

# Enhancing L2 learners' use of formulaic sequences in academic writing

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## Introduction

Formulaic sequences (FS) are 'combinations of words that fulfil specific functions and that are called up more or less automatically by native speakers' (Adel & Erman, 2012, p.81). They are a prevalent feature of both written and spoken discourse, with different FS seen to be more commonly used within different discourse genres. Proficient use of a genre's preferred FS is therefore seen as signaling membership of a particular discourse community. Conversely, inappropriate use is seen to signal unfamiliarity.

FS use has been found to be especially prevalent within academic writing. As such, knowledge of, and proficiency with those most commonly used in the genre would seem necessary if one is to advance in academic writing. However, comparisons of L2 learners' use of FS with native-like use have found:

- L2 learners tend to overuse particular items (lexical teddy bears)
- It is often not genre-appropriate
- Single words are used to express functions more commonly expressed using multi-word items.

While frequency has been cited as being L2 learners' main determinant of FS (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010), noticing and tasks which require the use of target FS have also been proposed as being beneficial for acquisition (Cortes, 2004; Coxhead, 2008). Previous interventions aimed at enhancing L2 learners' acquisition have sought to measure the effectiveness of explicit instruction of written academic FS. However, while proficiency with target FS was measured through use in written paragraphs, production exercises at the acquisition stage were limited to controlled use. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of editing target items into learners' own paragraphs, an exercise requiring far less controlled use than in previous studies. It was guided by the following research question:

What effect does an explicit focus on integrating target FS into paragraphs have on participants' subsequent use of these items in their own writing?

## Methods and Materials

### Selection of target FS

A total of 16 FS were selected for the intervention, each serving a useful function within the written academic context the participants were expected to produce.

Each target FS was present in either the Phrasal Expressions List (PHRASE) (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012) or the Academic Formulas List (AFL) (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010)- 10 of 16 appear in both lists.

Each FS occurred at least 20 times per million words in the corpus of British Academic Written English (BAWE)- 13 of 16 had a frequency rate of more than double this.

'For example' was not included in the data as it received considerable coverage in the class textbook.

	BAWE	PHRASE	AFL
On the other hand	840	X	X
In contrast (to)	496	X	-
In terms of	1734	X	X
With respect to	320	X	X
To some extent	163	X	X
As well as	2368	-	X
In other words	338	X	X
In order to	3991	-	X
Whether or not	251	X	X
For example	3335	-	X
A number of	1158	X	X
As a result	1278	X	X
In addition to	393	X	-
Can be seen	1245	-	X
At the same time	507	X	X
In the same way	213	X	X

The FS selected, showing the frequency of each within BAWE, and the presence of each (X) within PHRASE and AFL

### Population

Consisted of 4 classes of first year undergraduates at a Japanese university taking a paragraph writing course. The level varied within each class, but averaged CEFR level B1

Experimental Group: 55 (2 classes)

Control Group: 57 (2 classes)

### Intervention

Weeks 1-4: all participants were given worksheets with example paragraphs in which target FS were used but omitted, requiring learners to fill gaps with the appropriate item and match it with its function, as in the example opposite.

Week 5: Feedback on the Midterm (MT) paper was given, during which all participants were required to try editing target FS into an example paragraph.

Weeks 6-7: The Experimental Group were given a worksheet on which target items were presented with only the first letter of each word followed by a number of dashes corresponding to the missing letters, e.g. \_ \_ / \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ = *on the other hand*. Having completed this, participants were required to try to edit the target items into their homework paragraphs, and encouraged to use a range of target FS. See the example opposite.

Week 8- The Final (F) paper was written in class, with neither group of participants given any prompt regarding the use of target FS.

### Data

Data was drawn from participants' MT (150 words) and F (300 words) papers, with occurrences of target items in each paper identified using Antconc software (Anthony, 2016). The frequency per 200 words was calculated for each paper, and a Mann-Whitney test run to determine whether there was any significant difference between the two groups' MT in terms of target FS use. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were then run to compare the use of target items between individuals' MT and F within each group.

Which of the phrases below goes in which gap?

1. A number of                      On the other hand                      In terms of

   In order to                      As well as

There are / / / / reasons why commuting to university by bus in Kanazawa is not very convenient. Firstly, / / / / get from my house to the campus, I have to take a bus into the city centre then back out. / / / / commuting time, it is faster to go by bicycle. / / / / this, it is also quite expensive, and can get very busy in the mornings. / / / / /, if the weather is terrible, I can stay warm and dry on the bus. Overall though, I prefer not to take the bus.

Which of the phrases in **bold** signals:

Addition of contrasting information?	
An amount?	
Addition of similar information?	
How something is done?	
'Framing' the topic within a new category?	

An example of the exercises used in Weeks 1-4 to familiarize participants with the target FS

There are two reasons why I think Kanazawa is one of the best places in Japan for visitors. The first is Kenrokuen, one of the top three gardens in Japan. There, you can eat delicious food, such as *dango* and gold foil soft cream which are tasty. You can also enjoy nice scenery in all seasons, for example, in spring, the cherry blossom is amazing, while in summer, everything is green and the flowers are in bloom. In autumn, the leaves turn red, which is beautiful, while in winter, the *yukizuri* is fantastic. Second, there are many traditional buildings in Kanazawa, such as Kanazawa Castle, which is a beautiful building and is lit up at night. The Ninja Temple is also very interesting because you can see many secret rooms and hidden passages. Therefore, you can enjoy eating good food and visiting interesting and scenic places in Kanazawa.

There are two reasons why I think Kanazawa is one of the best places in Japan for visitors. The first is Kenrokuen, one of the top three gardens in Japan. There, you can eat delicious food, such as *dango* and gold foil soft cream which are tasty. **As well as** this, you can also enjoy nice scenery in all seasons, **for example**, in spring, the cherry blossom is amazing, while in summer, everything is green and the flowers are in bloom. In autumn, the leaves turn red, which is beautiful, while in winter, the *yukizuri* is fantastic. **In addition to** traditional buildings in Kanazawa, such as Kanazawa Castle, which is a beautiful building and is lit up at night. The Ninja Temple is also very interesting because you can see many secret rooms and hidden passages. **As a result**, you can enjoy eating good food and visiting interesting and scenic places in Kanazawa.

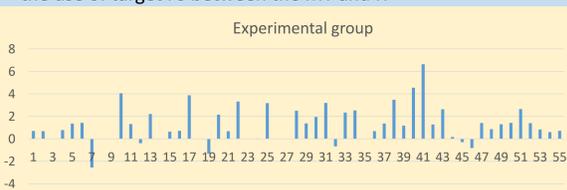
Example of a paragraph before and after editing target FS into it.

## Results and Analysis

- There was no significant difference in the use of target FS in the MT between the Experimental Group and Control Group.
- In the Experimental Group, **there was a significant difference** in the use of target FS between the MT and F.

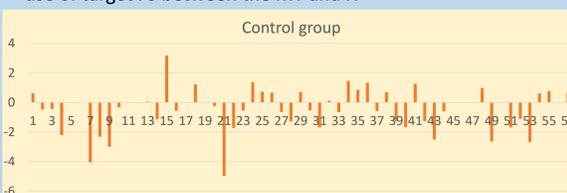
	Experimental Group (55)		Control Group (57)	
	MT	F	MT	F
On the other hand	2	11	6	8
In contrast to	3	4	2	2
In terms of	1	10	6	3
With respect to	2	7	3	5
To some extent	0	1	0	2
As well as	4	21	9	14
In other words	4	12	5	7
In order to	5	12	5	12
Whether or not	0	4	1	1
A number of	8	26	5	3
As a result	2	24	3	14
In addition to	13	43	22	23
Can be seen	0	7	2	0
At the same time	4	12	6	9
In the same way	2	7	0	1
	50	201	75	104

The raw frequency of target FS in the MT and F for the Experimental Group and Control Group



The increase/ decrease in individual's use of the target FS between the MT and F for the Experimental Group

- In the Control Group, **there was no significant difference** in the use of target FS between the MT and F.



The increase/ decrease in individual's use of the target FS between the MT and F for the Control Group

The 'editing' intervention does appear to have increased the participants' use of the target FS. The following will examine whether they were being used appropriately. An analysis of F papers from the Experimental Group where the raw frequency count of target FS was  $\geq 7$  is given below.

Paper:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
On the other hand		1				1	1		1
In contrast (to)				2	1				
In terms of	1		1	1				1	
With respect to		1	1				1	1	1
To some extent									1
As well as		1	1	1	1	1		1	
In other words	1	1			1	1	1		
In order to	2	1	1					1	
Whether or not	1								
A number of	4	1	1	1	1			1	2
As a result	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
In addition to	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	
Can be seen	1						1		1
At the same time		1		1	1		1		
In the same way			1			1			
TOTAL	12	9	9	8	8	7	7	7	7

Raw frequency count of target FS within 9 F papers with count of  $\geq 7$

- In all the above papers, a variety of target FS were used, although in 1 'a number of' was used four times. This aside, the data suggest that the intervention was successful in encouraging participants to broaden their use of genre-appropriate FS, and move away from repeated use of lexical teddy bears.
- The great majority of instances of use of target FS were correct. Mistakes were generally minor (grammatical or spelling), with only two instances of a FS being used to signal an incorrect function.

## Discussion and Conclusion

- **The Experimental Group showed a significant increase in use between the MT and F with only two additional weeks of editing exercises over the Control Group.** The exercises in Weeks 1-4 allowed the participants to see the target FS in context, but, as is clear from the familiarization exercise example above, use was very controlled. In contrast, using them freely within the context of a paragraph, in most instances one which participants themselves had written, required greater understanding of usage and arguably allowed for deeper processing.
- **Examination of the F papers with the highest counts of target FS use shows that, on the whole, usage was correct.** Restricting practice exercises to more controlled use only allowed for very limited corrective feedback. The freer use afforded by the editing exercises, on the other hand, allowed for far greater insight into what problems learners may be encountering and, consequently, enabled more focused feedback.
- **Analysis of papers with high target use suggests that a range of target FS were used within each.** This negates one of the criticisms of L2 learners' use of FS highlighted in the introduction above. This could be because it is easier to spot repetition and consider alternatives within the context of a paragraph than in stand alone practice sentences or other controlled forms.

Overall, the literature suggests that the use of FS within academic writing is valuable to L2 learners if they are to achieve more native-like proficiency within the genre. With a considerable number of FS identified as common within academic writing, the next step must be to gradually build learners' knowledge of and utility with these. This study would argue that following the above two-step procedure appears to be one effective way of doing so. The data suggests that familiarization exercises alone may not be adequate, but rather that it may be necessary to provide output exercises in which learners' use of the target language is relatively unrestricted, as in the editing exercises carried out in this study.

**References**  
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