

Facilitating learning about academic phraseology: teaching activities for student writers

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Abstract

Academic Phrasebank is an online, open-access compendium of formulaic phrases for academic writers, created and continuously developed at the University of Manchester. Originally developed for student writers whose first language is not English, data suggests that over half of the many users are in fact native speakers of English. Underpinned by current approaches to academic text analysis and to understanding the phraseological nature of language, the Academic Phrasebank has become a well-known and widely-used resource which many learning support teachers recommend to students at all levels of study, mainly as a self-study or quick reference tool. In order to explore ways to facilitate learning about academic phraseology, this paper seeks to demonstrate how exercises developed from Academic Phrasebank can be used to help student writers to better understand the nature and role of academic phrases and to improve their academic writing. The usefulness of different exercise types is discussed, drawing on comments from learning developers. The implication of the study is that such teaching activities can facilitate student engagement with academic phrases and help them to write more effectively.

Keywords: Formulaic phrases; academic writing; learning development; student writers; teaching activities.

Introduction

A characteristic of academic writing is that it is rich in conventionalised phrases or what is generally termed formulaic language. Here we are referring to commonly-used sequences of words, sometimes with variable elements, which appear to be ready-made and which are often related to a particular communicative purpose. It has been argued that to be successful, a writer needs to be able to use a wide range of these phrases, knowledge of which is lacking or underdeveloped in novice writers. One pedagogic response to this need has been to provide writers with a list of commonly-used phrases to refer to. It was for this reason that the Academic Phrasebank (hereafter referred to as AP) was created. The AP is a freely available online resource of over 3000 useful generic academic phrases, organised according to the typical communicative functions employed by academic writers. Although AP has proved popular mainly as a linguistic resource with novice writers and with more experienced writers in many academic contexts, we argue that it could represent more than a resource to refer students to, since it also has pedagogic potential as a tool for learning, which may be enhanced through tasks designed to raise students' awareness about this important area of writing. By using AP in teaching activities, we demonstrate that important opportunities can be created for students to improve their academic literacy, for example by understanding how to build sentences, avoid plagiarism and understand criticality. The first part of this paper describes the content and structure of AP and its users in some detail before moving on to explain the theoretical ideas underpinning the resource and its connection with academic literacy. The second part presents and explains a series of instructional exercises based on AP which can be used by learning developers with student writers. We discuss the usefulness of these activities by drawing on comments made by learning developers in interviews about AP, and with reference to literature on academic writing development.

Academic Phrasebank

AP is an open-access compendium of formulaic phrases commonly found in academic writing. It contains over 3000 reusable phrases which are grouped in two ways: either under one of the main sections of a research report, for example, *Discussing findings*, or under a more generic functional area, for example, *Being cautious*. Within these sections, the phrases are further listed under headings determined by their specific functional

purpose in the writing. For example, within the section on *Discussing findings*, the following sub-sections can be found: *Indicating an unexpected outcome*; *Offering an explanation for the findings*; *Advising cautious interpretation of the findings*. In most cases, around 20 possible phrases are listed under each sub-heading. Below is an example of a sub-section for *Discussing findings*.

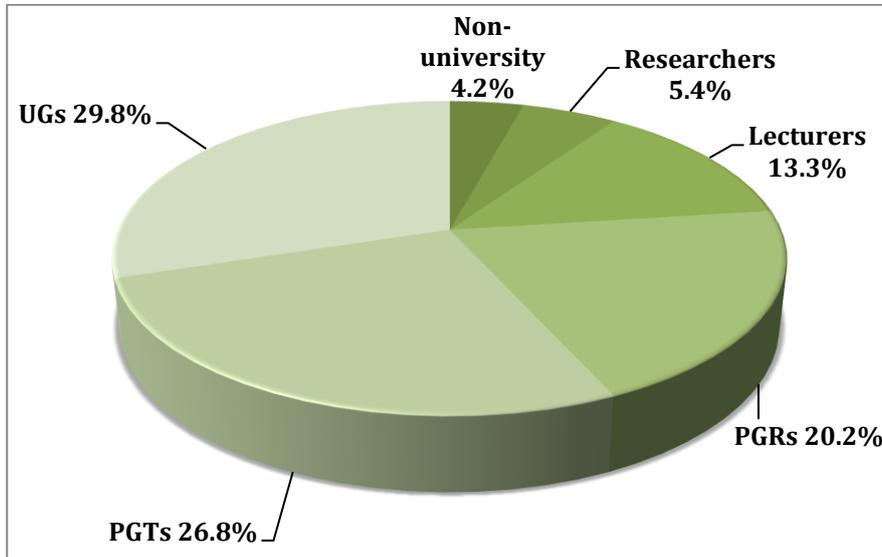
Figure 1. Phrases listed under a section for *Discussing findings*.

Advising cautious interpretation of the findings
Another source of uncertainty is ...
A note of caution is due here since ...
These findings may be somewhat limited by ...
These findings cannot be extrapolated to all Xs.
These data must be interpreted with caution because ...
It could be argued that the positive results were due to ...
These results therefore need to be interpreted with caution.
In observational studies, there is a potential for bias from ...
It is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these responses.

During an early stage of development, the phrases in AP were drawn from a corpus of 100 research dissertations at the University of Manchester with the authors' permissions. However, since the initial stage, phrases from a wide range of academic sources have been included. Criteria for inclusion are that i) the combination of words contains formulaic elements, ii) the phrase expresses a useful communicative purpose in academic writing, and iii) the combination of words sounds natural to a native speaker of English. Once identified for inclusion in AP, a phrase needs to be sifted of its original content so that only topic-neutral terms remain.

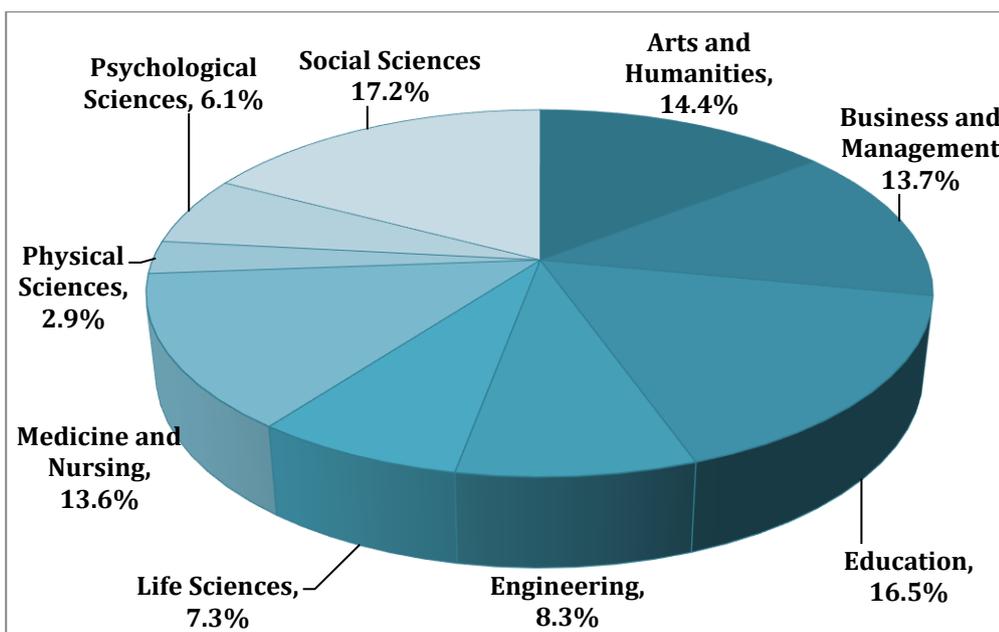
Although its development was informed by the needs of postgraduate students, around 30% of users are actually undergraduates. An indication of the breakdown of users can be seen in the table below. These figures were obtained using an electronic questionnaire attached to the AP website from 2016 to 2018. Although the sampling is therefore not scientific, a rough picture of the users has been obtained.

Figure 2. Breakdown of users by level of study or role (n = 3650).



In terms of the distribution of disciplinary areas represented by the users, it appears that all areas are represented. However, Social Sciences seem to be the largest disciplinary group, followed by Education and Arts and Humanities. As we know, these disciplinary areas tend to contain within them the more linguistically demanding subjects.

Figure 3. Disciplinary areas represented by the users (n = 3650).



Originally developed at the University of Manchester for student writers whose first language is not English, the data obtained via the electronic feedback form suggest that around one half of all who use the resource are native speakers of English. What is recognised as a need in non-native speakers of English, therefore, also appears to present a significant challenge to many native speakers.

Theoretical influences

The resource has been informed by two very influential theoretical approaches in applied linguistics. The first of these is an approach to describing the structure and features of academic texts known as genre analysis and the second is an approach to analysing and understanding language, known as phraseology or the study of formulaic language.

The genre-centred approach to understanding academic texts was pioneered in the 1980s by John Swales (1981, 1990). Swales was interested in identifying the rhetorical patterning in academic discourse and making this explicit in order to help overseas postgraduate writers who were non-native speakers of English. In his early work on the analysis of the introductory sections of research articles, using a corpus-based approach, Swales identified commonly-used 'moves' which he defined as a section of text that serves a specific communicative function and purpose (Swales, 1990). An example of one of the moves he identified in introductions to research articles is, for example: *establishing the field* which can be realised by indicating the interest or importance of the topic. Such units of analysis are used to organise much of the material in AP; many of the subsections under which the phrases are organised correspond to 'moves' identified by Swales in his early work. The resource actually utilises many more functional headings and some slightly different ones but the fundamental approach is the same. As well as identifying the communicative functions of sections of text, Swales was also concerned with showing the kind of language which was used to achieve this. In other words, he sought to identify 'the linguistic means' (1990, p.82) by which the communicative moves can be realised. Much of this language was phraseological in nature.

This brings us to the second major theoretical influence which has informed the development of the AP. This is the approach to understanding language not in terms of single words or sounds, or in terms of grammatical patterns, but rather in terms of the

ways words combine to produce conventionalised or commonly-used sequences, described in the introduction to this paper as formulaic language. It is now accepted that much of the language we use has this formulaic quality; that many pairs of words or strings of words are found in combination with a frequency greater than that expected by chance. These observations were becoming apparent around the time that John Swales first started working on his rhetorical analysis of communicative moves and were reported by such writers as Bolinger (1976) and Pawley and Syder (1983). Later, these intuitive insights began to be supported empirically, as computer technology permitted the identification of recurrent phraseological patterns in very large corpora of spoken and written English using specialised software (for example, Sinclair, 1991). This understanding of the formulaic nature of language has become an important area of interest in psycholinguistics, since it has implications for the ways that language is learnt, stored, retrieved and used. It has also become extremely important in the field of applied linguistics where language learning and writer development are major concerns. Many researchers share the view that successful academic writing requires a clear specialised knowledge of formulaic phrases, as well as a clear knowledge of academic genres. Wood (2015), for example, writes that formulaic phrases comprise the 'basic elements of academic discourse' (p.103); others argue that formulaic language is such an important characteristic of academic discourse that poor awareness and insufficient use can mark a writer as inadequate (Jones and Haywood, 2004; Li and Schmitt, 2009; Hyland, 2008).

Academic literacy

Given these theoretical influences, it can be seen that learning about academic phraseology constitutes an important element of students' development of academic literacy. In order for students to learn to make effective use of formulaic phrases, it seems necessary for educators to design teaching interventions which can help students to demystify the process of academic writing. Many studies have highlighted the problems students experience with understanding the requirements of academic writing, often due to a lack of support (French, 2011; Murray and Kirton, 2006). French (2011) demonstrated that a group of lecturers were unaware how they should support first year undergraduate students with academic writing while, in a much broader study of the UK HE context, Murray and Kirton (2006) drew attention to the widespread inadequacy and lack of availability of academic writing teaching. The use of teaching interventions has been

strongly recommended. For example, Farrell and Tighe-Mooney (2013) developed an academic writing intervention through group workshops based on both the process and product of writing with students. In their intervention, they devoted a workshop to “demystifying the route to getting an A in essay writing” (p.1107); thus, unsurprisingly, the students were much more motivated about the final assignment product, than about the writing process or activities that were peripheral to assessment. Murray and Moore (2006) also emphasise the need to demystify the academic writing process by breaking down exactly what students need to do and how to do it, presenting many useful teaching activities. However, to our knowledge, other researchers and educators have not focused on demystifying academic writing by presenting teaching activities based on the use of formulaic phrases, which this study will attempt to do.

Methodology

In the following section, five teaching activities developed by the authors of this paper will be presented. These teaching activities have been used by the authors (based at two UK universities) in study skills classes and workshops to foster student understanding and engagement with phraseological elements and to help them to improve their academic writing. We also draw on comments from four UK based learning developers which were gathered in follow-up interviews to the questionnaire survey of AP users explained above. The interviewees were self-selected in that the questionnaire invited participants to provide an email address if they agreed to be interviewed on how they used AP. Ethical concerns for the interviews were followed by requesting consent to the use of interview data for research, anonymising all data and sending a full interview transcript to each participant, to check they were happy with the recorded data. Following Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the interviews were semi-structured to gather some comparable data but also permit probing of useful areas. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and were based around a discussion of how AP may help student writers with language, rewriting from sources, structure, ideas and style, as well as the impact and role of reusable phrases in academic writing (see appendix for interview questions). This builds on an earlier study by the authors which examined how lecturers in different disciplines viewed the acceptability of re-using phrases from AP (Davis and Morley, 2015). With each activity, how learning about academic phraseology may be facilitated through the task will be discussed and analysed, with reference to the literature, and using relevant and insightful comments from learning

developer participants in the interview data. In this way, we aim to inform the use of these teaching activities, not only from research in academic writing but also from the perspective and experience of learning developers.

Analysis and discussion of teaching activities

The five teaching activities presented in this section comprise: using sentence stems, raising awareness of phrases in texts, raising awareness of rhetorical moves in texts, distinguishing between acceptable and non-acceptable reuse of phrases and using critical language. As explained above, relevant comments from learning developers gathered through interviews will contribute to the discussion of these activities.

Activity 1 - Using sentence stems for the introduction as a writing prompt

Figure 4. Task to complete sentences from stems for introduction functions.

Choose one of the following sentence stems for the function indicated and continue the sentence for your own introduction (you may find it useful to substitute some elements):

Establishing the importance of the topic:

One of the most significant current discussions in X is...
It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the ...

Highlighting a knowledge gap in the field of study:

However, far too little attention has been paid to ...
A search of the literature revealed few studies which ...

Focus and aim:

This report seeks to address the following questions:...
The aim of this study is to determine/examine ...

Outline of structure:

This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part deals with ...
The first section of this paper will examine ...

Explaining keywords

While a variety of definitions of the term X have been suggested, this paper will use the definition proposed by Y who saw it as ...
Throughout this paper the term X will be used to refer to....

Starting a writing task is known to be extremely difficult for writers (Murray and Moore, 2006); not having the language to start can be a further reason to procrastinate. The introduction section is probably the most formulaic part of a research paper so having these phrases at hand can empower the student writer to put together an introduction with the required elements (scope, knowledge gap, aim, outline, keywords). On this point, one learning developer explained their perception of phrases on AP:

They are like a launch. It's as if you are an artist with a blank canvas. When I am working with a student, we are spitting ideas out and then looking to cluster them but having phrases you can use is very helpful. Once you've started with the words moving on the line, the continuation is much, much easier. (Learning developer 1).

Using phrases such as these effectively could also enable students to develop what Sword (2012) calls 'smart sentencing', where the sentence has a clear focus and purpose, rather than being abstract and losing meaning. Thus, sentence stems such as these may also impact positively on the quality of student writing, particularly in the introduction.

Activity 2 - Raising awareness of phrases in text

Figure 5. Task to raise awareness of reusable academic phrases in a given text.

Highlight the reusable phrases in this paragraph from a text about gap years

For many years, vast numbers of UK students have been taking a break in their studies between school and university. What has become widely known as the 'gap year' is a phenomenon that has undergone extensive transformations to the extent that nowadays it could be said that anything goes; it can vary from a 2 month trip to a 3 year work experience. In this essay, various factors related to gap years will be described and evaluated with a view to understanding how the phenomenon works in practice...

It is clearly important to understand the use of phrases in a text, both for their meaning as a reader and as a writer, to see how to use them. Another learning developer agreed with the need to put phrases within a text:

It might be nice to see some phrases in context, if there was a section where you could see a short sample of writing with some of the phrases highlighted, just to see how they have been incorporated. (Learning developer 2).

By using an activity such as highlighting phrases in a given text as shown in figure 5, perhaps first by showing an example paragraph with phrases already highlighted and then giving them a paragraph to highlight phrases themselves, students get practice in identifying useful phrases and thus also have an opportunity to expand their linguistic repertoire of formulaic phrases. In addition, students gain the opportunity to develop an awareness about which combinations of words may be reused or recycled due to their generic and frequent usage. This area is developed further in activity 4 below. It may also be an activity that could be applied to students' own writing, both to identify phrases used and where incorporating additional phrases would improve the coherence of the text. Importantly, such exercises may encourage students to develop their phraseological repertoire beyond using AP, as they learn to identify reusable phrases for themselves (Swales and Feak, 2012).

Activity 3 - Functions of transition signals

Figure 6. Task to analyse the phrases for transition signals.

	<i>Decide on the purpose of each group of phrases below.</i>	Purpose or Function
a)	The structure and functions of X will be explained in the following section. The following part of this paper moves on to describe in greater detail the...	
b)	As was pointed out in the introduction to this paper.. As previously stated,..	
c)	So far this paper has focused on X. The following section will discuss... Moving on now to consider...	
d)	This section has reviewed the three key aspects of ... This chapter has described the methods used in this investigation.	

e)	In the chapter that follows, I present ... The next chapter describes the synthesis and evaluation of...	
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In a similar way to the activity 1 sentence stems for the introduction, this transition-signalling activity could be a matching exercise of functions and phrases, or where only phrases are given and students need to decide the function, as shown in figure 6. The activity thus helps students to understand signposting and raises their awareness of rhetorical moves (Swales and Feak, 2012), as discussed in the review of theoretical influences above. The usefulness of focusing on signposting was emphasised by a learning developer:

When I am working on signposting with students I start off with a very basic list of phrases for building on, rather than just 'and', but then... sort of explore how to make the signposting within the essay clear so that the person marking it can see you know, they are reviewing what they have done, this where they are, this is where they are going. (Learning developer 1).

It is clear therefore that being able to manipulate phrases for signposting is helpful, both for a student writer to structure their own text and for them to facilitate clear communication to the reader. In this way, the emphasis on signposting phrases could result in more effective and communicative writing.

Activity 4 - Plagiarism and phraseology

A frequent concern about re-using any language chunk is whether this might risk plagiarism (Davis and Morley, 2015). Thus, it is important to raise students' awareness of where it is acceptable and where it is not acceptable to re-use phrases, as can be seen in the task below.

Figure 7. Task to distinguish between reusable and non-reusable phrases.

<p><i>Do you think these phrases could be re-used without risk of plagiarism?</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The research to date has tended to focus on x rather than y2. Deliberately and incisively debunks such myths3. The main weakness of this study was the lack of4. It has become a catchword used to label and delegitimise political movements5. While a variety of definitions of the term x have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first proposed by X, who saw it as ...6. Taken together, these findings suggest a role for7. Much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature8. Dawkins is deaf to theology9. In this paper I argue that10. The findings of the current study are consistent with

The need to differentiate was explained by another learning developer:

One thing our students ask when we show the site is ‘will we be able to use it and is it plagiarism?’ That is their only fear of using it. And we do say it isn’t plagiarism, it’s stock phrases, they are not in trouble and in no way will the phrase fit the exact sentence they want to write anyway. But I think showing it and giving them an idea how they can structure their sentences and phrase things, they are given the idea of how to go away and do it themselves. (Learning developer 3).

As this learning developer explains, using formulaic phrases actually helps students to avoid plagiarism, as they are able to take a phrase and then develop it in their own way. However, some of the phrases in activity 4 are very specific, contain an opinion, and copying would be plagiarism (2, 4, 8), so the activity enables students to practise distinguishing these non-reusable phrases from the remaining phrases in the list which are generic and could be re-used.

Activity 5 - Understanding criticality

In activity 5 below, students practise putting phrases together, through slotting evaluative adjectives into phrases in order to comment on the literature.

Figure 8. Evaluative adjective slotting.

<i>Choose an appropriate evaluative adjective to comment on a study</i>			
In her In his In their In this	useful timely seminal detailed thorough influential important innovative pioneering comprehensive	study (of X), survey (of X), analysis (of X), examination (of X), investigation (into X),	Smith (2012) showed that ... Jones (2013) concluded that...

Doing focused phrase-building activities such as this might ease the problems for students in understanding some aspects of criticality, as emphasised by another learning developer:

In terms of being critical, sometimes students don't understand what that means, they understand it to be criticising, like saying an author is wrong. When they see how they could phrase it, sometimes the penny drops, they get a sense of 'oh right, that's the sort of thing I should be saying'. Because I think, conceptually, they might understand they've got to be critical but they just don't know how that would look. In their feedback, sometimes the markers will say things like 'more discussion is needed' but they are not sure what that would really look like so I think it can help them pin a more abstract concept onto something more specific. (Learning developer 4).

These comments highlight the importance of helping students to understand what being critical means, particularly since they may not learn how to do this from class or tutor feedback. Developing criticality in approaching the literature is known to be a significant challenge for students (Ridley, 2012), so activities to practise employing critical expressions can be very useful to assist their understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented and discussed five teaching activities based on exploiting phrases from AP. We have considered their application to learning development in academic writing, in particular through comments from learning developers. All of these activities, through making use of material freely available on the AP, show how working with formulaic phrases can facilitate learning development in academic writing. By getting students to actively engage with formulaic phrases in these activities, they may be better able to develop the cognitive aspects of academic writing. Using the phrases can empower students in their writing, give them a structure and a greater understanding of the tools for academic writing. Thus, the overall impact of using formulaic phrases effectively can be very significant; by sounding more academic, students stand a better chance of being accepted as members of their intended discourse community.

This paper has presented a small number of teaching activities. In our workshops at the ALDinHE Conference and elsewhere, we have gathered participant evaluations of a considerably larger number of activities to enable us to make further improvements with the aim, in future, to develop a more complete set available to staff using the resource. In this paper, we focused on the insights of learning developers; it would be very useful to conduct further research which examines the perspectives of student writers using AP and gathers their evaluations of the activities.

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Appendix

Interview schedule for Phrasebank users – staff

1. How do you think Phrasebank helps students with:
 - a) Language
 - b) Rewriting from sources
 - c) Structure
 - d) Ideas
 - e) Style?
2. Does Phrasebank help them with anything else?
3. Which section of Phrasebank do you find most helpful? Why?
4. Do you think students feel able to learn phrases from Phrasebank and use them by themselves?
5. What is the impact of these phrases on students' writing?
6. Do you think using these phrases leads to greater competence in academic writing?
7. When students use phrases from Phrasebank, how do they fit with the rest of their writing?
8. Do you have any further suggestions for Phrasebank?