'It can facilitate so much!' Student writers' practice of self-efficacy to develop their use of formulaic phrases

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Abstract

This study is about student writers' development of their own approaches to using formulaic phrases from a compendium (*Academic Phrasebank*). While the essential role of formulaic phrases in academic texts has been well established in research, teaching about the effective use of these phrases is not widely available, and little attention has been paid to how students learn to employ formulaic phrases in their own writing. Therefore, this research aims to explore this gap in understanding how student writers develop individual approaches to using formulaic phrases through the lens of self-efficacy.

Twelve self-selected student writer participants at undergraduate, master's and PhD levels, who were all L1 English speakers, were interviewed and asked about how they used formulaic phrases from the resource. Three key findings emerged from the data: firstly, that the resource may support inclusion as an empowering tool to enable student writers to participate confidently in academia; secondly, that students could employ the resource flexibly at different stages of the writing process depending on their individual approach to text construction; thirdly, that it could offer particular support with writing to students who have a specific learning difficulty (SpLD).

This paper contributes to understanding these individual student learning processes in the use of formulaic phrases for writing through self-efficacy. The implication for learning development is that making more guidance about formulaic phrases widely available and accessible would be beneficial to students' writing processes.

Keywords: formulaic phrases; student writers; self-efficacy; specific learning difficulty (SpLD).

Introduction

Developing competence in academic literacy and the mastery of suitable academic language is important for university students at all levels. However, it is very well established that use of academic language is not innate and must be learned (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994). We use the term academic language to refer to the specific language register that is used in academic communication, including student assignments. It can no longer be assumed that most students come to university with strong, recent secondary education in which they learnt this academic register, given the diversity of the students' prior experiences of learning and teaching, including those affected by 'learning loss' during the pandemic. While it is clear that, for students whose first language is not English, lack of familiarity with the academic register and its genres can present a major challenge, similar challenges have also been reported for L1 (English as a first language) students who are from widening participation backgrounds (in terms of ethnicity, social level, or age groups underrepresented in higher education), students who are returning to academia after a long gap, or those who have a specific learning difficulty (SpLD) (Forster, 2020).

When we talk of the academic register, a formal style and specialised lexicon often comes to mind. Studies have shown that academic writing has an important phraseological dimension; that multi-word units or formulae play a significant role (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2008). We are referring here to strings of words that are learnt, memorised and reused as wholes. Examples of this kind of language, which in this paper we refer to as formulaic phrases, are given below:

> in this paper I argue that
> several studies have shown that
> a possible explanation for this might be that

Hyland (2008, p.46) emphasised that formulaic phrases are 'important building blocks of coherent discourse and [. . .] characteristic features of language use in particular settings'. In addition to discourse organisation, other important functions include expressing attitudes or assessments of certainty, known as writer stance (Hyland, 2008) and signalling membership of a particular discourse community by replicating expected linguistic norms (Barks and Watts, 2001).

Within the field of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), practitioners work to prepare and support mainly L2 (English as a second language) international students in their academic studies and recognise the importance of raising their students' awareness about this important area. Thus, activities that encourage students to notice how phrasal combinations are used to achieve particular communicative functions feature on many EAP courses. In our earlier paper (Davis and Morley, 2018), for example, we proposed teaching activities to assist in pedagogical approaches to developing an awareness of the roles of formulaic phrases. However, these kinds of pedagogical interventions are generally not available to L1 English students, even though, as argued powerfully by Wingate (2015, p.152), 'Academic literacy needs to be learned by all students new to university, regardless of their backgrounds'. Wingate contends that the failure by universities to offer academic literacy support, especially in the initial stages, has a highly detrimental effect on student experiences and outcomes, as students struggle to comprehend and enact what is required of them. There is a need to move away from remedial add-on approaches, and to look more holistically at academic literacies that are embedded in disciplinary teaching to assist all students (Wingate, 2019; Abegglen et al., 2019). However, there is some evidence that universities are beginning to offer academic literacy instruction and embed support more widely (Thies and Rosario, 2019).

To manage the cognitive challenges of composing academic texts, student writers need to develop their own coping strategies as a means of strong self-efficacy, which involves motivation and perseverance with personal goals (Bandura, 1997). Research into the role of self-efficacy in student writing has grown significantly, and the importance of students taking responsibility and working out their own way to approach their studies has been well established (Mitchell et al., 2019). At the same time, encouraging students to discuss their own struggles with academic literacies as a form of community building has been

encouraged (Shapiro, 2020). Some students (for example, with different backgrounds including no traditional qualifications or being out of study for a long time) describe academic writing as 'unfamiliar and remote' and experience great anxiety (French, 2018). French highlights how the stakes are extremely high in academic writing and seeking support may be seen as failing by some students, so they try to manage alone. Other studies have found that students with some diversity dimensions (such as first in family to attend university) label themselves as failures at university because they are not good at writing (Forster, 2020).

To help to support student learning, resources have been created, such as the *Academic Phrasebank (AP)*, an online resource freely available to all students, which provides writers with an extensive list of commonly used formulaic sequences for reference and incorporation into their own writing. In this resource, the formulaic phrases are organised according to the typical communicative moves found in academic writing (Swales, 1981). The authors have been researching user practices of academic phraseology for some years, and one of the authors created the *AP* resource (Morley, 2005). Analysis of data obtained by the authors indicates that, although this resource was designed with the needs of L2 speakers of English in mind, around half of those who use the resource are L1 English students. We felt that this was highly significant and that there is a need to listen to the voices of students who are attempting to navigate their own academic journeys in terms of phrasal use. Therefore, in this small-scale study, we set out to examine the perspectives of L1 students at different levels of study with respect to how they experience and work with formulaic phrases in their academic writing. Our research question was: How do student writers as users of *AP* develop their approaches to using formulaic phrases at different levels of study?

Methods

Respondents for this study were recruited after they completed an electronic survey about the usefulness of *AP*, available on its website, which currently has approximately 8,000 responses. The survey includes an option to indicate whether respondents wish to take part in a follow-on interview about their use of formulaic phrases by providing their email address. From this group, the researchers identified and contacted respondents who

described themselves in the initial survey as having English as their first language (L1) and were studying at either undergraduate, master's or PhD level. In this way, we aimed to obtain a sample that was representative in terms of levels and subject of study in order to gain a broad range of perspectives. None of the participants studied at the researchers' respective institutions, nor were known to the researchers prior to interview. For ethical purposes, participant information was provided, and consent was requested for the interview and our use of anonymised recorded data for research purposes. Subsequently, 12 self-selected respondents were interviewed and audio recorded for approximately 30 minutes using Zoom, then the interviews were manually transcribed for accuracy and analysed for emerging themes (see interview questions in appendix).3

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Participant	Level of study	Subject area	Country of study	Self-identified learner profile
1	UG	Business	UK	Not mentioned
2	UG	Health	UK	Not mentioned
3	UG	Sociology	UK	Autistic with ADHD
4	UG	Psychology and Criminology	UK	ADHD, Mature student, dropped out twice
5	MSc	Psychology	UK	Neuro non-typical
6	MSc	Medicine	UK	Not mentioned
7	MSc	Librarian Studies	UK	Not mentioned
8	MSc	Psychology	UK	Dyspraxic, slow cognitive processing
9	PhD	Film Studies	Ireland	Dyscalculic
10	PhD	Psycholinguistics and neuroscience	USA	Not mentioned
11	PhD	Computer Science Education	UK	Dyslexic
12	PhD	Sociology	Austria	Not mentioned

There were four participants at each level of study, undergraduate, master's and PhD. The majority of participants (nine) were studying in the UK, the remainder in other countries where the language of study was English. A large number (eight) were students of Psychology or Social Sciences. It is striking that six out of the 12 participants self-identified as having a learning difficulty, although we did not ask them to supply this information. There was no trend related to level of study and learning difficulty – two out of four of students at each level of UG, MSc and PhD self-identified in this way.

Findings

Following analysis of the interview transcripts, three broad thematic areas of interest emerged. We grouped these under the headings of facilitating inclusion, adopting different approaches, and helping writers with learning difficulties, as discussed below.

Facilitating inclusion in academia

Perhaps the most important theme that emerges from the study is that access to a phraseological resource for academic writing such as the *AP* appears to facilitate the integration into the academic community of students who might have, at some point, considered themselves excluded. The fact that all 12 of our participants reported they found the *AP* resource to be very useful for their writing is unsurprising, given that we were working with a self-selecting sample of willing participants who had responded to a survey about its usefulness. However, it was especially notable that some participants demonstrated its impact on their sense of belonging at university. The comment below, for example, from a writer who originally felt that they were not 'made' for academic study, suggests that use of the resource, and the resulting awareness of academic phraseology, had a transformational effect on their perception of their own abilities to the extent that it influenced their decision to pursue a higher degree.

> Actually, now it makes me really comfortable, and I am able to say I can definitely do a master's now. Before I was thinking I'm going to finish my undergraduate and that's it, I am not made for this, but it has changed my mind, I am definitely going to do a master's now, I feel more confident. (Participant 3)

Another participant commented that, as a result of having access to the resource and having greater awareness of academic phrases which they felt could be compared to 'stepping stones, academic pixels or academic essentials', they had begun to develop their own 'academic identity' as a writer (Participant 5). These comments demonstrate persistence in the face of difficulty and drive for individual improvement of performance, which are concordant with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

The helpfulness of having a good command of academic phraseology does not seem to be restricted to the medium of writing. Two of our participants spoke about the importance of understanding the academic phraseology in facilitating the reading of research papers. Furthermore, five participants stressed the interdependence of reading and writing, and reported that, while they are reading, they either actively look for or simply take note of academic phrases used by more experienced academic writers, as this was one way that they themselves could develop as writers:

> Being able to see how they implemented formulaic phrases within their own writing is something that you really have to do, and you should be reading journal articles every day because that is really the core of where your knowledge is going to be able to come from. (Participant 4)

One concern about academic phraseology was expressed related to plagiarism:

> I know which phrases are the formulaic ones, and which phrases are the content of the research or the idea, but what I worry about is the formula creates the structure, and it is also possible to plagiarise this way of presenting ideas, the structure, so that's what's trickier. (Participant 10)

We investigated this concern in a previous paper (Davis and Morley, 2015) and concluded that use of formulaic phrases should be a way of avoiding plagiarism by presenting alternative standard ways of using organisational language, but it is striking that this participant considered that it would be possible to plagiarise another author's writing style from phrasal choices.

Data from this study suggests that many students felt unprepared for the life of academia and that unfamiliarity with conventional academic phraseology was an impediment to successful engagement, as the two participants below attest:

> We're not taught this. We come out of secondary school, and we're often not taught to look at text in this way, to look at language in this way. And for a lot of people, it's very difficult. (Participant 8)

> Having a tool like this is so useful. Even though you are supposed to know how to do essay writing on a master's, it is so helpful to use these phrases to make your writing stronger. (Participant 7)

Moreover, endorsing Wingate's (2019) contention discussed earlier that universities generally fail to offer adequate academic literacy support, especially in the initial stages, our participants explained that where support was provided by their institutions, it tended to be quite limited and/or tended to focus on areas that our participants felt were less useful. Although a small number of our participants had been referred to the *AP* by tutors, none of them had been given any instruction about the use or role of academic phraseology. Of significance is the fact that all of the participants in this study were keen to refer to their early struggles with writing at university, for example, one participant lamented the absence of any guidance on academic phraseology:

> It would have been helpful to have had an induction explaining how to use them, some instruction. I really don't know how I survived the first five years without them! (Participant 3)

These responses suggest that inducting new students into the role of phraseology in academic discourse and introducing them to tools such as the AP is one of the steps that could be taken to reduce lack of familiarity and anxiety caused by academic writing (French, 2018). Thus, enabling students to start using appropriate academic discourse could facilitate greater inclusion and enhance student experiences and outcomes.

Different approaches to using a compendium of academic phrases

The *AP* is presented to users as an extensive compendium of commonly used phraseological elements and is freely available online. However, no advice is given about how the resource should be used, other than that some changes or substitutions to the phrases will need to be made to suit the writer's particular purpose and discipline. Therefore, we were very interested in the participants' accounts of self-efficacy with their use of formulaic phrases, in terms of their motivation to improve their own performance in academic writing (Bandura, 1997). One of the areas we focused on in the interviews was to ask how the participants were using the resource, and interesting evidence emerged that the participants had developed quite different methods. Three broad methods were identified which we can call the 'before', 'after', and 'during' writing approaches. Exemplifying the 'before' writing approach, one student reported that they use *AP* as the starting point for their assignments:

> I read my assignment brief, then I go straight to *AP,* and I check to see if I can find suitable formulaic phrases before writing. (Participant 1)

This suggests that the resource can be a helpful tool for starting the writing process, perhaps helping to overcome the hurdle known as 'writer's block', which is widely covered in the study skills literature. As reported by Murray and Moore (2006), many academic writers talk about the 'agonies of just getting down to it', and that getting started is often the most challenging aspect of the writing process (p.29). The usefulness of having a set of commonly used phrases at hand in helping with writer's block and inspiration for starting writing is further highlighted in the following comment:

> You know how you get writer's block, and you know what you want to say but you don't know how? It really helps just to speed that process along and you're able to have all these different phrases and being able to mix and match what could work and what couldn't. And it just kind of helps to create a spark. (Participant 4)

Similarly, one participant felt that overcoming writer's block by adding phrases also contributed to making the text reader-friendly:

It is easy to get stuck in your own words, your own way, and I try to introduce variation, so how I use it is to create a bit of interest. (Participant 12)

In contrast to the 'before' writing approach, other participants described how they prioritise writing their own ideas down on paper first, before turning to the resource to improve their text later. So rather than serving as a trigger or prompt as we have seen above, the phrases are being used to shape ideas that have already been written down – the 'after' writing approach:

I try to make the first draft about getting words on the page and not structuring beyond a loose outline [. . .]. So once I know that I have a sturdy word count, then I start shaping it. I apply formulaic phrasing as part of a trimming and organising step. (Participant 9)

When I read over my essay, I tend to discover some weakness where I add formulaic phrases to make my text better. (Participant 2)

Another approach to using the resource might be described as a 'during' approach where the writer looks to the resource to find alternative words and perhaps more suitable ways to express an idea while they are writing. This approach is explained in the two comments below:

In the middle of writing an essay, I might think 'oh how shall I say that?', and then I check the list and think 'ok that one suits this point', so I will use that. (Participant 7)

I tend to be writing then I think 'oh it would be good to have something here'. Then I go to the website, and then I tend to have a look through which one [. . .] because usually I have a sort of idea in my head of what I want to say but the words aren't quite there, so then I'll just have a read through, and something will catch my eye and I'll either directly use it or tweak it a little bit. (Participant 6)

In a strategy that appears to be applicable to both the 'during' writing and the 'after' writing approaches to using the *AP*, another participant commented that they consult the resource purposefully:

> I always go with a question. For instance, I used 'however' 13 times in an assignment, so I was looking for words to replace 'however'[. . .] I always have a specific problem in my writing I'm trying to fix. (Participant 8)

With respect to how the participants actually use the phrases that they have selected, some were eager to point out that with most of the phrases they use, they try make some modifications to incorporate them seamlessly into their own work, using the resource as a kind of linguistic 'scaffold' (Participant 11). While we were not able to reliably assess the degree to which participants made modifications to the phrases, from their comments it seems likely that all participants used modifications some of the time, and that some participants made a particular effort to extensively modify most of the phrases they used. In this respect, a few participants gave advice, warning about simply reusing the phrases without adequate care. One suggested that the writer should not 'hold too tightly to it' (Participant 5); in other words, rather than employing them as fixed constructions, it is better that they serve as linguistic prompts for other possibilities. Another participant stressed the importance of the writer having a fairly good idea of what they want to say before using the phrases, and they offered the following advice:

> Try to visualise what you're trying to say before you go to the Phrasebank maybe. Like having an idea of where you're trying to go with something before having a look can be quite helpful in terms of not picking something that's not that suited to what you're trying to say. (Participant 6)

This advice to peer writers suggests building self-efficacy by first deciding the moves of a text individually, and then looking for appropriate phrases to make those rhetorical moves (Swales, 1981).

Helping students with specific learning difficulties

As noted above, it is significant that of the twelve individuals who agreed to be interviewed, six explained, without prompting, that they had one of the following specific learning difficulties (SpLDs): ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and one identified as 'neuro non-typical' which can be broadly interpreted as autistic. Our self-selecting sample of participants, therefore, had a much higher representation of students with learning difficulties (50%) than for the student body as a whole; it is estimated that 5% of higher education students in the UK have a known learning difficulty of ADHD, dyslexia, or other difficulty (HESA, 2021). It would appear that for these learners, a phraseological resource like the *AP* is found to be particularly helpful in developing their writing, and it is interesting to explore why this might be the case. At the same time, we acknowledge that it was not in the agreed interview protocol to enquire about these areas with the participants, and so we did not interrogate them directly about these questions, and we are only able to report on data that participants chose to reveal.

Difficulties with written expression are common in learners with ADHD (Graham et al., 2016), a condition primarily associated with problems sustaining attention. These difficulties affect many areas, including quality, output, genre elements, vocabulary, sentence construction, spelling, and handwriting (Graham et al., 2016). It is also known that learners with ADHD exhibit weaknesses in the utilisation of working memory (Martinussen and Major, 2011). Working memory has been defined as 'a limited capacity system allowing the temporary storage and manipulation of information necessary for [. . .] complex cognitive tasks' (Baddeley, 2000, p.418). Composing a text is a particularly good example of a complex cognitive task, since the writer must plan and keep in mind the intended audience and the overall argument of the text, generate ideas, express these ideas using correctly spelt words and grammatically correct sentences, organise these into connected paragraphs, and monitor the text for overall coherence and errors. From this we can deduce that any tool that helps to reduce the processing load on working memory will assist with the task of writing, and we can see why *AP* is useful for these writers, as it provides the necessary language, in the form of functionally useful whole strings of words, together with indications of how these might be organised. This is what the student below seems to be alluding to when they say:

> I have a whole battle going on in my brain to write something out. So when I started
> using the *AP*, it cut down the time I needed to write a paragraph, so before it would
> take me seriously 2 to 3 hours to write a paragraph, using this would take me down
> to 45 minutes, and I could have a flow in the essay as well. (Participant 3)

Interestingly, this student also commented that *AP* was particularly helpful for their writing because they were already learning and using linguistic scripts so that they could cope with interactive situations in everyday life. So, the idea of using functionally useful whole strings of words for writing – academic phrases – fitted in with their wider practices.

Dyslexia typically primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading irrespective of intellectual ability. Like ADHD, it is also associated with difficulties in written expression (Mortimore and Crozier, 2006). One explanation for this association is that impaired reading skills are likely to limit a learner's opportunity to acquire linguistic and rhetorical knowledge for successful writing (Shanahan, 2016). Thus, it is likely that for many students with dyslexia, given the challenges they face when reading, the process of noticing useful phrases in academic texts is made that much more difficult when compared to their non-dyslexic peers. In addition, Forster (2020) draws attention to the feeling dyslexic students have that they are not 'clever enough' (meaning good at academic writing) to be at university. The participant quoted below seems to be suggesting that *AP* provides them with the language they need to structure and formulate their ideas in an acceptable way.

> I use it quite a lot because I am dyslexic, so I find having the scaffolding to help me
> jump, you know, change topics between thematic elements [. . .] I think they are
> giving me the correct language that then helps me structure and formulate my ideas
> in a better way. So it's actually sort of me presenting my arguments in a way that is
> readable to other people. (Participant 11)

In addition, it is recognised that students with dyslexia commonly have difficulty with spelling, a feature sometimes called dysgraphia, which is also associated with impaired ability to retrieve the visual picture of words. The spelling and word visualisation difficulties that these writers experience seem to further constrain the writing process, since they use more working memory resources and time on these features, at the expense of text

generation and organisation, which non-dyslexic writers focus on (Sumner and Connelly, 2020). So again, with this group, we can understand why the *AP* can be useful in reducing the processing load in working memory by providing functionally useful strings of words.

One of our participants indicated that they were dyscalculic. Although this is a condition that is characterised by persistent difficulty in understanding numbers leading to a diverse range of challenges with mathematics, it may also co-occur with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. This participant explained their challenges with sequencing information:

> Sequences are very difficult for me. It's a real obstacle with academic writing. With dyscalculia, the way information is naturally presented seems very 'mind map', so it is contiguous but not necessarily sequential. Formulaic phrases help make my explanations more sequential, so easier to follow for more mainstream minds [. . .] formulaic phrases help me participate in discussions too. I would be lost without such tools. (Participant 9)

It is notable that this participant found the formulaic phrases presented in the resource not only assisted them with text organisation and sequencing ideas, but also enabled them to participate more fully in seminars.

Lastly, there was one student in our sample who indicated that they had dyspraxia, which is normally manifested as impaired co-ordination, balance and movement. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for dyspraxic learners to experience some of the difficulties faced by ADHD and dyslexic learners. Unfortunately, as stated at the start of this section, because we did not set out to explore this area, and it was not mentioned in the information that we gave to the participants at the outset, we did not probe the participant on this question further. Nevertheless, they leave us with an insightful comment about how using a resource like *AP* can help the development of greater linguistic and rhetorical awareness.

> The idea of Phrasebank really is to point the finger for people to begin to read not just for content but to read for the rhetorical aspects of text and notice things [. . .]. Once you show them the language, it can facilitate so much! (Participant 8)

This advice for peers also demonstrates empowering academic literacy through self-efficacy in terms of developing individual understanding and awareness-raising of the role of formulaic phrases.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the approaches developed by student writers at different degree levels towards the use of formulaic phrases in their writing, and in particular how they made use of a compendium of academic phrases (*AP*). The data from our interview participants demonstrates that the resource could be an empowering tool which facilitated the participants' development of academic writing and helped them to participate in their academic discourse community. It is striking that none of the participants had received any instruction in how to use formulaic phrases in their writing; they had only been recommended to consult the *AP* resource. Therefore, it is unsurprising that from our lens of self-efficacy, our participants constructed their own novel ways to make use of formulaic phrases and the resource, according to their needs, for example to consult and add phrases to help them start writing, to consult phrases in the middle of the writing process or to use them for improvement at the end of text production. It is notable that half of our participants reported a learning difficulty, which meant that they used the resource in particularly individual ways to support their writing with scripts, scaffolding, structure, sequences and triggers for writing.

The findings from this study offer learning developers some new insights into student writers' individual approaches to using formulaic phrases, to their challenges and strategies, and provides advice for other students. As well as drawing attention to the learning processes student writers, particularly those with learning difficulties, go through to use formulaic phrases, the main implication from these findings is that there is a clear need for widely available instruction for all students about how to use academic phrases in written texts. This could be delivered by writing/learning support centres at key developmental stages of students' academic journey, such as in the preparation of initial writing assignments.

This research was limited as a small-scale exploratory study involving only twelve participants. We did not examine any differences between student writers at different degree levels. We had not predicted that a significant number of our respondents would self-report as having a learning difficulty and therefore could not examine this systematically. Further research into the use of formulaic phrases by student writers with specific learning difficulties is therefore recommended.

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Appendix

Interview questions

In this interview, we are going to discuss your use of formulaic phrases, by which we mean commonly-used functional groups of words such as 'the aim of this study is to investigate…' We are asking you these questions as a user of Academic Phrasebank.

1. When do you use formulaic phrases in your academic writing?
2. How do you use formulaic phrases in your academic writing?
3. Do you make a record or list of the formulaic phrases that you have used?
4. Do you notice formulaic phrases when you are reading?
5. Have you had any instruction about the use of formulaic phrases?
6. Do you have any difficulty with using formulaic phrases?
7. Do you have any advice for other writers about using formulaic phrases?