

## THE EFFECT OF RAISING EFL LEARNERS' AWARENESS REGARDING FORMULAIC SEQUENCES ON THEIR WRITING PERFORMANCE

**Shahram Afraz (Corresponding author)**

*Department of English Language, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran  
a.sh32@rocketmail.com*

**Leila Bakhshinezhad**

*Department of English Language, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar  
Abbas, Iran  
Bakhshinejad.134@gmail.com*

**Maryam Keykavoosi**

*Department of English Language, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar  
Abbas, Iran  
Maryam.keykavoosi@yahoo.com*

### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of raising EFL learners' awareness regarding formulaic sequences on their writing performance. Therefore, the researcher selected a homogeneous sample of 40 M.A. students majoring in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University – Bandar Abbas Branch, Iran, as the participants of the study based on their performance in Nelson English Language Test. The selected participants were randomly assigned into control and experimental groups. The experimental group underwent treatment (i.e., instruction of formulaic sequences) whereas the control group followed a conventional method of writing instruction. At the end of the treatment, the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of writing performance. Raising EFL learners' awareness regarding the use of formulaic sequences results in development of the writing performance and accordingly can prove helpful for language teachers, learners, and textbook designers in paving the way for improving the participants' writing skill. The advanced writing course designers and teachers, as well as language experts determine the great significance of formulaic sequences and attempt to develop research-based educational packages suitable based on the student's particular target context.*

**KEYWORDS:** Formulaic Sequences, Awareness Raising, Writing Performance.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing skill receives great significance in higher education and being considered as a member of the disciplinary community of expert writers is one of the desires of many learners in almost any

field of study. For this purpose, learners should attempt to exploit those word combinations that pertain to the disciplinary conventions, which are typically implemented by recognized academics (Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a).

Formulaic sequences, also going by the name of lexical chunks or clusters (Hyland, 2008a), are a kind of word sequences which have recently been introduced and are specified as the most frequently happening sequences including three or more words. The formulaic sequences have often neither idiomatic nor complete structural units but, most of the time, have strong grammatical correlates (Biber, 2006). Instances of formulaic sequences involve expressions such as *on the other hand*, *the end of the*, and *it is important to*.

Since formulaic sequences are very frequent in language, it might be supposed that they will naturally and effortlessly be learnt. But as Biber and Barbieri (2007) and Cortes (2006) note, the acquisition and appropriate use of these expressions does not seem to naturally occur. Although expert academic writers in various disciplines and genres make use of a wide diversity of formulaic sequences to construct their arguments and convince the readers, many formulaic sequences preferred and applied by specialists are never or quite rarely applied by learners in various fields and at various levels of proficiency (Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a).

Most studies concerning formulaic sequences take a corpus-based approach and concentrate on determining the sequences used in a given discipline and on the differences or the similarities in the type and frequency of the formulaic sequences used across various disciplinary fields, registers, genres, and different degrees of writing proficiency (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Cortes, 2013).

There are also studies proposing various ways of introducing learners to the use of frequently recurring lexical bundles. Lewis (2000) introduces many novel ways of instructing formulaic sequences. Pang (2010) also mentions several strategies and techniques that will make second/foreign language students able to broaden their collection of academic rhetorical features to involve these multi-word sequences.

Very few explorations have considered explicit teaching and practical implementation of formulaic sequences (Cortes, 2006). Jones and Haywood (2004) taught a group of university students who were all non-native speakers of English on the use of particular word combinations during a 10-week period. Their results indicated minor increase in the production of formulaic language after the teaching but they indicated high motivation and tendency towards the use of these expressions by the students in their study. They also highlighted that students' insufficient use of formulaic expressions in their academic writing may lead to undesirable writing. In another study, Cortes (2006) found her five 20-minute sessions of formulaic sequences instruction to a group of university students in a writing-intensive history class excessively short to make significant variations between pre- and post-teaching production of formulaic sequences but they revealed a raise in students' awareness of and interest in these expressions.

To the researchers' best knowledge, up to the present time, very few studies have explored the effect of teaching advanced EFL learners on the use of formulaic sequences in writing in the field of applied linguistics, more particularly in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Advanced TEFL learners are assumed to have few problems in the understanding of formulaic sequences since these expressions are so common in the field. But it is not clear if these learners can use formulaic sequences in writing without trouble and if providing them with a list of most related, most regular, and functionally significant formulaic sequences in the field can promote their writing ability.

The study may have both theoretical and practical implications to the field of applied linguistics. Theoretical to the sense that it may contribute to re-specifying the features of a good writing class and practical in the form of suggestions to EFL learners and novice writers as well as to writing course teachers about the significance and usefulness of formulaic sequences in developing learners' ability in writing. The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of teaching formulaic sequences on fostering the students' writing ability.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The widespread use of formulaic sequences in natural language performance gives it an essential role in language acquisition, processing, and application (Ellis, 1996; Millar, 2010; Wray, 2002). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) emphasize the paramount role of these readymade chunks on the acquisition of a language by mentioning that a large amount of language that people encounter every day is very habitual and predictable. The significance of multi-word lexical clusters is also highlighted by Wood (2002) that formulaic language is essential to language development, processing, production and learning.

Among their principal functions in language learning and construction, formulaic sequences are known to lower the cognitive load and facilitate the language processing burden as they are stored in and recalled from memory as unanalyzed pieces (e.g., Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Wei & Ying, 2011). There are several studies acknowledging that formulaic sequences have processing benefits. For example, Conklin and Schmitt (2008) attempted to explore whether the formulaic sequences are useful in terms of processing by comparing the time spent on reading formulaic sequences with their non-formulaic equivalents by native and non-native speakers. It was found that formulaic sequences were processed more rapidly than non-formulaic language by both groups showing that formulaic sequences have a noteworthy remarkable advantage over non-formulaic language in terms of language processing. The study performed by Underwood, Schmitt, and Galpin (2004) to examine how formulaic sequences are processed also confirmed the claim that formulaic sequences speed up language processing.

Another function of formulaic sequences that has an essential effect on language development is their role in easing communicative functions. Even when students lack adequate linguistic knowledge, they can obtain their interactional objectives and become prosperous communicators by using formulaic sequences (Wei & Ying, 2011).

The main purpose of language instruction is to make students understand the significant effect of linguistic items in discourse on communication and that it can be considered by having them learn form/function combinations that are called sequential clusters (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Formulaic sequences have an essential role as a guide in showing the discourse structure (Li & Schmitt, 2009), and in fact, one of the most significant functions of it is that of discourse organization including the use of discourse markers (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). Formulaic sequences, regularly used in academic language (Hyland, 2012), are fundamental elements of written register (e.g., Li & Schmitt, 2009) and writing well demands using them properly (Li & Schmitt, 2009). They result in pragmatically effective communication, and in academic discourse often serve as the structuring frame of discourse by directing readers through a text (*in the next section, as shown in figure*) or by connecting ideas (*is due to the, in contrast to*) (Hyland, 2012).

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the purpose of the study, the following research question was proposed and corresponding hypothesis was investigated:

RQ: Does raising EFL learners' awareness regarding formulaic sequences significantly affect their writing performance?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Forty M.A. students majoring in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University – Bandar Abbas Branch, Iran, took part in the present study. All the selected participants were B.A. graduates of different sub-fields of English including TEFL, linguistics, and translation. The selection of the participants was based on their scores in a Nelson English Language Test. It mean that from initial 73 students, 40 students who could get scores in the range of one standard deviation minus and plus the mean were selected to participate in the study.

### Instruments

In order to collect the needed data for the present study, the researcher used the following instruments:

1. *Nelson English Language Test*: a test in the advanced level – 400B – was used to select a homogeneous sample for the study. The selection criterion was obtaining scores in the range of one standard deviation minus and plus the mean.
2. A writing task which was repeated two times as pre-test and post-test before and after the treatment, respectively. These written products were scored by two independent raters and the inter-rater reliability index was calculated as 0.79.

### **Procedure**

In order to have a homogeneous sample of the participants, the researcher distributed the Nelson English Language Test to all M.A. students ( $n = 90$ ) majoring in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University – Bandar Abbas Branch, Iran. From among them, 40 students whose scores were in the range of one standard deviation minus and plus the mean have been selected and randomly assigned to two groups and one of them was taken as experimental group and the other as control group. The study was performed in eight sessions of one hour and fifteen minutes length.

In the first session, a topic was given to the participants in the two groups to write an essay about it. This essay was considered as their pre-test. In the subsequent sessions, a topic was given to the groups to write essays about them. The only difference between the procedures taken in the two groups was that in the experimental group, at the start of each session, 10 frequently used formulaic sequences based on corpus studies (Jalali, Eslami Rasekh, & Tavangar Rizi, 2008; Hyland, 2008a, 2008b) were taught to the participants and then they started to write on the proposed topic. The teacher advised the participants to use the formulaic sequences in their essays; but, in the control group, there was not such an instruction and the participants only wrote an essay in each session on the given topic.

In the last session, the students were asked to write another essay on the topic given in the pre-test to measure the degree of progress in two groups from pre-test to post-test. The students' essays in pre- and post-test were scored by two independent raters based on the Jacob et al.'s (1981) writing scoring rubric, out of 100, and the average of the scores given by the two raters was taken as the participants' scores.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This part presents the descriptive and inferential statistics based on the variables and research question posed in the study.

### ***The Results of the Selection Test***

As Table 1 shows, the mean of 75 initial participants' average scores was 34.12 with standard deviation of 5.323.

*Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Selection Test*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Nelson	73	34.12	5.323

Those students whose score was between one standard deviation minus and plus the mean have been selected as the participants of the main study and others have been left out. It means that 40 students whose scores were between 29 and 39 were selected.

### The Results Regarding the Research Question

In order to determine whether there was any significant difference in the writing pre-test scores between the two groups, an independent samples t-test was run. Table 2 reports the results of this analysis.

Table 2: Writing Pre-test Difference

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower Upper
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.059	.809	.713	38	.480	1.600	2.243	-2.941 6.141
	Equal variances not assumed			.713	37.993	.480	1.600	2.243	-2.941 6.141

As indicated in Table 2, the Levene's test for equal variances yields a p-value of 0.809. This means that the difference between the variances is not statistically significant and the statistics in the first row should be used. In the first row, the p-value is equal to 0.480 which is above 0.05 and indicates that there is not a significant difference in the pre-test scores of the control and experimental groups.

To explore the effect of raising EFL learners' awareness regarding formulaic sequences on their writing performance and determine the difference in the post-test scores of the control and experimental groups, another independent samples t-test was run. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis.

Table 3: Writing Post-test Difference

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower Upper
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	.130	.720	-3.759	38	.001	-9.400	2.501	-14.463 -4.337
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.759	37.999	.001	-9.400	2.501	-14.463 -4.337



Table 3 shows that the Levene's test for equal variances shows a p-value of .720. This means that the difference between the variances is not statistically significant and the statistics in the first row should be used. In the first row, the p-value is equal to 0.001 which is below 0.05 and reveals that there is a significant difference between the post-test scores of the control and experimental groups. In other words, raising EFL learners' awareness regarding formulaic sequences significantly affects their writing performance and improves it.

### **Discussion**

The results of the present study indicated significant points concerning the advantages of formulaic sequences in promoting Iranian advanced EFL learners writing performance. The findings were all in support of the positive effect of formulaic sequences on participants' writing ability. Although the period of time devoted to instructional program was short, unlike other similar studies (e.g., Cortes, 2006; Jones & Haywood, 2004), based on the results of pre- and post-test and the statistical analyses, the participants of the present study could significantly increase their scores in writing after being taught to use formulaic sequences.

This outcome may be due to the fact that the participants in the present study were all M.A. students majoring in TEFL who mostly have the ability to acquire the bundles and just need some practice to improve their awareness of and attention to these overlooked, but paramount, discourse elements and use them properly to develop their quality of writing.

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

On the basis of the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners, even those majoring in TEFL, are not familiar with these repeated clusters of words and that they get very little, if any, instruction about formulaic sequences. While this is the case, almost all of the students ascribe great value to formulaic sequences and feel the severe need to get thorough understanding of this significant and almost completely ignored aspect of foreign language learning.

The present study was only conducted on TEFL university students and the generalizability of its findings to other EFL students is a matter of question. Furthermore, the number of the taught formulaic sequences was limited. This may be another drawback to the generalizability of results.

Based on these findings, it is important that advanced writing course designers and teachers, as well as language experts, determine the great significance of formulaic sequences and attempt to develop research-based educational packages suitable based on the student's particular target context. There should be situations for students in writing courses, as well as in EAP courses, particularly in advanced levels, to get accustomed to and use those word clusters that are more relevant to their target genres and are used by skillful writers in the field. Regular contact with reading materials, lists of sequences, noticing (Cortes, 2004, 2006), consciousness-raising tasks (Lewis, 2000), concordances (Hyland, 2008a), activities like item recognition and matching, and also activities which makes students generate the items in their writing can be among many other techniques which teachers can use with their students.

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