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First Year University Students' Use of Formulaic Sequences in Oral and Written Descriptions

El uso de secuencias formulaicas de estudiantes de primer año en descripciones orales y escritas

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The present article investigates the use of first year university students' formulaic sequences in written and oral texts in an English as a foreign language context. The corpus of the study consists of eight descriptive texts—four written and four oral—which were composed of four students of English Pedagogy at a university in Santiago, Chile. The investigation is a case study where the corpora were analysed qualitatively. The results show that first-year students use similar formulaic sequences in written and oral texts and many of the expressions generally used in spoken discourse are used by students in written texts.

Key words: Formulaic sequences, lexical bundles, oral and written discourse, pre-fabricated chunks.

Este artículo presenta el uso de secuencias formulaicas de estudiantes universitarios de primer año en textos orales y escritos. El corpus del estudio está formado de ocho textos descriptivos, de los cuales cuatro son textos escritos y cuatro son textos orales. Los textos fueron desarrollados por cuatro estudiantes de pedagogía en inglés de una universidad en Santiago de Chile. La investigación es un estudio de caso, y el análisis de datos es cualitativo. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes usan secuencias formulaicas idénticas tanto en el discurso oral como escrito, y muchas de las expresiones utilizadas en el discurso escrito son particulares del discurso oral del género de descripción.

Palabras clave: discurso oral y escrito, léxico, secuencias formulaicas, secuencias pre-fabricadas.

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Introduction

During the last decades many studies have been reported in the area of formulaic language (Wood, 2002) due to the importance of understanding the role of formulaic sequences in oral and written discourse in everyday communication. Most of the studies have been carried out in native speaker language, clinical language, and second language learning (Wray, 2009), paying special attention to the role of isolated patterns in language production, how these patterns play a part of everyday communication, and how they are involved in fluent language production.

The necessity of understanding how language is composed and how people acquire or learn it is an important field in linguistics studies because language has been used to communicate ideas, feelings, and transmit knowledge and experiences to the rising generations throughout history (Cook, 2003). Therefore, it is essential for human beings inasmuch as without it society would not exist since the majority of our social activities are not conceivable without the use of words. People develop or enhance many of these activities without conscious analysis: they communicate ideas, feelings, and transmit knowledge and experiences to others because language use is in many ways "a natural phenomenon beyond conscious control" (Cook, 2003, p. 3). This means that there are some activities which seem to be intrinsic to human life and some aspects of language use that are more natural than others.

According to an approach to language based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), language is seen as meaning potential (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), that is, speakers of a language have an infinite number of options in terms of meanings to perform different social activities. From this perspective, it seems that we do not need to know about language to use it well; it means that we need to have an amount of pre-fabricated chunks stored in our memory and then we are going to retrieve them from memory at the moment we need them. Therefore, the use of formulaic sequences is an important constituent of discourse production and a relevant component in language learning (Hyland, 2007).

Despite the fact that formulaic language is an important component in the production of fluent discourse, there is little research related to the inclusion of this area in English as a foreign language teaching in Chile and how they are included in descriptions. For this reason, this study aims at describing the use of first-year students' formulaic sequences in written and oral descriptions through the identification of the category of formulaic sequences in written and oral texts provided by Biber, Conrad, and Cortes (2004), and the verification of the use of formulaic sequences in written and oral texts.

Formulaic Language in Oral and Written Descriptions in EFL

Over the years, the phenomenon of formulaic language has been studied by many authors like Bal (2010); Biber et al. (2004); Chen and Baker (2010); Conklin and Schmitt (2008); Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard (2008); Rafiee, Tavakoli, and Amirian (2011); Wei and Ying (2011); Wood (2002, 2010); and Wray and Perkins (2000). These authors have carried out their research in order to define what formulaic language constitutes, its characteristics, and the emphasis on the importance of drawing second or foreign language learners' attention to standardized multiword expressions. However, studies related to formulaic sequences (henceforth FSS) in descriptions are limited or inexistent, and much of the research performed in this area has been done on written discourse (Halliday, 1987), but it is equally, if not more important in spoken discourse; to our knowledge, there are limited studies conducted in this area.

Different attempts to reach a consensus have been made to define FSS since they are essential

in discourse. It seems that there is agreement on defining FSs as "multi-word units of language, stored in long-term memory as single lexical units" (Wood, 2002, p. 31). Consequently, retrieving these formulaic sequences is an important process because they are fundamental when communicating with others. In effect, the mind uses the long-term memory to store a number of prefabricated chunks of language, which are then used in language production. It means that we do not generate sentences each time; we use what is stored in our memory. However, these pre-fabricated chunks are not going to exist in isolation, "but rather in discourse" (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008, p. 75); after all, we need to use these fixed expressions in a specific context.

In general terms, most of the language people use is formulaic. Altenberg (as cited in Wray & Perkins, 2000) claimed that as much as 70% of an adult native language may be formulaic; for that reason, the use of these FSs is present in all languages since language itself needs to use all of these expressions. The relevance of FSs is not only in speech but also in written language, so the sequences are considered to be important elements in discourse because they facilitate efficient communication, and particularly fluent speech (Wood, 2010).

Biber et al. (2004) proposed to classify FSs into a functional classification of common lexical bundles across register in order to characterize the difference between written and oral speech. They distinguished three main classifications: stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions. They defined stance expressions as "stance bundles which express attitudes or assessments of certainty that frame some other propositions" (p. 384); for instance, to choose a, *I think* or *I would like to*. Discourse organizers are those that reflect "relationships between prior and coming discourse" (p. 384); for example: *previously known as*, *not only . . . but also*, *because it is when*. Referential bundles make direct reference to "physical or abstract entities, or to the textual context itself, either to identify the entity or to single out some particular attribute of the entity as especially important" (p. 384), such as: *one of the most*, *most of my*, or *into the mountains*. This taxonomy is used in this study to classify the FSs used by participants when producing oral and written descriptions.

Flowerdew (2004) claimed that "discourse is instantiated in texts" (p. 583) and can be presented written or orally; therefore, particular genres reflect the characteristics of discourse and how information unfolds in the texts. In order to develop oral and written descriptions speakers and writers need to bear in mind the differences between oral and written discourse and the schematic structure of the genre of description, namely orientation and description; these aspects are essential to compose this genre as they are socially conveyed in a specific community.

Generally speaking, oral discourse is quite different from written discourse in many aspects. Chafe (1982) mentioned some differences between writing and speech. The former seems to be marked by more nominalization, more genitive subjects and objects, participles, attributive adjectives, serial and sequenced phrases, complement clauses, and more relative clauses. The latter appears to have more first person references, more speaker mental processes and fillers; in the same way, speech is marked by hesitations and performance errors, while written speech is more prepared, more accurate. Neither written discourse nor the spoken one is more organized; they are organized in different ways. Spoken language tends to have more clauses in the system and with fewer lexical items in the clause because it is spontaneous and describes actions more than things. The major differences between speech and writing are that one is essentially transitory and the other is designed to be permanent (Brown & Yule, 1987); that is, spoken discourse tends to be more spontaneous than written discourse since it is more prepared and reflective.

With regard to the genre of description, it is one of the most important genres in any language system and also one of "the most widely used genres across all of the learning areas" (Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p. 97). Description allows people to categorize or classify a range of experiences, observations, and interactions. It is used in many text types, such as riddles, observation or information reports, and/or descriptive essays. According to Rose and Martin (2012) descriptions have two main stages, namely orientation and description and they present information on one object, place, situation, or person.

Within the two stages of the genre of description (orientation and description), some important elements need to be considered in order to be developed. For instance, the use of sensory details of sight, sound, taste, texture, emotion, and smell; the use of rhetorical devices such as the simile, metaphor, or other comparisons; specific descriptive attributes beyond the obvious one of topic build an overall, dominant impression of a topic organization based on the author's chosen attributes and some others. All of these elements are included in the texts, and they are connected with different FSs that allow speakers and writers to compose oral and written texts supported with information that flows through these two stages; therefore, discourse unfolds in the genre of description.

Method

This is a non-experimental and descriptive case study based on discourse analysis since it identifies and evaluates the use of first-year students' formulaic sequences in written and oral descriptions. It includes qualitative research methods and was conducted in Santiago, Chile, during June 2012.

Participants

Participants were four first-year students of English pedagogy attending English grammar lessons, at a university in Santiago, Chile. They were from 18 to 25 years old. Their proficiency in English was estimated to be the pre-intermediate level.

Instruments

The present study is based on an analysis of eight texts: four are written descriptions and four are spoken ones. The corpus was collected in June.

Procedure

The corpus collection was carried out during June in 2012. The students were given a task to develop during the lesson: They had to describe their favourite place, first in written form, and then in spoken language. After data were collected, the eight texts were analysed according to the taxonomy named functional classification of common lexical bundles across register, proposed by Biber et al. (2004). The analysis was done based on the number of occurrences of the use of FSs, the types of complexity, and the differences between the written and oral texts, and then the FSs identified were classified in one of the three main categorizations given by Biber et al.: stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions.

Analysis and Discussion of the Data

As stated in the research methodology, the text analysis was approached by considering Biber et al.'s (2004) taxonomy of lexical sequences, subdivided into three main groups: stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions. These three criteria were identified in all texts and their use has to do with the extension of the texts. Table 1 shows the information about the eight texts collected.

Table 1 illustrates that written descriptions are more extensive than oral descriptions because oral texts are shorter than written ones in terms of number of words. This situation is similar regarding the number of FSs identified in the texts since there

is a close relation between extension of the text and number of FSs identified in the descriptions. In general terms, the majority of written descriptions have more words and more FSs while oral texts lack a vast majority of FSs in the texts.

FSs in Written Descriptions

As stated previously, written texts are more extensive than oral ones; therefore, more FSs can be identified. The results of FSs identified in the four written descriptions are illustrated in Figure 1.

The data show that the participants wrote similar texts in terms of number of words because the range of words goes from 192 to 261 words. Just as well, the results illustrate that there are 78 FSs in the texts which are part of the classification called stance expressions, 26 expressions are part of discourse organizers and 55 lexical bundles correspond to referential expressions. They also follow similar patterns in terms of the number of words for each of the three categories, that is, there is homogeneity among the distribution of the three criteria. Table 2 shows some examples of the three categories in Text 1A.

One of the most significant results in this category stands for the number of expressions used by the students in the second category: discourse organizers, which represents 12%. This category is the least used by the participants in the texts in both written and oral texts; nonetheless, in the written description the percentage represents a significant number of occurrences. At the same time, the use of referential expressions obtained 36% in terms of their inclusion in the written texts, and stance expressions are the most used with 36% occurrence in the four descriptions. Figure 2 summarises FSs identified in the written descriptions.

Table 1. Distribution of Texts

Type of Texts	Participant	No. of Words	No. of FSs identified
Written texts	1	237	41
	2	210	41
	3	192	30
	4	261	47
Oral texts	1	237	54
	2	136	23
	3	102	18
	4	176	32

Figure 1. Number of FSs in Written Texts

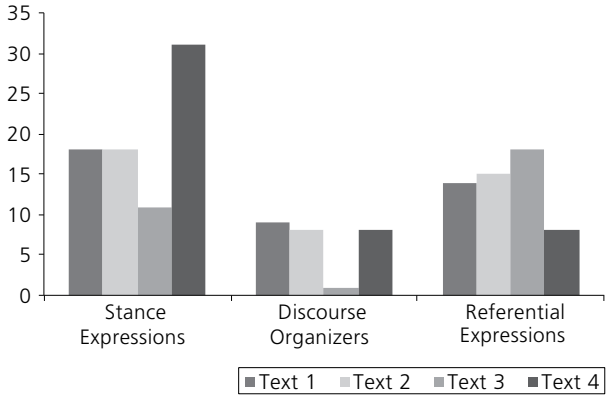
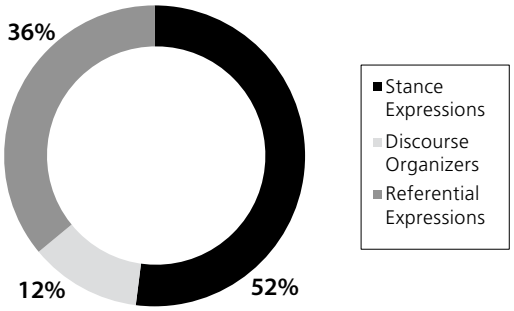


Table 2. Examples of FSs in Text 1A

Stance Expressions	Discourse Organizers	Referential Expressions
to choose; *I have*; *if I had*; *I would visit*; *I know*; *we have*; *I've ever seen*; *I love it*; *it has been changed to*; *is situated in*; *which has acquired*; *we can find*; *I think*; *I would like to.*	*and*; *thankfully*; *because*; *but*; *which*; *previously known as*; *but in my opinion*; *there is nothing more*; *to be in contact with*; *like this.*	*most of my country*; *one of the most beautiful*; *this time*; *now*; *it is a place*; *the colonies of*; *many beautiful places*; *in nature itself*; *some day*; *most of my world.*

Figure 2. FSs in Written Descriptions



FSs in Oral Descriptions

Regarding the results obtained from the four oral texts, they show similar results to the ones from the written texts. However, there are many fillers which were part of the recorded texts, for instance: *mmm*, *huh*, which are common characteristics of orality. Figure 3 shows the results.

Figure 3. Number of FSs in Oral Texts

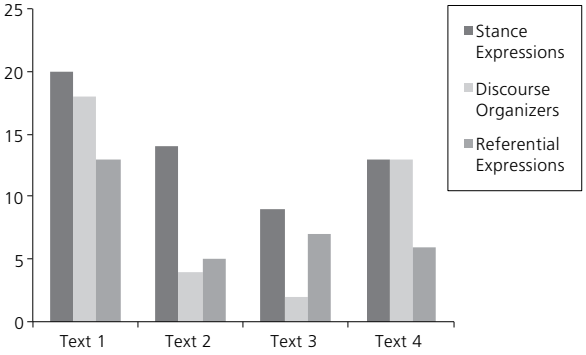
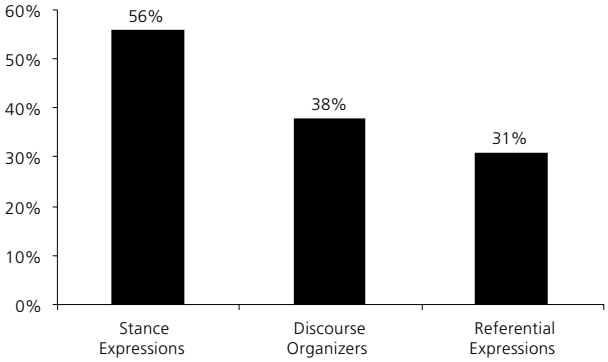


Figure 3 illustrates that the category called discourse organizers is the lowest in terms of the number of FSS used by students when presenting a description orally; it represents 30%. The most common FSS in this criterion are: *because*, *well*, *for that*, and *we can see*. The use of stance expressions is the highest classification used by the students with 53% occurrence of these expressions in the texts; for instance: *I see*, *we can find*, *I would like to*, *I know*, *I think that*, and *I don't know*.

Figure 4 shows that the FSS identified in the four oral texts were distributed among three categories; namely, stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions in different percentages of occurrence in the texts. Regarding stance expressions, 66 examples were used by participants in all the text (56%); discourse organizers had 38 expressions in the texts (38%); and of the referential expressions, 31 occurrences in the oral descriptions (31%).

Figure 4. FSs in Oral Descriptions



General Identification of FSs in Descriptions

Bearing in mind the taxonomy provided by Biber et al. (2004) the general results illustrate that the category called stance expressions was the most used by the participants in the study. According to Biber et al. these bundles express attitudes, assessments, or certainty that frames some other proposition. For that reason, more use of these expressions is identified in the texts because the texts are related to descriptions which link information from different periods of time and the texts are related to the writers own points of view.

Likewise, the second category, discourse organizers, was the least used by them. Biber et al. (2004) defined them as sequences which reflect relations between prior and coming discourse. There is a lack of these lexical bundles in the written texts,

possibly because the students are doing their first year and do not have a sufficient amount of FSS stored in their memory, so they cannot retrieve them. In the oral texts the students used more discourse organizers in contrast to the lack of them in the written texts. Even though the use of these FSS rose in the oral texts, it is the lowest category in all the texts.

By the same token, the use of the third category, referential expressions was employed by the students as well. These lexical bundles are defined as FSS which refer to entities, or to the textual context (Biber et al., 2004). The inclusion of these pre-fabricated structures was in all the texts, and it represents the second category most used by the students. The expressions used the most were *most of*, *around the*, *full of*, *a lot of*. The last one is considered an informal sequence mostly used in oral texts, but in this case it is used in the written descriptions as well.

Taking into account what Halliday (1987) claimed, the students' written texts are related to self-monitored discourse because they had more time to develop them; on the contrary, their oral texts correspond to spontaneous discourse since they had to improvise when describing their favourite place. Likewise, the written texts seem to be more structurally developed because the language tends to be more academic than that in spontaneous speech where texts are more fluent; nonetheless, expressions used in the written descriptions are more related to oral language than written discourse because of the use of informal expressions such as *I think*, *a lot of*, *so*, to name a few.

Bearing in mind the different FSS identified in the written and oral corpus, the texts appear to be similar. The most common lexical bundles used by the students were *I think (that)* and *my favourite place is* both being part of the first classification: stance expressions. As Chafe (as cited in Halliday, 1987) proposed, there are some differences between a written and an oral text, but in this case the written texts seem to be oral texts because they have some first person references.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind that FSS constitute a large portion of spoken discourse (Schmitt & Carter, 2004), the use of them is relevant not only for native speakers, but also for second or foreign language learners because these pre-fabricated expressions are part of discourse and speakers use them unconsciously, so that the FSS are stored in the long-term memory and then retrieved from it to the working memory. In light of the previous premise, the main purpose of this study was to analyse the FSS that first-year students use in written and oral descriptions. The results provide evidence that the use of these expressions in written texts is very similar to the FSS used in oral texts, that is, the students' written texts have the structure of an oral text because they use many lexical bundles which are frequently part of oral speech. It seems that novice students develop texts in oral forms mostly instead of written forms, probably because of their level of proficiency in the target language and their exposure to the genres being developed.

The findings reveal that the participants use the FSS and these are an important part within the texts. The most outstanding finding shows that students are more familiar with oral texts than written ones, to our knowledge; the reason could be that writing is a more difficult task that requires more knowledge on the part of the writer since it is an epistemic activity, that is, when you write you construct knowledge and experience, and novice students have not had exposure to different genres in the foreign language; therefore, in terms of structure, there is a lack of knowledge as to how a written text is to be developed.

From the findings reported above, this study not only confirms the importance of FSS in discourse, but it also reveals some gaps in knowledge and practice regarding the inclusion of FSS in English as a foreign language teaching. Even when the quantity of students involved in this work was a limitation, this case-study is a contribution to the field because it provides more

information about the necessity of reflecting upon how the FSS are part of discourse and how they can be included in formal instruction in different levels and programmes. Based on that, more research in the area is needed so as to improve the students' development of language skills in the foreign language.

In sum, the four participants of this research use FSS when they develop written or oral descriptions, but they are not always successful when they choose the expressions in written descriptions, and they are not so varied. As previously stated, the proper use of idiomatic expressions is an important constituent of language learning (Wray, 2000); consequently, its use in both oral and written texts is necessary in order to develop fluency in discourse. According to Wood (2010), fluency in a foreign language is a function of pauses and hesitations and their connection with pragmatics and structures. Thus, pre-fabricated structures are essential in developing oral fluency in foreign language lessons, so, teachers of English as a foreign language need to design tasks which include the use of lexical bundles to help foreign language students gain more fluency in the language.

Similarly, students have to be clear about the structure of texts since when they describe a particular issue or situation, there is some structure to follow and some sequences are mostly used in written texts, others in oral ones, because patterns of formulaic language vary according to genre (Wray, 2009). Thus teachers need to provide students with opportunities to be in contact with these lexical bundles by offering proper input that will allow them to use these expressions in a better way. It appears that students need more exposure to these expressions; therefore, more research in the area is needed to share experiences about the inclusion of FSS in direct instruction in foreign language environments.

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