress was measured from pretests to posttests. The aim of this study is to shed some light on whether it is

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beneficial to devote classroom time to the explicit teaching of a limited number of academic FS and how this might be best achieved.

2. Formulaic sequences

Corpus research has shown that language is to a large extent formulaic in nature (Meunier, 2012; Sinclair, 1991). Formulaic sequences (FS) are important not only because they are ubiquitous in language but also because they are necessary for appropriate, fluent language production and comprehension (Meunier, 2012; Schmitt & Carter, 2004). As a result, their use can be considered a marker of proficiency of foreign language learners. It has been advocated that FL learners need to acquire a considerable number of FS in order to become fluent and proficient FL speakers. Cowie (1992, p. 10) even argues 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”. Although a lack of FS may still result in meaningful, grammatically correct language output, it will make FL learners sound odd and non-native-like.

The same holds true for spoken and written academic discourse (Coxhead, 2008; Hyland, 2008, 2012). Academic FS, such as *on the other hand* or *a central issue*, are used to signal stages and to realize functional units of this register (Cortes, 2013; Li & Schmitt, 2009). In this context, Hüttner (2007, p.97) distinguishes “genre-specific FS” and “genre-functional FS” (= FS used to realize a particular genre move) and argues that the latter are especially important for L2 learners because their appropriate use marks a writer as an insider in the academic discourse community. Let us illustrate this with a concrete example. Cortes (2013)¹ found that *studies have shown that* is almost exclusively found when previous literature is reviewed. In addition, sequences such as *the aim of this study is* or *the purpose of the present study was to* were only found in the move “to announce present research”. Such sequences can thus be considered “defining markers of fluent writing and are important for the development of writing that fits the expectations of readers in academia” (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007, p. 135). Likewise, a lack of such sequences in students' writing may mark a writing assignment as inappropriate and too colloquial (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Gilquin & Paquot, 2008; Hyland, 2012; Jones & Haywood, 2004). The development of lists containing the most frequently used academic FS (also called lexical bundles, lexical formulas, or multi-word constructions) is therefore not surprising (Ackermann & Chen, 2013; Biber, 2009; Cortes, 2013; Hyland, 2008; Liu, 2012; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010).

The importance and omnipresence of FS in academic writing means that mastering academic FS becomes a prerequisite for any FL learner who wants to be successful in their academic writing. FL learners should not only know how a text is organized in terms of functional units but also how these units are realized linguistically and lexically (Cortes, 2013). However, FL learners' use of FS tends to differ from that of native speakers (Ädel & Erman, 2012; Chen & Baker, 2010; Durrant & Mathews-Aydnli, 2011). Chen and Baker (2010) demonstrated that the use of FS is linked to writing proficiency and that compared to native speakers, FL learners tend to favor certain FS but use fewer hedging devices. Ädel and Erman (2012) found that native speakers do not only use more FS, they also use a wider range of FS compared to FL learners. In addition, some FS were only found in native-speaker writing, whereas others were only identified in FL learners' writing. In general, non-native speaker writing contained more informal FS (e.g. *to find out*). Gilquin and Paquot (2008) also revealed learners' overuse of spoken-like features in academic prose.

Given the formulaic nature of academic writing and the challenges FL learners face in using FS appropriately, students should be familiarized with the FS typically associated with the communicative functions of academic writing (Hüttner, 2007). Jones and Haywood (2004) list the following advantages of using FS. They help students 1) meet the expectations of the academic community, 2) signal stages in their discourse, 3) express their ideas more economically, and 4) display the necessary level of formality. Coxhead and Byrd (2007) add that the use of FS makes the task of writing academic English easier because the writer is working with ready-made phrases rather than having to create each sentence word by word.

3. Teaching formulaic sequences

Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) provide an exhaustive review of intervention studies that have investigated which enhancement techniques have the potential to boost students' knowledge of FS. Although awareness-raising activities, such as Lewis' (1993) lexical approach, seem to promote students' use of FS, they may not always foster deep processing of the FS (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006). However, the following factors do seem to have a beneficial effect: visual salience of the FS in the input (Peters, 2012), frequency of occurrence (Peters, 2014; Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013), and access to meaning via glosses or dictionaries (Laufer, 2011; Peters, 2009, 2012). Boers and Lindstromberg have also consistently found positive, long-term effects of having students exploit formal properties of FS, e.g. by asking students to pay attention to sound repetition (alliteration, assonance) (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2005; Lindstromberg & Eyckmans, 2014). Other factors that have been found to contribute to students' learning FS are translation activities (Laufer & Girsai, 2008) and explicit vocabulary activities (Peters, 2014; Webb & Kagimoto, 2011). However, none of these studies centered around

¹ Cortes uses the term lexical bundles, which she defines as “combinations of three or more words that frequently occur in a language or a given register (p. 34).

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