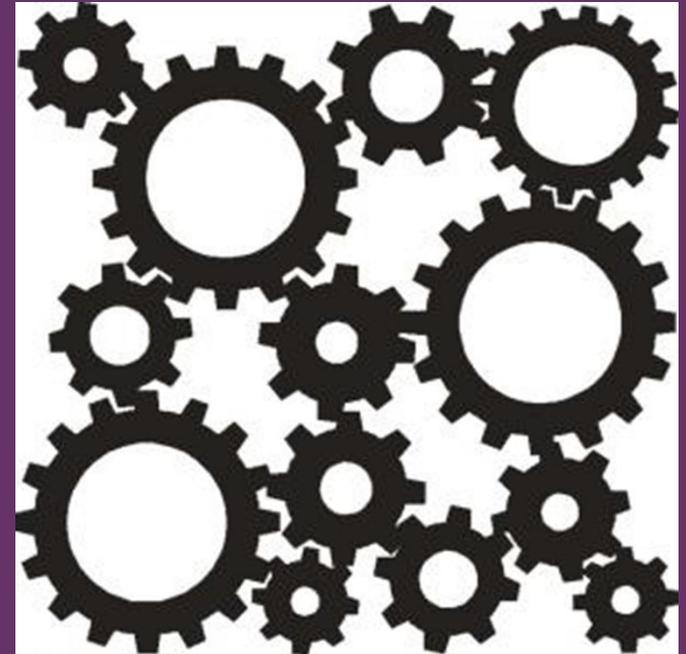# To teach or not to teach: the effectiveness of overtly teaching formulaic phrasing in academic practice

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Overview

- ❑ **Background**
- ❑ **Recent Literature**
- ❑ **Implications for teaching**
- ❑ **Potential for further study**
- ❑ **References**

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My observations

- Student essays – proportion of formulaic phrasing varies depending on what is counted, but significantly reduces strain on the reader

- Vital for purposeful, logical writing – and for accessible academic reading

- Grammar and vocabulary for content – but communicative purpose can cross disciplines

- Academic speaking – often good results teaching how to incorporate signal phrases

Challenges:

- Selecting model texts for teaching – narrow range of lexical bundles – 'chance encounters' not always reliable

- Selection of most useful (or learnable) phrases to teach/highlight

- Context issues

- Problems with integration of phrases in own writing

Background

❑ AWL – well used

❑ Formulaic phrases – standard academic practice – lots of terms used…(lexical bundles; lexical sequences; formulaic patterns; multi-word combinations etc.)

  ❑ Includes signposting/ signal words/ connectives/ linking language and phrasing

❑ Either 'fixed' (eg. as a result of…) or 'semi-fixed' (eg. the …of the….)

❑ Included in university guidance/ books/websites Eg. Manchester University's excellent Academic Phrasebank: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/

❑ Both production and recognition of phrases important

❑ Corpus linguistics - used to identify repetition of words – moving more towards recognition of recurrent word combinations (focus on frequency and distribution)

Recent literature A

❑ **Byrd and Coxhead (2010)** cite Grange and Meuniere's statement that there is an '*…urgent need for more empirical evidence of the actual impact of a phraseological approach to teaching and learning*' (2008, p249).

❑ They identified a 'powerful' list of 21 4-word lexical bundles used across four AWL disciplines (arts, commerce, law and science) – used the corpus and compared with 2 other lists to narrow (Biber et al., 1999; Hyland, 2008).

❑ Analysis included discourse functions (presenting & discussing content; organising discourse; expressing attitudes); further analysis at text level

Challenges highlighted

❑ More information often required of lists of bundles (eg. source; context for use)

❑ Lack of 'face validity' – seen as 'remedial' learning

Recent literature B

❑ **Chen and Baker (2010)** analysed use of lexical bundles in one corpus of published academic texts and two corpora of student academic writing (one L1, the other L2)

    ❑ Published writing = widest range   L2 writing = smallest range

❑ Psycholinguistic viewpoint – for both L1 and L2 speakers, formulaic language has '*a processing advantage over creatively generated language*'(citing Conklin & Schmitt, 2008) – but often use idiomatic language in studies.

❑ Found use of hedging more effective for L1 than different b/g L2 writers (L1 users tend to overstate)

Conclusions:

❑ Use of formulaic expressions increases with level of writing proficiency
(though this is contested in other studies – issues with context-dependency…)

❑ L1 and L2 writers similar in use of lexical bundles – more VP-based and less mature than native expert writers BUT L2 writing exclusively overgeneralise (idiomatic expressions and connectors)

❑ Growing interest in identifying phraseology with corpus tools not reflected in published materials – could help learner writers achieve more native-like expert academic writing style.

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Recent literature C

❑ Staples et al (2013) flagged up lack of research into frequency, function and degree of fixedness of formulaic sequences.

❑ Use of formulaic sequences – measure of learner development (cited Bolinger, 1976 and others)

❑ Second language acquisition theory – early NNS learners rely heavily on these sequences – initially stored as units, then more flexibly used – developmental sequence

❑ Little research to compare levels - this study compared use of referential, stance and discourse organising bundles across 3 proficiency levels

Overall Results

❑ Unclear – possibly due to restrictions of using texts from TOEFL iBT (eg. preparation and practice; length of texts; register required)

❑ Chen and Baker (2010) found NS and NNS writers used fewer referential bundles than published academic writers – these texts used even fewer – possibly issues with referring to abstract entities (key academic writing skill)

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Implications for teaching

'*There is little advice based on solid research on the most useful pegagogical approach to lexical bundles and phrases*' (Coxhead, 2008)

❑ Keep up to date – learn and teach lexical items for today (Nation 2009)

❑ Focus on purpose and principles when choosing what to teach – most useful and most frequently used (and easily taught and learnt).

❑ Highlight the value of lexical bundles – helps with fluency; elevates writing/speaking

❑ Highlight the value of deliberately learning bundles from reading/listening

❑ Cortes (2007) compared pre- and post-instruction production of lexical bundles – although no difference in use, indicated increase in awareness and interest…

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Moving on to further research

❑ Does it help to break down multi-word units – show how they combine in other sequences?

❑ Does an understanding of the grammar help to integrate into own writing?

❑ Use of corpora – can we develop this area further using our own Focus corpus?

❑ Academic speaking - some analysis of useful phrases, but little relating to the communicative purpose of prosodic features of academic speech (Byrd and Coxhead, 2010)

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