

English Language Learning Magazine

# CONTACT

Special Research Symposium Issue

**English in the Workplace**

**Formulaic language:  
A promising way to think  
about vocabulary building**

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## CONTACT

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# FOREWORD

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This issue offers the refereed proceedings of the sixteenth Annual Research Symposium, part of the 43rd Annual TESL Ontario Conference held in Toronto in November 2015. The two themes that provided the focus of the Research Symposium were as follows:

- English in the Workplace
- Formulaic language: a promising way to think about vocabulary building

As in previous years, the themes covered topical issues that directly affect the classrooms and practice of ESL professionals in varied ways. Teachers who encounter problems and challenges related to these themes on a daily basis in their classrooms look for background information and practical ideas that will help them meet their learners' needs and the needs of their own professional development. In organizing the Research Symposium around topical themes and in publishing the proceedings, TESL Ontario offers ESL professionals relevant information on recent research and new initiatives that inform both classroom practice and the development of the profession.

Following past practice, the different themes were selected in consultation with members of TESL Ontario. Symposium presenters were invited to submit a written version of their oral presentation after the Research Symposium. Selected reviewers, subject experts on the review topic, commented on the manuscripts for final inclusion in the proceedings. Those papers included in these proceedings offer readers theoretical, research and practical insights on pedagogical challenges that classroom teachers, administrators, and other ESL professionals deal with on an on-going basis as they endeavour to provide learners with optimal learning conditions. We are confident that readers will find the selected papers interesting and relevant to their teaching and professional development. We hope teachers and researchers will feel inspired by the ideas presented, and that teachers will launch their own inquiries into an aspect of their teaching context, then report their insights at future TESL Ontario conferences.

We also wish to thank all the presenters who participated in the different topics of the Symposium for their dedication to their work and for sharing their expertise and insights. Without them, we could not have organized the Symposium and compiled these proceedings. Finally, we thank the many individuals who contributed in one way or another to the success of the Research Symposium. We particularly wish to thank the editor of Contact magazine, Brett Reynolds, and TESL Ontario's administrative office, and conference staff for supporting us in organizing and preparing the Research Symposium and for the opportunity to assemble this refereed Research Symposium issue of Contact. Without their continued support, our work would have been considerably more difficult and markedly less pleasant.

Hedy McGarrell, David Wood  
Co-editors

# INTRODUCTION

The Research Symposium and the ensuing refereed proceedings of contributions to the symposium have become an integral part of the annual TESL Ontario conference. The symposium during the 2015 TESL Ontario conference brought together researchers and language professionals who addressed one of the two topics that had been selected for inclusion. While some of the contributions included present data from individual researchers' recent studies, others summarize areas of activity in areas that have become topical in ESL learning and teaching. The contributors link theoretical insights with practical issues in pedagogy and consider the implications to classroom practice. Both themes addressed at the 2015 Research Symposium are represented in these proceedings. They are grouped according to theme and, within each theme, presented in alphabetical order of the presenters.

## Theme 1: English in the Workplace

The theme of English in the Workplace explored three different workplace-related settings that ESL learners may encounter. The first paper, Tracey Dewing's *The Three P's Of ESL In The Workplace: Proficiency, Pronunciation, & Pragmatics*, discusses two studies that explored aspects of receptive and productive oral communication between immigrant and native English speaking employees. The material presented highlights challenges and successes of workplace programs and offers recommendations for future research. In *Who Recommends the Higher Language Test Score for Workplace Readiness: Language Specialists or Employers?* Andrea Strachan investigates the question of cut score standard setting for professionals' language requirements. In particular, the study explored whether cut-score recommendations differed between health professionals and language specialists, groups that acted as expert panellists in the standard-setting study. A key finding of the study is that while language specialists' participation clarified aspects of the language testing process for panellists, health professionals contributed workplace examples that helped the panel understand the language demands of the workplace. The third paper, Julia Williams and Maggie Heeney's *Developing a Culturally Mindful Curriculum and Occupation-Specific Assessment for an Optometric Bridging Program*, describes the development of an ESL curriculum and occupation-specific assessment for a specific optometric bridging program. The Optometric English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA), which assesses reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in optometric contexts served to inform the curriculum developers on the impact of the curriculum on learning outcomes. The paper has relevance for curriculum development and workplace assessments in other professional contexts.

## Theme 2: Formulaic language: a promising way to think about vocabulary building

This theme focused on research on formulaic language, multiword units with unitary meanings or functions. Examples of types of formulaic language include collocations, idioms, formulaic expressions, lexical bundles, and phrasal verbs. The three papers here report on pedagogically relevant research studies which address the acquisition and use of formulaic language.

Lina AlHassan's contribution, *Learning all the Parts of the Puzzle: Focused Instruction of Formulaic Sequences Through the Lens of Activity Theory*, reports on an innovative study in which English for academic purposes (EAP) learners were taught specific formulaic language through focused instruction. The writing produced by the learners was evaluated by a team of EAP teacher judges who also reflected on the efficacy of teaching formulaic language. Randy Appel's *Formulaic Sequences in L2 English Academic Writing: Proficiency level differences* reports on a study of formulaic language in the writing samples produced by EAP learners in proficiency test contexts. The results show some noteworthy differences in the use of formulaic language by learners of different proficiency levels. The third contribution is from Alisa Zavialova, whose study *Explicit Instruction of Formulaic Expressions and Second Language Pragmatic Competence*, focused on LINC learners who were taught formulaic sequences relevant to specific pragmatic speech acts. The learners were later tested on their use of the sequences, and reflected on the learning process and their evolving awareness of formulaic language and pragmatic competence.

As in the past, we enjoyed preparing this Special Research Symposium Issue for readers of *Contact* and wish to thank the contributors for submitting written versions of their papers. To grow, members of the TESL profession need to continue to investigate research and teaching practice; this continual striving for more sophisticated research questions and teaching techniques allows them to meet the challenges encountered in their classrooms. We hope that the stimulating contributions contained in this issue of the referred proceedings of the 2015 Research Symposium will inspire teachers to experiment with a new methodology or new techniques in their classrooms.

We regret to announce that this is the final Research Symposium and the final published proceedings. Due to funding priorities, TESL Ontario will not offer a Research Symposium for the foreseeable future.

Hedy McGarrell, David Wood  
Co-editors



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# THE THREE P'S OF ESL IN THE WORKPLACE

## Proficiency, pronunciation, & pragmatics

By Tracey M. Derwing, University of Alberta; Simon Fraser University

### Abstract

Findings from two English in the Workplace research projects are outlined; the first is a study carried out at two firms that hired a substantial number of immigrant professionals, primarily engineers. The L2 participants' communicative skills in English were found to be affected by proficiency, pronunciation, and pragmatics. Interviews were conducted with L2 immigrant employees, and Human Resources representatives, and a questionnaire was completed by L1 English employees, who shared their views of working with their L2 counterparts, especially regarding oral communication. The second study focused on the instruction of pronunciation and pragmatics for long-term employees in a factory, who, after several promotions, had greater need for more comprehensible speech. Both perception and production tests were utilized pre- and post-instruction, and a model for giving feedback to employees was developed. Some of the challenges and successes of workplace programs are outlined and recommendations are offered for future research.

Government-funded adult language programs in Canada are designed to prepare newcomers for integration and for entry into the workplace. Indeed, over the last several years, immigration policy has placed an increasing emphasis on employment issues, largely because, as Picot and Sweetman (2012) indicated, skills in Canada's official languages "have significant direct and indirect influences on labour market success and are key to positive outcomes" (p. 8). Some provinces also provide monies for adult language training; in the case of Alberta, the overwhelming majority of provincially-funded language training programs are geared to helping immigrants gain access to the workplace. Although many newcomers are under-employed in jobs that do not fully utilize their education or qualifications (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000), opportunities for professional immigrants to re-enter their original occupations exist when the economy is good. The first study reported here involved two companies that experienced rapid growth during a strong economic period, and an immediate need for more engineers; both companies hired large numbers of immigrants. The immigrant employees had the technical skills for their jobs, but their communication skills, particularly for interactions in a team environment, were a cause

for concern. The study describes an intervention to promote better communication within the companies. The second study recounted here is that of a pedagogical intervention for long-term immigrants who had been promoted repeatedly. Each job promotion required more nuanced communication skills, and for the individuals who participated in the study, both pronunciation and pragmatic issues were causing problems with their performance at work.

### The Three P's of Communication

Overall proficiency in a second language (L2), as measured by such tests as the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment Tool, TOEFL, IELTS, and others, is a major determinant of an immigrant's employment. Many companies and institutions require a baseline level of proficiency as a hiring requirement. However, proficiency levels as measured by standardized tests do not necessarily reflect two aspects of language that affect communicative success. Both pronunciation and pragmatics influence an individual's efficacy in transmitting meaning, and yet often receive short shrift in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms (Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Pronunciation errors may interfere with a listener's comprehension of the intended message, affecting intelligibility (actual understanding) and comprehensibility (ease of understanding; Derwing & Munro, 2015). Pragmatics, or the culturally acceptable ways of using language (e.g., speech acts such as appropriate ways of asking a favour, giving feedback, disagreeing, or teasing someone), may affect an interlocutor's reaction to a speaker. Because pragmatic conventions are culturally determined, they vary from one language to the next. As Yates (2004) noted in arguing for the teaching of pragmatics in ESL classrooms, native speakers can generally recognize pronunciation problems as a language learning difficulty, but they often interpret inappropriate use of pragmatics as rude behaviour rather than as a gap in language learning. In fact, Laroche and Rutherford (2007) cite dozens of anecdotes from foreign-born professionals in the Canadian workplace that support Yates' assertion. Although most adult L2 programs in Canada aim to increase learners' overall proficiency by focusing on the four skills and grammar, pronunciation and pragmatics are often missing from the curriculum (Derwing & Munro 2015; Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2010) carried out a study of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in which they compared students in LINC with matched individuals who had been tested, but who had not registered for LINC instruction. Although the instructed students showed significant gains over the non-instructed group in reading and writing, there were no significant differences between the two groups in their listening and speaking skills.

One consequence of a heavier focus on reading, writing and grammar in LINC and ESL classes is the fact that immigrants often perform well on written tasks, and can demonstrate sufficient proficiency to be hired into a job, but may not have the pronunciation or pragmatic skills to keep that job.

### Study One: Immigrant Engineers in the Workplace

Representatives from the Human Resources (HR) departments in two companies contacted a local provider of ESL for assistance with some of their L2 immigrant employees. The employees in question had strong engineering skills, but were not communicating well on the job. As one of the HR representatives indicated, they had received considerable feedback from Canadian-born employees that they had difficulty understanding the L2 engineers. The local ESL provider contacted the author to suggest that the interventions designed by their instructors would make an interesting workplace research study.

#### Research Question

The primary research question was whether the interventions, which focused primarily on pronunciation and pragmatics, would result in improved communications in the workplace, as perceived by the learners themselves, their co-workers, and company management.

#### Method

The study entailed open-ended interviews with two HR staff, the lead ESL/Culture instructor, and 15 L2 employees, from Bangladesh, Columbia, China, India, Pakistan, Philippines and Venezuela. In addition, twenty-four native speaker (NS) employees completed a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards their L2 counterparts. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the responses to the questionnaires were collated.

#### Results

**Courses Offered.** The interviews with the HR staff and the instructor indicated that the job requirements for the L2 employees included strong oral skills for interactions in project teams. The team approach to projects conducted in the companies meant that all team members were expected to contribute ideas in meetings, offer constructive feedback, and speak clearly. However, there were several ongoing complaints that the immigrant engineers were often silent in meetings, and that when they did talk, they were difficult to understand. The lead instructor indicated that his first step was to job shadow several employees in a variety of settings to gain a sense of the range of communication requirements. He then developed a three-part course for the L2 employees from both companies, offered for three hours every Friday afternoon over 12 weeks. The companies paid for the course development and instruction, and the employees gave their own time for the lessons (all staff in both firms worked long hours during the week in order to have Friday afternoons off).

The course began with a pronunciation component, focusing on aspects of the speakers' accents that caused problems for intelligibility. The second component comprised pragmatic instruction. For example, employees were taught how to discuss contentious matters in a diplomatic way, such as disagreeing with another team member using expressions like 'I

take your point, but ... ’ The instructor gave numerous examples of appropriate ways to challenge another individual’s statements, ways to interrupt successfully, and generally how to back-channel in a format that Canadian-born employees would understand. The third component of the course was labelled ‘autonomous language learning.’ The employees were asked to read the local paper, particularly editorials and regular columns, and were encouraged to bring questions to class about anything they didn’t understand. The instructor’s goal was to get the participants to consider how a second language offers broader insights on the world, while at the same time familiarizing them with local issues, giving them ‘small talk’ topics to discuss with their colleagues.

In conjunction with others, the instructor also developed a series of four intercultural training workshops for management and HR staff to help them recognize the socio-cultural challenges faced by the immigrant employees. The workshops dealt with how to interpret a résumé from another country, general aspects of cross-cultural communications, and cross-cultural conflict. Management and HR staff were also encouraged to discuss how to develop immigrant employees’ leadership skills to take on project management positions. Role play was a major component of the course; for instance, the instructor brought in three high proficiency L2 speakers from a local language provider who were engineers. These individuals took on the role of employers in job interviews while the managers of the company played job applicants. The managers generally did not fare well, because they failed to follow the standard procedures found in the countries of origin of the L2 speakers. The instructor guided the discussion after the role plays, helping the managers and HR individuals to interpret what had happened.

**Immigrant Employees’ Perceptions.** The immigrant employees were asked whether they had taken LINC and/or ESL classes in Canada, and if so, whether they had found them helpful. Seven of the 15 had studied English in Canada. All seven indicated that although they learned in their programs, they would have benefitted more from a greater emphasis on speaking and listening. Two representative comments illustrate this point very well: “[The course was] a little bit helpful – the program has a different aim. My aim is to look for a job, to be familiar with the Canadian working place. Aim at [X] College is to upgrade [prepare for university].” “More emphasis should have been on conversation than on grammar.” When the immigrant employees were questioned about the helpfulness of the three-part workplace course they had just completed, the majority indicated that it was very useful, but some felt that the course was too short. The following comments are representative of the whole group’s reaction: “Oh, yeah, [it helped] a lot - I was introduced to the Canadian workplace culture.” “Yeah, sure, it helped, but it was too short. The culture aspect was the most helpful.” “Ah, yes, definitely ... I think this course could help me in the future.” “The focus on speaking and communication was most helpful.” The employees were also asked whether they were happy in their jobs. Fourteen of the 15 respondents indicated that they were, as these comments suggest: “Ah yes...just sometimes maybe I have a little bit of difficulty, I mean for this language... but it’s getting better.” “I’m getting cooperation. People are friendly ... acceptance value is more. And the main thing is management is

aware of immigrant limitations, so it’s easy to move ahead.” Although happy in their jobs, only two of the 15 immigrant employees reported having close Canadian-born friends, and most indicated that they did not socialize with their co-workers (for example, most said they ate lunch alone at their desks).

**NS Employee Questionnaire.** A questionnaire was completed by 24 employees who worked with the immigrant engineers on a daily basis. The questions dealt primarily with communication patterns in the company, and the NSs’ perceptions of their L2 counterparts’ use of English. Five of the questions and the responses to them can be seen in Table 1. The respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their responses by adding comments to each question.

Table 1. Canadian-Born Employee Perceptions of Communicating with Immigrant Employees.

	QUESTION	YES	NO	N/A
1.	Is more effort required to communicate with ESL speakers than NSs?	22	1	1
2.	Do you have difficulty communicating with ESL speakers?	22	2	
3.	Do the ESL speakers have problems communicating?	24		
4.	Do most employees socialize within their L1 groups?	23	1	
5.	Are NSs reluctant to talk with ESL speakers?	16	3	5

The majority of respondents indicated that it takes more effort to talk with the immigrant employees than with other native speakers. One individual put it this way: “[It’s] both harder to understand AND harder to be understood. The analogies that I tend to use are not easily translated. The time delay required for them to translate what I say, think in their native language, then translate to English and share it is painful for a person with little patience to spare. Humour is completely lost a lot of the time.” In Question 2, we asked whether the NSs had experienced difficulty communicating with L2 speakers at work, and again, the response was unequivocal. As one of the respondents commented, “Yes, sometimes their accent is too dominant. I seriously can’t understand them sometimes. Sometimes I feel they don’t have a strong enough vocabulary, which results in their explanations of things to be somewhat unclear.” Question 3 asked whether some ESL speakers in the company generally have difficulty communicating effectively with other employees in the workplace – all agreed that that was the case. In Question 4 the NSs were asked whether people in their company tended to socialize more within their own L1 groups. Most agreed that they did; note that this includes English speakers. Finally in question 5, NSs were asked if they are sometimes reluctant to initiate conversations with ESL employees; two thirds agreed that they were. This last question is particularly relevant, given the responses to our next query: How should your L2 co-workers improve their English? Overwhelmingly, the NSs recommended that the immigrant engineers practice speaking English, although some suggested that this practice should be with other speakers of the immigrants’ native language, or at home with family members. Some respondents advised that the L2



engineers should focus on pronunciation, while another mentioned learning more about the culture and norms of communication. A couple of people indicated that the engineers should give up their first language altogether, although they acknowledged that it was a fairly unrealistic expectation.

In sum, the participants in the pronunciation/pragmatics component of the study and the managerial and HR staff felt on the whole, that the instruction had been beneficial and that the L2 speakers had gained valuable communication skills. However, the co-workers who did not receive pragmatics training did not perceive an improvement and continued to be frustrated by and unhelpful towards their L2 counterparts.

### **Study Two: Pronunciation Instruction for L2 Speakers in a Workplace Setting**

A full description of this study has been published elsewhere (Derwing, Munro, Foote, Waugh & Fleming, 2014). For this reason, I will provide only a brief summary of the findings here.

I was contacted by the in-house ESL instructor at a local factory. Seven long-term employees, six Vietnamese speakers, and one Khmer speaker self-identified as having pronunciation difficulties that interfered with their work. They had been in Canada for an average of 19 years. In every case, the employees had been promoted several times because of their excellent work ethic and knowledge of the factory operations, but with each promotion came the need for stronger communication skills. I was asked to participate in the development of a pronunciation course and to document the outcomes; a representative from a local college was also asked to develop pragmatics workshops for the same factory employees.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question was whether the L2 speakers' communication, both in terms of pronunciation and pragmatics, could be improved in a short time, even though they had been living and working in an English-speaking environment for many years.

### **Method**

After conducting an extensive needs analysis, the instructor for the pronunciation course and I developed perception and production tests that were administered both before and after the 17-hour course. The course itself was offered three times a week for 30 minutes at a time. In addition, the participants were asked to do a minimum of 10 minutes of listening and speaking homework five days a week. They all agreed to do so, and some of them spent considerably more time practicing on their own. The activities in class focused on raising the participants' awareness of their pronunciation problems, and improving perception and production using techniques such as dictation, shadowing, and explicit correction. Homework was provided for each class on a mini-recorder; learners had both listening and



speaking tasks to perform. These tasks were also available on a wiki, so that the students could revisit all homework activities at any time.

### Results

A comparison of the pre- and post-tests revealed that the participants' own perception, measured through dictations, improved significantly. Listening experiments were designed in which the intelligibility and comprehensibility of the participants' productions were assessed by 30 NS listeners. Both speech dimensions improved significantly as a result of the course.

The pragmatics component of the training was provided by a local college. Based on input from the factory managers and the participants themselves, it was determined that the participants needed help with giving feedback to the workers for whom they were responsible. The instructor gave workshops totalling five hours on this topic to the L2 employees alone, a two-hour session with managers to discuss intercultural communication, and another two-hour session with management and employees in the course. Together they developed a model with exemplars for giving feedback under the acronym ABLE: Acknowledge, Behaviour, Learning, and Expectations. This model provided the participants with an approach to give feedback to workers in a respectful way, but with clarity about expectations for changed behaviour.

### Discussion and Recommendations

In both studies, management recognized that there were communication problems that could not be addressed in-house. In the case of the first firm, there was a general unease with the oral communication skills of some of the L2 employees, which was attributed to accent, although when a needs analysis was carried out, both pronunciation and pragmatics were at issue, along with proficiency in a few instances. Writing skills were also a concern, and prior to the course described here, the company had sent some foreign-born engineers to a local college for a writing course. That course was determined to have minimal benefits, since it was not tailored to the writing needs of the engineers. Management came to recognize that if their employees were to be helped, it would have to be with a program that addressed specific problems, rather than generic, one-size-fits-all courses. In the case of the second company, an expert ESL instructor was already on staff; he very readily identified some of the issues faced by L2 employees, but, given his extensive responsibilities on site, he recognized that he could not spare the time to work on these issues with the employees in question. The management in that company also recognized the nature of the problem, and encouraged the ESL instructor to approach external experts to provide assistance in the workplace. It was abundantly clear that the employees would not simply "pick up" the language they needed on the job. In both studies, needs analyses (including job shadowing) indicated that pronunciation and pragmatics were the areas that would most benefit the immigrant employees, although general proficiency in English was also an issue for some. Pragmatics and pronunciation instruction for L2 employees, tailored to the

communication needs of the workplace, was successful in both studies, thus answering the primary research questions for each study. It is clear that significant improvements in L2 speakers' productions can take place within a limited time period; not only that, Study Two indicates that it is never too late to enhance an L2 speaker's comprehensibility.

In Study One, the Canadian-born NSs in management and HR positions gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant employees as a result of the pragmatics workshops offered to them. They also recognized improvement in the communication skills of those employees who received instruction, perhaps because they now understood and knew what to look for. Unfortunately, many of the employees who worked most closely in teams with the immigrant engineers did not receive the pragmatics training. As one of the L2 engineers suggested, it would be useful in future to have joint sessions with immigrants and Canadian-born alike, so that they could learn together what the "secret rules of language" are. The importance of working with both Canadian-born and foreign-born employees together on pragmatics cannot be underestimated. In Study One, the HR and Management who received some pragmatics training had far more empathy and patience for their L2 staff, whereas the Canadian-born co-workers, who did not receive instruction, continued to express frustration with their L2 counterparts. Pragmatics training in a cross-cultural context has benefits not just for the workplace, but for society in general. The more individuals can be accepting of differences, and the more they make an effort to understand people from another culture, the better.

In Study Two, there was an integrated session for both L2 speakers and the senior management. Doing these cultural exercises together after some preparation with the L2 speakers alone was extremely valuable. Although the L2 participants in this study were already highly valued for their work ethic and technical skills, some of the management team expressed surprise at the initiative that the instructed workers displayed after the course. For example, at a final class ceremony, one of the participants offered an impromptu speech, thanking the instructors and the company for providing the course. The plant manager indicated that "he [the L2 employee] would never have done that three months ago." The manager went on to say that he had noticed a real improvement in emails (not a focus of instruction) as a result of both the pronunciation and pragmatics instruction because the employees were now using final consonants, where they often left them off before, and the structure of the emails was far more to the point.

Most of the L2 participants in both studies would have liked longer courses. The participants made significant progress, but felt that they could have learned more had there been more time. The greatest challenge faced by English in the Workplace programs is that everyone is busy and often companies have very little time to set aside for these types of initiatives. Moreover, there is a lingering perception on the part of some employers that a single course should suffice. Another challenge to English in the Workplace courses is the cost. The companies involved in these studies were large and had budgets that could accommodate a range of training opportunities. This is not the case with many smaller

businesses, who might require some government assistance if they were to offer English in the Workplace support to their employees. Companies may want to consider a cooperative approach, in which several firms combine resources to offer their L2 employees support for pronunciation and pragmatics. Finally, the companies involved in these studies were well aware that their employees had valuable technical skills and were worth the investment. Organizations such as ERIEC, the Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council (similar to TRIEC in Toronto), have reached out to such employers to have them speak to others about the benefits of hiring immigrants who may need some initial support, but ultimately, whether or not a company chooses to invest in the communication skills of their L2 staff depends on many factors, including the robustness of the economy.

Although employers are typically responsible for improved communication skills in the workplace, LINC and ESL programs should provide increased foundational support. First, LINC/ESL programs should examine whether they are addressing adult immigrants' actual communication needs beyond the traditional four skills and grammar. Pronunciation, speaking skills to enhance fluency and cultural training to improve awareness of pragmatic conventions appear to be what the NSs and L2 speakers in these studies have identified as most important for the workplace. These are precisely the areas that do not appear to be given as much coverage in many LINC and ESL classrooms as other language skills.

LINC teachers may feel pressured by the curriculum in their programs to spend more time on grammar, writing, and vocabulary learning than on oral proficiency skills. Furthermore, it is often difficult to design speaking activities that engage the whole class, especially when class sizes are large. Instructors may wish to suggest planning meetings with the program administrator, in which everyone involved works towards a curriculum with a greater emphasis on oral communication. A close examination of the student population may indicate that a stand-alone pronunciation option would be useful for some students.

A recommendation for LINC funders is that they require programs to have TESL trained teachers. Some LINC providers in Canada still rely on instructors who have no TESL training but who have been "grandfathered" in (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Furthermore, funders should be asking questions about time spent on speaking and listening. It is evident from the federal government's own research (CIC, 2010) that more focus should be placed on the development of oral communication skills.

It is recommended that TESL programs in Canada review their offerings. Few provide courses in teaching pronunciation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011), and a quick review of Canadian university websites suggests that there are very few stand-alone courses in how to teach pragmatics. No doubt both of these topics arise in methodology classes, but their importance is minimized if they are not given the coverage they deserve. Furthermore, instructors are unlikely to get good guidance from general skills textbooks on pragmatic content, which Diepenbroek and Derwing (2013) found in a survey of texts to be insufficient in many respects.

Given that many immigrants arrive in Canada with some English already or are NSs of another variety of English (for instance, eight of the engineers in Study One had learned English in their home countries), workplace programs that focus on sociocultural aspects of language in the local context for both NS and immigrant employees, regardless of their first language, can offer useful insights for improved communication among all workers.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to communication in the workplace. Janet Holmes and her team in New Zealand (Holmes & Riddiford, 2009) have made a great start by documenting real language use in the workplace. Dahm and Yates (2014) have shown the necessity for conducting workplace research with language that is “as close to naturally occurring data as possible” (p. 28). Their research on International Medical Graduates’ speech patterns compared to Australian patterns clearly shows that the approaches to establishing rapport in the workplace are culturally determined. More research along these lines is needed. Finally, it is important to know more about how willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007) on the part of both NSs and L2 speakers in the workplace can be enhanced, so that more Canadian-born co-workers will share the reaction of one of the participants in Study One to their immigrant peers: “The more I try [to talk with them], the easier it is. Wish others would see that too.”

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# RECOMMENDING LANGUAGE TEST SCORES FOR WORKPLACE READINESS

## Who recommends higher language test score for workplace readiness — Language specialists or employers?

By Andrea Strachan, Touchstone Institute: Competency Assessment Experts

### Abstract

Regulatory bodies are mandated through the Ontario Regulated Health Professions Act to certify only practitioners who demonstrate the knowledge and skills to practice in a safe and effective manner. These standards protect the public by ensuring that only those applicants who meet the prescribed minimum standard are able to gain employment and serve the public. Internationally educated health professionals, although previously certified in other jurisdictions, must complete professional practice exams to demonstrate their professional competence and often they must also provide scores on an acceptable language proficiency exam to demonstrate their communicative competence. Scores on international standardized language proficiency tests are used in this context. This investigation sought to determine whether cut score recommendations differed between health professionals and language specialists acting as expert panellists in a standard-setting study. Cut score recommendations by each of these expert groups were collected using a standard-setting instrument and the cross-group discussion periods between judgment rounds were recorded and analysed. Results showed that language specialists recommended higher cut scores than health professionals. The transcript analysis indicated that language specialists contributed information about language testing that helped the panel understand the language testing process, and health professionals contributed workplace examples that helped the panel understand the language demands of the workplace.

*Keywords:* standardized language tests, cut-scores, standard-setting



Successful immigrants contribute substantially towards strong labour-force growth, which in turn enhances Ontario's potential economic growth rate (Drummond Report, 2012). However, there is serious concern about the underutilization of immigrant skills (Alboim, Finnie, & Meng, 2005). Many policy recommendations have been made for improved credential-recognition programs (Alboim & Cohl, 2007) but challenges faced by immigrants along the professional registration and licensure pathway continue to be documented (Baumann & Blythe, 2009; Johnson & Bauman, 2011; Cheng, Spaling, & Song, 2013). To address potential unfair practices in this area the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act of 2006 (FARPA) promotes transparent, objective, impartial, and fair registration practices with the intent to positively impact the experience of international applicants for professional registration in Ontario. Scores on international standardized language proficiency tests are accepted as evidence of language ability, and cut scores (the passing threshold) must be defensible and in keeping with Ontario's fair-access law.

### **Setting Standards for Language Proficiency**

Regulators have had language proficiency policies since the Ontario Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA) was enacted in 1991. The RHPA is the legislation that governs Ontario's health professional regulators (i.e., regulatory colleges). These colleges determine each profession's scope of practice, define what is allowed and disallowed (controlled acts), and establish entry-to-practice licensure, certification of registration requirements. This includes setting exams and required scores.

### **Language Proficiency Standards in the Legislation and Regulatory Policy**

Internationally educated professionals who apply for professional registration or licensure in Canada often must meet a language-proficiency standard. These standards may be defined in the regulation, in regulatory policies, or through by-laws, with wording and interpretation that differ across the professions. In medicine, the English-language requirements are defined in the Medicine Act itself: "an applicant is reasonably fluent in English or French if the applicant, obtains a score of 220 on the Test of Spoken English and a score of 580 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language of the Educational Testing Service" (Medicine Act, 1991 O. Reg. 93/12 ONTARIO REGULATION 865/93 REGISTRATION). In contrast, the legislated requirement for Medical Laboratory Technologists is much more general: "The applicant must have reasonable fluency in either English or French" (Medical Laboratory Technology Act, 1991, S.O. 1991, c. 28). Similarly, the more recent Traditional Chinese Medicine Act, 2006, requires that "the applicant must be able to speak, read and write either English or French with reasonable fluency" (Traditional Chinese Medicine Act, 2006 O. Reg. 27/13 ONTARIO REGULATION 27/13 REGISTRATION).

The requirements described above demonstrate some of the challenges regulators face with language proficiency standards. One issue is the need for language proficiency standards to be dynamic rather than static given the changing nature of testing. For example, the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) has changed significantly since 1991. Its



speaking component, the Test of Spoken English (TSE), has been discontinued and the “580” is a score that refers to the paper-based TOEFL, which was replaced in 2006 by the Internet-Based TOEFL. On the other hand, the Traditional Chinese Medicine and Medical Laboratory Technology acts are very general and do not describe the requirements in a way that defines how language proficiency is to be measured.

### **The Question of Defensible Language Proficiency Standards**

The 2006 Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act (FARPA) imposed oversight of regulatory bodies to ensure that registration practices were transparent, objective, impartial and fair. The question of whether existing language standards were appropriate was raised around this time by regulators and employers who suspected that the language difficulties experienced by applicants on qualifying examination and in the workplace, even after language proficiency standards had been met, were based on the weakness of the standard itself. Regulators, being familiar with standard setting as a reliable method for setting cut scores on competency exams, began to consider this approach for language assessments.

### **Standard Setting as a Defensible Method to Set Standards**

Cut scores on professional competency examinations are commonly determined through standard setting. Standard setting is a psychometric process used as a policy-making tool that is legally defensible and can be associated with the requirements of the target situation (Cizek, 1996, 2001; Johnson, Squires, & Whitney, 2002; Kane, 1994). Standard-setting studies for educational standards or professional competency exams are commonplace and represent the acceptable practice in educational and competency measurement and evaluation (Popham, 1992; Plake, Impara, & Potenza, 1994; Smee & Blackmore, 2001; Skorupsky & Hambleton, 2005). The most widely used standard-setting process relies on the judgment of subject matter experts (expert panellists or judges) who analyse test items and recommend a point on the score scale that, in their view, represents the threshold that distinguishes between examinees who are competent and those who are not (Cizek, 1996; Zeiky, 2001).

Norcini and Shea (1997) describe two types of validity evidence required to support credible and valid standards resulting from a standard-setting process. One is that the composition of the panel must demonstrate the appropriate qualifications, numbers, and variety, and the methods used must be supported by research. The credibility of a standard is dependent on the quality and performance of panellists who represent the communities of interest (Norcini & Shea, 1997, 2002; Raymond & Reid, 2001). The criteria established for the panel include: subject matter expertise, an understanding of the examinee population, the ability to estimate item difficulty, knowledge of the instructional environment, appreciation of the consequences, and representation of the communities of interest. It could be argued, therefore, that language specialists should be included in the panel in order to support greater validity of the cut scores on international standardized language proficiency tests are accepted evidence of language ability. Standard-setting studies for

language proficiency tests have appeared in the academic literature (O'Neill, Tannenbaum, & Tiffen, 2005; O'Neill, Buckendahl, Plake, & Taylor, 2007), and although these studies demonstrate a reasonable variety of panellists, including locally and internationally trained nurses representing 16 different languages, they exclude language specialists.

### Methods

This study investigated cut score recommendations made by health professionals and language specialists who participated as expert panellists in a standard-setting study. The study was designed to evaluate the impact of the participations of these diverse panellists. An existing methodology developed by Educational Testing Services was utilised as a framework for the standard-setting activity.

### Standard-Setting Procedures

The TOEFL®iBT Standard Setting Manual was developed by Educational Testing Service in 2006 to coincide with the launch of the Internet-based TOEFL (TOEFL®iBT). The Manual provides a validated and adapted set of tools to run a modified Angoff standard-setting study and adheres to the prescribed methodology such as the summary of the accepted practice and the general steps provided by Hambleton (2001):

1. Choose a large and representative panel;
2. Choose a standard-setting method;
3. Train panellists to use the method;
4. Compile and analyse item ratings;
5. Conduct a panel discussion on the proposed ratings;
6. Compile item ratings a second time;
7. Compile final ratings;
8. Present consequences to the panel;
9. Revise ratings if necessary; and
10. Compile validity evidence.

The TOEFL®iBT Standard Setting Manual is a structured package that includes materials and instructions for execution of all these steps (Educational Testing Services, 2006).

### Research Design

A mixed methods design was applied (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) in order to facilitate analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data collected in the standard-setting session. The quantitative analysis focused on differences in voting patterns of occupational experts and language specialists while the qualitative data was found in the transcription of the discussion, thus helping with the identification of factors that might have influenced

the decision making process of the two groups. A concurrent triangulation approach was applied to the data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This allowed for a separate collection of quantitative and qualitative data during the same timeframe throughout the standard-setting session. Afterwards, the data was analysed and merged in an interpretive stage.

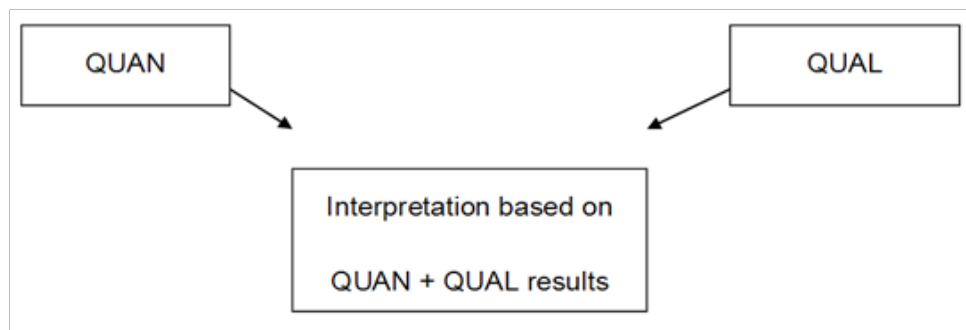


Figure 1. A visual model of a triangulation mixed-method design.

### Study Participants (Panellists)

Fifteen panellists were selected through a purposeful sampling procedure. They represented the communities of stakeholders that met the requirements recommended by Raymond and Reid (2001) and included: two employers, two ESL specialists, two patient advocates, one trainer, three internationally educated medical technologists, three Canadian trained technologists, one other health care professional, and one representative of the regulatory board. All panellists met the qualifying criteria established Raymond & Reid (2001) and demonstrated subject matter expertise, an understanding of the examinee population, the ability to estimate item difficulty, knowledge of the instructional environment, appreciation of the consequences, and representation of the communities of interest.

### Data Collection

The standard-setting instrument included in the TOEFL®iBT Standard Setting Manual (Educational Testing Service, 2006) was used as the data collection instrument. Quantitative data was collected and recorded in pre-programmed Microsoft Excel tally sheets provided within the manual. The qualitative data comprised transcriptions of the recordings of the four between-round discussion periods, each for one section of the exams (speaking, writing, reading, and listening).

The quantitative data contained the first and final cut score recommendations by each panellist for each of the skill areas tested (speaking, listening, reading, writing). Cut score recommendations from each voting session were recorded in the tally sheets. Pre-programmed embedded formulas then generated descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, median, and standard deviation) and also converted raw score recommendations into a scaled score which resulted in a final overall score.

The recordings of four between-round discussion periods were recorded and transcribed, each representing the discussion related to the cut score of a specific component of the test (speaking, writing, reading, and listening). Data preparation and analysis were modelled on a grounded-theory analysis process documented by Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (2005) which include the following phases:

1. assign open coding to key points, recurring ideas and concerns that emerged more than once throughout the discussion
2. assign conceptual categories
3. develop themes.

### Study Results

#### Data Analysis

The quantitative results will be presented first, with specific results by test section, followed by a section outlining the qualitative data.

#### *Quantitative data*

The table below illustrates the data collected during the rounds of voting. Round 1 represents the aggregate results from the individuals in the two groups: the English as a Subsequent Language (ESL) specialists and the medical technology group (Techs). The final round represents the aggregate votes after the group discussion which emerged from a review of the first recommended score. Differences were observed between the groups for each test section (speaking, writing, listening, and reading). In most test sections, the ESL group often recommended higher cut scores than the Techs group. The notable exception is the speaking test section where recommended cut-scores were highest for both groups, and indeed closer between the groups. Despite these differences, both groups' cut scores represented the intermediate levels as described by TOEFL®iBT test score descriptors.

Table 1

*Scaled Score Recommendations of Language Specialists and Content Experts*

TEST SECTION		G1 (ESL) SCALED SCORE OUT OF 30	G2 (TECHS) SCALED SCORE OUT OF 30	DIFFERENCE (G1 - G2)
Speaking				
	Round 1	23	24	1
	Final round	24	24	0
	Change	+1	0	
Writing				
	Round 1	22	21	1
	Final Round	21	18	3
	Change	-1	-3	
Listening				
	Round 1	17	15	2
	Final round	17	15	2
	Change	0	0	
Reading				
	Round 1	19	17	2
	Final round	19	18	1
	Change	0	+1	

*Notes.* Round results are reported as scaled scores out of 30.

The overall results represent the final overall recommended cut scores. The overall final cut score recommendation made by the ESL group was 81 out of a total of 120 whereas the recommendation from medical technologists was 76 out of a total of 120. The ESL group's overall recommendation is noticeably higher than the Techs.

Table 2  
Overall Scaled Score Recommendations of Language Specialists and Content Experts

ROUNDS	G1 (ESL) SCALED SCORE OUT OF 120	G2 (TECHS) SCALED SCORE OUT OF 120	DIFFERENCE (G1 - G2)
Round 1	81	76	5
Final Round	81	75	6
Change	0	-1	
Change	0	-1	

Notes. Round results are reported as a scaled score out of 120.

Qualitative data

The qualitative data analysis included the assignment of open coding to key points, recurring ideas and concerns that emerged more than once throughout the discussion. These categories were then developed into themes. Seven main themes were identified in the discussion. Of these, two were areas of expertise for the language specialists (Language & Language test), two were areas of expertise for the regulators (Credentialing & Candidate experience), two related to the workplace (Patient care & Professionalism) and one was related to the standard-setting process. These themes of discussion represented the specialty areas of participating panellists. The continuing discussion on the standard-setting method itself indicates that panellists and the facilitator were continually ensuring that the established protocol was being followed appropriately.

Table 3  
Codes and Categories Observed in the Discussion Transcripts

THEMES	CATEGORY DESCRIPTION	OPEN CODES
1. Language	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to language use and language proficiency	Vocabulary, comprehensibility, tone, accuracy, grammar, overall meaning, confidence, inference, coherence, factual details, fluency, pronunciation, punctuation, spelling
2. Credentialing	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to the credentialing process	Fairness (requirements for internationally trained versus Canadian trained technologists), cross-cultural awareness of the need for the process (different from other countries), and the credentialing process itself (tests, time, cost), purpose of language testing

THEMES	CATEGORY DESCRIPTION	OPEN CODES
3. Standard setting	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to the standard-setting process	Standard-setting process (clarification or reminders of the protocols), definition of the minimally competent practitioner
4. Patient care	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to patient safety and needs, as well as the level of confidence of the patient about the treatment being received	Patient safety, patient needs, patient confidence
5. Professionalism	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to professional standards, workplace tasks and performance, concerns about human resource shortages, legal repercussions, clinical errors, interpersonal skills appropriate to the workplace, technical skills required at work.	Professional standards, workplace tasks, human resource shortages, legal repercussions of workplace performance, clinical errors, interpersonal skills, technical skills
6. Language test	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to the language test (TOEFL®iBT)	Test relevance/irrelevance, test purpose, critic of test design, description of test design, passages in the, test taking strategies, testing condition, test administration protocols, test location, and test in a computer lab
7. Candidate experience	Synonyms, near lexical equivalents, phrases, or paraphrases that were inferences, interpretations or summarized meanings related to the candidate experience or perspective	Personal experience, advocacy, sympathy, impact, and consequences of the cut score

### Conclusions

Through their language standards, regulators make decisions about the level of language skills required for the workplace. Their duty is to protect the safety of the public by ensuring that certified and registered professionals are capable and effective. Language skills play a critical role in the provision of safe and effective health services as they support the specialized communication skills which facilitate quality care. Canada's client-centred approach requires health practitioners to understand patients' needs and desires for their health care and wellbeing, as well as to communicate with patients and their



families about shared health care goals and priorities. Good communication also underlies effective teamwork that enables efficient delivery of inter-professional health care services. Furthermore, sound communication skills help health practitioners meet legal and ethical requirements related to documenting patient interviews, assessments, care plans, and treatment outcomes. In the case of IEHPs, there is an assumption that a minimum English language proficiency standard will enable these professional communication competencies.

This study showed that expertise of each group was a contributing factor to the discussion in this standard-setting study. Language specialists supplied information about language testing that helped the panel understand the language testing process while medical technologists added workplace examples that helped the panel understand the language demands of the workplace. Indeed, a language standard that requires cut scores for speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills can be defensibly linked to safe professional communication only if the perspectives of both language specialists and medical technologists considered.

While some similarities were observed in the cut score recommendations made by these two different groups, there were also some similarities. Both groups recommended the highest cut-scores for speaking. This was indeed the area where recommendations were the closest between the groups, demonstrating a shared understanding of the critical importance of spoken communication in the health care setting. The overall cut score recommendation did, however, differ. The ESL group recommended a total score of 81 whereas the Techs recommended a total score of 76 out of a possible total of 120. Unlike other tests, the TOEFL does not provide bands of proficiency, but analysis of the results in comparison to the scores on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) shows that 81 represents IELTS 6.5, whereas 76 represents IELTS 6.0. Although the TOEFL and the IELTS language proficiency scales are different scales, they are often compared because regulators commonly accept both tests as evidence of language ability. This difference is noteworthy because many health care regulators require 6.5 as a minimum standard. This could indeed make the difference between success and failure in gaining a license of becoming certified. What is interesting about this is that the ESL professionals are the group recommending the higher cut score, yet the professionals are arguably better at defining the needs of the workplace.

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# DEVELOPING A CULTURALLY MINDFUL CURRICULUM AND OCCUPATION

## Specific assessment for an optometric bridging program

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### Abstract

Citizenship and Immigration Canada funds bridging programs that are designed to orient foreign-trained professionals to Canadian workplaces and bridge skills gaps that may exist between foreign and Canadian certification. These programs provide pathways for professional foreign-trained immigrants to comparable professional Canadian workplace contexts. This paper reports on the implementation of a bridging program for foreign-trained optometrists. We began with a communicative-skills needs analysis of the optometric profession in a North American context, and we used that information to develop a curriculum and an occupation-specific English-language proficiency assessment. The curriculum was informed by the concept of cultural intelligence (Thomas & Inkson, 2004) which includes developing knowledge about, becoming mindful of, and adapting behaviour to support successful navigation of new cultures. To determine the impact of the curriculum, we developed the Optometric English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA), which assesses reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in optometric contexts. Careful delineation and constant communication of the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment were used to situate the OELPA appropriately within the scope of the bridging program. This paper has relevance for curriculum development and workplace assessments in other professional contexts.

In order to practice optometry in Canada, candidates who hold North American degrees in optometry must write the Canadian Assessment of Competence in Optometry (CACO). Prior to the development of the bridging program that this article describes, only individuals with North American optometry degrees were allowed to write the CACO exam. In the years 2004 to 2007, a select few foreign-trained (i.e. outside of North America) optometrists were allowed to write the CACO. The pass rate for this select group was only 16 percent (Turnour, 2015). This low pass rate made evident the need for a bridging program to create a pathway for foreign trained optometrists to practice optometry in Canada. In 2006, Citizenship and

Immigration Canada provided grant money to the School of Optometry at the University of Waterloo to develop the International Optometric Bridging Program (IOBP). The IOBP was first offered in 2007 and consists of optometric lectures, clinical labs, internship and externship placements, and Enhanced Language Training (ELT). Once the program has been completed, the internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) are eligible to write the CACO exam.

Anticipating the IEHPs' need for English language instruction, the IOBP Director approached the university's English Language Institute during the program development phase. In order to support the IOBP program participants in the most effective manner, the English-language instructors began a language-needs analysis for the optometric profession. The first source of information for the needs analysis was the optometry faculty who were expected to be involved in the delivery of the bridging program. As several faculty members were practicing optometrists, they were in a position to reflect on the language needs of optometrists. The Essential Skills Profiles developed by the Government of Canada (n.d.) provided further valuable information for the needs analysis.

Information collected from these sources suggested that the prime language skills used by optometrists are listening and speaking, which are required for their interactions with patients, staff, and colleagues. Reading skills also play an important role in optometric practice, as optometrists need to read patient charts and informational texts to remain current in their field. Writing plays a supportive role, as optometric texts (e.g. letters of referral to specialists and letters to insurance companies) are often formulaic in nature. All these skills need to be informed by cultural awareness for effective optometric communication.

Adding another layer of complexity to the needs analysis was the fact that the IOBP program includes approximately five months of classroom study. This means that participants need skills traditionally required of university-level students: strong reading, listening, and note-taking skills. Optometric lectures are typically scaffolded through PowerPoint presentations, with students receiving copies of the lecture slides to support their note-taking skills. Language skill requirements for clinical labs (an important component of the IOBP program) are commensurate with those required for optometric practice. With this information in mind, the English language instructors set about developing a program curriculum for the ELT component of the IOBP program and an optometric English-language proficiency test, to be called the Optometric English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA). The purpose of developing the English language proficiency test was to determine the impact of the ELT curriculum within the IOBP program. The curriculum and the test were developed concurrently, with substantial interaction between the developers. Our purpose in this paper is to describe the ELT component of the IOBP program, the integration of cultural awareness into the curriculum, and the development and dynamic use of the Optometric English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA).

### **The IOBP program: Two streams**

To be accepted to the IOBP, internationally educated optometric professionals wishing to practice optometry in Canada are required to submit their credentials for assessment, participate in a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process, and provide a Canadian Language Benchmark score (with the minimum requirement being a CLB 8). The results of these assessments are used to assign candidates to one of two bridging streams. The Bridging One stream is a ten-week program composed of 200 hours of lectures, clinical instruction, and a four-week externship that provides experience in direct patient care. As program participants are typically Canadian, English-speaking students who trained in the United Kingdom, or in countries where English is the medium of instruction, it was not anticipated that participants would require ELT. The Bridging Two stream is a 48-week program consisting of 22 weeks of lectures, clinical instruction, a 26-week externship, as well as an ELT component described below. Language specialists work with the participants in the Bridging Two program to support occupation-specific English language development with ELT.

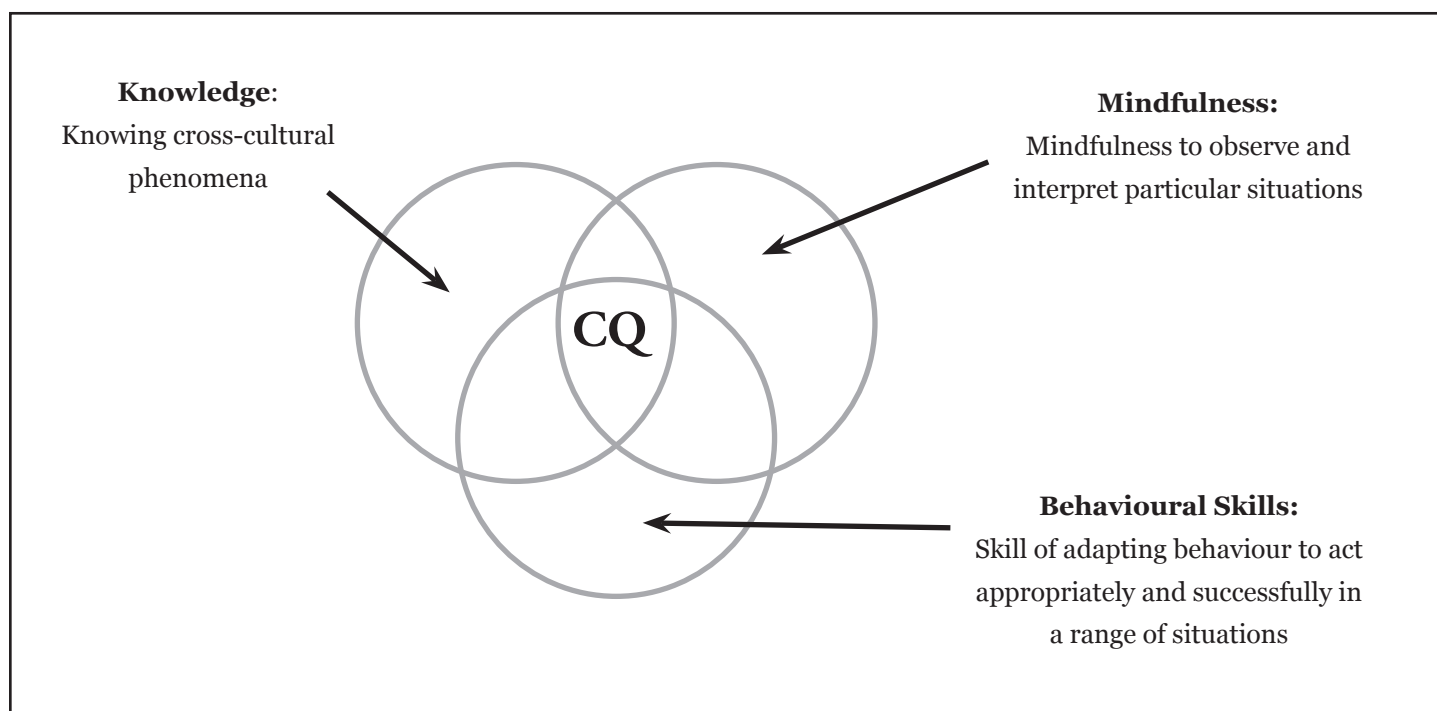
### **Enhanced language training component within the IOBP II program**

The ELT component of the Bridging Two program consists of 19 hours of in-class instruction in integrated skills, 30 hours of instruction in listening and speaking, and 14 hours of instruction in writing development, all of which are taught concurrently with the optometric academic program. Participants also receive language support through 48 hours of uniquely structured clinical lab experiences that accommodate the simultaneous delivery of content and language instruction. In these labs, the optometry professor teaches a clinical technique, which the students then practice in small groups. During the practice stage, the language instructor circulates amongst the groups, providing feedback on language use and cultural appropriacy.

### **Integration of Cultural Intelligence into the ELT curriculum**

The main purpose of the ELT component of the IOBP program was to provide assistance in adopting a culturally bound professional discourse (Wette, 2011) rather than a remedial English course. When planning the curriculum, it was anticipated that students would find it difficult to situate language within the North American cultural context of the optometric profession. Thus, a main objective of the program was to increase cultural awareness along with ameliorating language skills. Thomas and Inkson's (2004) model of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) served to provide a framework for integrating cultural awareness into the ELT curriculum. The framework defines an individual with CQ as being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, learning about it from ongoing interactions, and gradually reshaping thinking to be more sympathetic to the culture. It also calls for behaviour to be more skilled and appropriate when interacting with others from the culture.

Figure 1. The Cultural Intelligence Model. Adapted from Thomas, C. & Inkson, K. (2004).



As Figure 1 shows, the CQ model has three aspects: knowledge, mindfulness, and behavioural skills. In order to teach language and culture through this model, instructors first had to increase student knowledge of cross-cultural phenomena within the optometric profession. This entailed knowing what the culture is, how cultures vary, how culture affects behaviours, how to be self-aware and be aware of others. The second aspect is mindfulness, which can be defined as the ability to pay attention in a reflective and creative way to cues in cross-cultural situations and includes being consciously empathetic. The final stage is based on activating learners' knowledge and mindfulness by developing behavioural skills to be competent across a wide range of intercultural situations. It entails change of previous behaviours in order to adapt.

### Activating cultural knowledge

In accordance with Thomas and Inkson's model, activating cultural knowledge is one of the first steps to developing CQ. To do this in the optometric context, ELT instructors held awareness-raising discussions of the cultural differences in doctor-patient relationships. For example, while the North American culture is patient-centred in that patients can make final health decisions even if their decisions oppose the advice of the doctor, other cultures are doctor-centred, and patients are not expected to question doctors' decisions. This discussion was useful as participants were able to share how doctor-patient relationships are hierarchical in their cultures. In these cultures, doctors are distanced from patients, and do little to explain eye conditions. Further, any explanation has to be in medical terms as it demonstrates the doctor's superior expertise; the use of lay-language is not used



as it reduces the distance between the patient and the doctor. Some of the participants were from cultures where doctor visits are social events and entire families are allowed to be present for eye examinations. Others described situations where diagnoses are kept from patients and are discussed with the family. Further knowledge raising discussions of cultural differences included orientation to time, power distance, and interactions with others as it pertained to the profession (Rosinski, 2003; Storti, 1999).

### Enhancing cultural mindfulness

While students were building awareness of cultural orientation to the optometric profession, it was important to develop activities in the program that allowed the participants to experience the differences in order to increase their mindfulness of a patient-centred practice. Mindfulness became the focus of instruction. Initial in-class instruction included many role-plays. The instructors created activities that required the participants to ask patients questions and clarify information provided by the patient. This allowed instructors to draw participant attention to the grammatical accuracy of question formation and to teach how questions can be asked directly and indirectly. Participants needed to judge when it was appropriate to ask questions formally or informally. Role-plays included questioning a child, a teenager, an elderly person, a nervous patient or an angry patient. These scenarios provided opportunities for students to practice tone and how it should be softened for children and the elderly, for example, while tone may need to be firm with other patients, depending on the situation. Instructional time was spent on eliciting patient medical history information as the participants had difficulty with accurate verb tense use and appropriate word choice. Pronunciation practice was also a focus; the participants became resources for medical terminology, which was listed on the classroom board, and instructors used this authentic language to draw student attention to phoneme articulation, syllable stress, sentence stress, and intonation patterns.

Despite the IOBP participants' well-established knowledge of medical and technical terminology (such as *macular degeneration* and *tonometer*), they needed to be mindful when explaining terminology to patients. This allowed for a focus on the explanation of the terms through the use of lay language. In the patient-centred context, IEHP's should skillfully use lay language to explain diagnoses, procedures and to reassure patients. This was an important aspect of the training with doctor and patient role-plays to explain such conditions as amblyopia and cataracts. It required students to simplify language and use analogies to help with patient understanding. This proved very challenging for the students. While they could easily define terms using medical expressions, they lacked the vocabulary to create analogies. For example, to describe that the beginning of a cataract is like looking through a piece of cloudy glass or using a camera and taking a picture out of focus challenged the IEHPs. Students were taught strategies to paraphrase patient statements and to ask clarification questions in order to improve communication. Students practiced pausing and chunking the language. Some students spoke very rapidly, and the "patient" was often unable to comprehend, especially long utterances. It was found that

role-plays between the student and the instructor were more effective than the student-student role-plays, as students knew the terminology and tended not to use lay language. The “patients” often provided answers for the “doctor” rather than asking typical patient questions. During the teacher-student role-plays, the other students observed and provided peer feedback not only on pronunciation but also on grammatical accuracy and choice of vocabulary. The observing students were mindful and often commented on culturally inappropriate behaviours such as sitting too close to the patient. Overall, the role-plays were very effective teaching tools.

Another area of mindfulness instruction focused on being sensitive to giving bad news to a patient. This again provided practice for tone, pronunciation and grammar during role-plays. Participants learned the importance of knowing the audience and changing the delivery of the news accordingly. They needed to communicate a diagnosis in a way that was neither blunt nor an avoidance of the truth. They achieved this goal by mixing a variety of indirect phrasings (e.g. using conditional verbs, euphemisms, hedging), by means of their prosody (e.g. soft intonation, pausing, having a concerned quality of the voice), and by checking patient understanding and giving the patient time to absorb the news. They learned the importance of body language such as leaning forward to show interest. The desired goal was to give a patient the overall impression of an optometrist who cares and does not want to hurt the patient’s feelings.

Some of the participants found giving bad news a challenging part of the training as there were many cultural differences in this regard. Depending on the culture, bad news could be delivered with either blunt directness or with vague indirectness. Some students came from cultures where saying “my dear,” and sitting close and touching the patient’s knee were the norm, and perhaps the bad news was not made evident. Some struggled with softening tone and some with lay language. In order to help students with this, the optometry professors provided case studies that instructors could use to increase mindfulness. The case studies were written in part as a medical explanation and in part as a doctor-patient dialogue. The language in these studies was extremely valuable for the students as training for their optometric board exams, in which they needed to give an explanation of a procedure using first medical terminology and then again in lay language to a patient. These case studies were used as role-plays for further pronunciation and grammar practice, as well as to increase mindfulness of cultural differences.

The in-class instruction of the IOBP program was not based solely on listening and speaking skills but also on writing skills. The writing curriculum was developed in conjunction with the optometric professors, based on their writing models and was divided into three areas: writing pattern and audience, written feedback, and word choice and collocations. The students’ writing efforts were focused on three types of optometric writing and the corresponding audience: a referral letter, a report letter, and a résumé and cover letter. Referral letters and reports tend to follow a prescribed template used in the profession; consequently, instructors were able to focus on grammatical accuracy and tone of the letter

as well as content. However, résumé and cover letter writing is culturally bound, with the North American cover letter focusing on self-achievement. Some of the students needed to be mindful of not being too humble and downplaying their strengths. Others needed to be aware of not being too flowery in their writing and using phrases such as *Dear Esteemed Sir*. The cover letter and résumé were pieces of authentic writing that the participants could use when applying for their externships and, possibly, their future positions.

In summary, once students had gained the cultural knowledge of the optometric profession and had built mindfulness through extensive role-plays and language practice in the ELT classroom, they were able to demonstrate culturally appropriate behaviour in the clinical labs.

### **Culturally appropriate behaviour in the IOBP clinical labs**

The IOBP labs are a unique form of optometric content-based instruction with ELT support. The physical clinical lab was divided into approximately eight small areas, each of which was complete with the full equipment found in an optometrist's examining room. The discourse was authentic, and the participants needed to reflect upon their behaviour as well as their language. They needed to consolidate knowledge of the discussions about cultural differences with the practice of mindfulness in the ELT classroom as they performed authentic optometric tasks in a culturally appropriate manner.

Each clinical lab began with a lecture, delivered by an optometry professor, on a specific procedure such as testing for glaucoma or using an instrument called a keratometer to measure the curvature of the cornea when fitting a patient for contact lenses. ELT instructors attended these lectures and were able to note important vocabulary or potential grammar that would be needed during the procedure and that could be used and practiced in subsequent ELT classes.

Students were then paired to play the roles of doctor and patient in order to practise the specific eye exam procedures and to use the optometric equipment. Usually, there were two or three optometry professors in attendance to guide the students with the procedure. The ELT instructors observed and gave feedback on pronunciation, body language, cultural appropriacy, and grammar as needed. They also liaised with the optometry professors in order to give further guidance to the participants in terms of lay language or professional cultural appropriacy. Interestingly, the IOBP student playing the role of the patient often told the one playing the role of the doctor how to perform the procedure using technical language, which was contrary to the goal of the task of using lay language with a patient. Accordingly, it was helpful if the ELT instructors played the part of the patient, thereby increasing the authenticity of the situation as they did not have the same knowledge as the students. The ELT instructors were able not only to give feedback on the language and pronunciation but also to indicate if the doctor was too close physically or not thinking about the comfort of the patient; for example, the chinrest might not be at the correct

height. Through these experiences, the ELT instructors built subject knowledge that was pertinent for further classroom instruction.

The labs integrated the three aspects of CQ: knowledge, mindfulness, and behaviour. In their final course evaluations, the IOBP participants stated that the ELT instruction and the practice in the labs was authentic and personalized to the situation. One student commented that the labs “gave me base idea how the future work will be, and pointed out my shortage where I need put my effort on.” Others wrote, “I’m more confident speaking in labs,” and, “this course helped me . . . in counseling patients.”

### **The Optometric English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA) Development and Use**

In order to test the impact of the ELT, a test was developed to assess the participants’ pre- and post-program language skills. The OELPA is unique as it is a fully optometry-specific English language proficiency assessment that tests all four language skills in optometric contexts. (The Occupational English Test also tests optometric knowledge, but only the writing and speaking skills are occupation-specific with listening and reading skills being common across healthcare professions.) From the time of its first administration, there was consistent pressure to use the assessment for purposes for which it was not intended. Careful delineation and constant communication of the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment were required to situate it appropriately within the bridging program. It was initially developed for the purpose of determining the impact of the ELT program on Bridging Two participants. Its development was not funded through a CIC grant but was undertaken by ELT instructors who wished to determine the effectiveness of the ELT component for the Bridging Two participants. The possibility of using standardized tests for this purpose was considered and rejected, as none of the available standardized tests were fully optometry-specific, and the cost of the standardized tests prohibited their use as pre- and post-program tests. Other theorists have noted the limitations of standardized tests for workplace-specific contexts (Douglas, 2000; Ekkens & Winke, 2009; Grove & Brown, 2001; Wette, 2011). The development of the OELPA was informed by the Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN) and the International Pharmacy Graduate Language Assessment (IPGLA), both of which were developed with CIC grant assistance. Williams presented details of the development at the 2008 conference entitled *Moving Forward Together: A Conference on Higher-Level Language Training*, sponsored by CIC at Niagara Falls, Ontario. Briefly, the stages of the OELPA development included information from the language needs analysis, completed in conjunction with optometry professors, the elaboration of test specifications, item writing, rubric generation, pilot testing, the development of scoring and reporting procedures, and content maintenance and revision.

The test assesses all four language skills. The listening test tasks include listening to a video of a routine visit to an optometrist and to an optometric lecture; the reading tasks include reading a patient care record, a case study, a journal article, an optometric newsletter, and

a textbook excerpt. Test-takers listen and read, and respond to multiple-choice questions. This item format is deemed appropriate in these sections of the OELPA as the CACO exam is composed of multiple-choice questions. In the writing section, test-takers respond in writing to a short case study and write a letter of referral. In the speaking section, test-takers answer general questions and play the role of an optometrist in an interactive doctor-patient role-play that requires them to both clarify a patient problem and explain a diagnosis. And finally, test-takers analyse an optometry-related data set and respond orally.

From 2007 to 2011, the OELPA was used as a pre- and post-program test to measure changes in workplace-specific language proficiency. The assessment was administered at the beginning and end of the initial 22 weeks of lectures and clinical instruction, just prior to the start of the 26-week externship placements. As the externship positions were widely distributed across Canada, it was most practical to administer the post-program assessment before the participants left for their externships. Scores were reported to Bridging Two participants within two weeks. While the scores were shared with the IOBP administrators and the participants, the sole purpose of the scores was to demonstrate whether the ELT component of the program had a positive impact on the participants. In fact, the scores did demonstrate that the participation in the Bridging Two program improved their workplace-specific English language proficiency skills, with most participants showing gains. The scores were used to determine neither entry into the program nor exit from it. They were used for a low stakes purpose only, which was appropriate for a test that had not been statistically evaluated for validity or reliability.

In 2013, the IOBP administrators asked if the OELPA could be used in the PLAR process. Instead of using the assessment only with program participants, they wished to administer the test to all program candidates. This was a much larger candidate pool; it included candidates for both Bridging One and Two programs, and many of the candidates in this larger group were from English-speaking backgrounds. Many were Canadians who had studied optometry in Great Britain and were returning to Canada to practise. This was not a group of candidates who had been anticipated at the time of the OELPA development. Further, the IOBP administrators suggested that the assessment scores be used to screen candidates for the program, effectively requesting that the assessment be used for high stakes admissions purposes. Given the limitations of the assessment, the ELT instructors could not agree to this use of the test. They carefully delineated the strengths and weaknesses of the test for the program administrators, indicating that, without statistical analyses (which would require additional resources), the test could not be used for high-stakes purposes.

For the following three years, the OELPA was administered to all program candidates during the PLA period; however, the ELT instructors resisted the request to use the test for high-stakes purposes for admission. Instead, the test scores were used to identify successful candidates that might benefit from the ELT component of the IOBP program. Prior to

this date, all Bridging Two candidates had attended the ELT classes. However, from 2013 forward, candidates who were admitted to either the Bridging One or Two programs could be exempted from the ELT component of the programs by scoring above the 75 per cent cut score on the OELPA.

This was a compromise in the use of the test scores that resulted in the OELPA being used for “medium-stakes” purposes. The test scores were provided to the IOBP program administrators only for the candidates who were admitted to the program. This ensured that OELPA scores were not used for admissions purposes. Those candidates who scored below the cut score were required to attend the ELT component of the Bridging programs. This requirement had a considerable impact on participants as attendance necessitated a time commitment. However, the potential for high-stakes impact was reduced as the ELT instructors were able to modify who attended if they felt the test had erroneously placed a participant in the ELT class or excluded a participant from the class. For example, if a test score placed a participant in the ELT class, yet after working with the participant the ELT instructor felt that he or she was sufficiently proficient not to need the class, that participant could be exempted from the class at that point. This option of teacher-mediated placement prevented the test scores from being used in a fully high-stakes manner.

In 2015, the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) became concerned that the IOBP program administration was delivering not only the Bridging programs, but also the PLAR process, including the OELPA. The CAO believed this opened the program to possible perception of conflict of interest. The Association recommended that the PLAR process be managed by an arm’s length organization, which would administer all the assessments (both clinical and knowledge-based) and the OELPA. This was yet another call for the OELPA to be used for a high-stakes purpose. Fortunately, it appears as though the acquiring organization is in a position to devote the resources required for statistical evaluation of the validity and reliability of the OELPA and for further test development. Under these circumstances, new versions of the test could be developed that may be used for high-stakes purposes.

In our experience with the development and administration of the OELPA, we have found consistent pressure to use the assessment in ways that did not align with its original purpose. Designed with the intention of determining ELT program effectiveness, there was administrative pull to use the test for high-stakes admission purposes. Throughout the trajectory of the Bridging Two program, appropriate positioning of the OELPA required clear communication between the IOBP administrators and the ELT specialists. Without open communication about the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment, the test could have been pushed into use for a purpose that would have been indefensible.

Our experiences may resonate with other occupation-specific test developers and administrators. It is hardly unusual to maintain that tests should be used only for their intended purposes; however, the need to guard against administrative pressure to use the test for unintended purposes was eye opening. The only solution to this pressure is to work



consistently to communicate why the assessment tool can be used for some purposes and not for others, and this requires constant collaboration with the content experts.

### Conclusion

The IOBP program is unique in the cultural orientation of its ELT component, and the simultaneous delivery of content and language instruction in the clinical labs. Another noteworthy aspect of this program is the persistent need to resist ongoing administrative pressure to use the optometry-specific test for increasingly high-stakes purposes. As our experiences have shown, the collaboration of language specialists (both ELT instructors and test developers) with the optometry professors was key to building a strong language program with a cultural focus on the optometric profession and to maintaining the appropriate use of the OELPA within the program and PLAR process. Since the inception of the IOBP program, the pass rate of bridging program participants has improved significantly. In 2013-2014 (the most recent year for which data is available), the CACO success rate of the students who completed the Bridging Two program was 73 percent. The CACO pass rate for the 2013-2014 cohort of combined Bridging One and Two participants was 81 percent (Turnour, 2015). This is one measure of the success of the IOBP program. We hope our experiences may be transferable to other workplace bridging programs and therefore useful to a broader spectrum of language and occupation-specific specialists.

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# LEARNING ALL THE PARTS OF THE PUZZLE

## Focused instruction of formulaic sequences through the lens of activity theory

By Lina AlHassan, Carleton University

### Abstract

The role of focused instruction of formulaic sequences—defined as continuous and discontinuous strings of words that are highly frequent in academic discourse (Hyland, 2008; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010)—in improving second language (L2) learners' academic skills has been the centre of recent focus in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. However, only a few studies have investigated this role empirically (e.g. AlHassan & Wood, 2015; Cortes, 2006). Moreover, there has not been any attempt, to my knowledge, to explore English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors' perspectives on this teaching approach. This mixed methods pilot study adapted key concepts proposed in Activity Theory (AT) to probe the effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences in augmenting EAP students' academic reading and writing skills and to explore EAP instructors' perspectives on this teaching approach. The results showed that focused instruction of formulaic sequences improves academic reading and writing skills, but the instructors had mixed views about its effectiveness.

**Keywords:** focused instruction of formulaic sequences, EAP students' academic reading and writing skills, EAP instructors' perspectives

Since the revolutionary results of corpus linguistics research in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which empirically demonstrated that between 30% and 50% of the language produced is composed of formulaic sequences (Conklin & Schmitt, 2012; Erman & Warren, 2000), many experts in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have argued that formulaic sequences should be placed at the core of classroom materials and addressed explicitly in the language classroom (Cowie, 1992; Granger & Meunier, 2008; Paquot & Granger, 2012). Such an instructional approach may promote the acquisition of formulaic sequences, improve L2 users' language production and comprehension, and positively affect L2 users' evaluation at the academic level (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Handl, 2008). Nevertheless, an empirical investigation of the acquisition of formulaic sequences and its effects on L2 learners' academic reading and writing skills has not been attempted to any great extent yet. Nor have there been any attempts to explore English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors' perspectives on the effectiveness of an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences.

To address these two gaps in the literature, a mixed methods study was designed. The study, which had a sequential explanatory design (QUAN → qual), was designed based on two models proposed in Activity Theory (AT) and conducted in an EAP program at a large Canadian community college in an attempt to inquire into the effectiveness of such an instructional approach in augmenting EAP students' academic reading and writing skills. During the quantitative phase, a number of formulaic sequences were taught for a total of ten hours over a two-week period, reading and writing tasks were collected from 12 EAP students at three different points in time, and the collected data were evaluated by three EAP instructors who were interviewed during the qualitative phase.

### Literature Review

As early as the 1990s, several linguists started to question the view of language production as being entirely creative each time it is produced; such a view of language prioritized grammar instruction and marginalized vocabulary instruction in SLA research and methodology for decades (Lewis, 1997; Zimmerman, 1997). The influence of this view dominated SLA research and methodology until the emergence of corpus linguistics research, whose revolutionary results have revealed the fallacy of the notion of absolute creativity (Barlow, 2000; Sinclair, 1991; Weinert, 1995). By focusing on the way language users actually utilize their linguistic knowledge in language production rather than on the knowledge which allows them, in principle, to generate an infinite number of utterances based on syntactic rules, corpus linguists have demonstrated empirically that language, whether spoken or written, is neither entirely creative nor composed afresh each time it is produced; rather, it is marked by the frequent occurrence of formulaic sequences which are, for the most part, register- and genre-bound (Cortes, 2004; Erman & Warren, 2000; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003).

The results of corpus linguistics research have had strong implications for SLA research and pedagogy. Experts in SLA have argued that since language production is at least partially formulaic, formulaic sequences should constitute a major component of classroom materials, especially in academic contexts (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Granger, 1998). The rationale for emphasizing the importance of integrating formulaic sequences into classroom materials in academic contexts has been mainly attributed to the possible positive effects of the acquisition of formulaic sequences on academic reading and writing proficiency (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Jones & Haywood, 2004).

Several experts in SLA have claimed that mastering a wide range of formulaic sequences may improve L2 learners' writing proficiency. Since achieving proficiency in a register is contingent on language users' ability to comply with the established conventions of that register, L2 learners need to master the elements that characterize academic writing in order to be identified as proficient writers (Ellis, 2008; Verstraten, 1992). Among the defining linguistic characteristics of academic writing, as demonstrated in corpus linguistics, is the frequent occurrence of formulaic sequences that function as important building blocks of academic discourse (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Hyland, 2008). Without mastering a wide range of the formulaic sequences that are recurrent in academic writing, L2 writers

may produce academic texts that do not precisely express the intended message and that are viewed as lacking proficiency or idiomaticity (Laufer & Waldman, 2011). As Coxhead and Byrd (2007) put it, academic vocabulary, both individual words and formulaic sequences, can be seen as “a language bar or barrier that students need to transcend in order to move successfully from everyday ways of expressing meaning to the specialized, ‘high-status’ academic language” (p. 132).

Mastering a wide range of formulaic sequences may also promote L2 users’ academic reading skills. In addition to enriching L2 users’ linguistic repertoire, formulaic sequences promote reading efficacy in that they require less processing time than their creatively constructed counterparts (Ellis, 2012). In this respect, “since EAP courses are meant to... [prepare] non-native speakers of English to deal with the demands of post secondary academic reading and writing,... they should deal with the formulaic sequences most frequently used to construct academic text in English” (Wood, 2010a, p. 88).

Because of the complex nature of formulaic sequences, which are either partially transparent or fully opaque, and L2 users’ tendency to disregard their occurrence in input, an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences has been strongly recommended in literature (AlHassan & Wood, 2015; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Conklin & Schmitt, 2012; Lewis, 1997). Some experts in SLA, therefore, suggest that language teachers should explicitly teach the formulaic sequences that account for their students’ needs and integrate this language phenomenon into activities which promote their acquisition and internalization into L2 learners’ linguistic repertoires (Jones & Haywood, 2004; Lewis, 1997).

In spite of the extensive focus that has been placed on the effectiveness of an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences in augmenting L2 users’ performance in academic contexts, an empirical investigation of such a role is rarely attempted in research. Moreover, although language instructors play a key role in this proposed instructional approach, no attempt has been made to account for their perspectives on its effectiveness. To help address these two gaps in literature, a mixed methods research study was designed based on Engeström’s (1987) version of AT.

### Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory

AT originates in Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory, which depicts higher psychological functions as a triangle involving a stimulus, a response, and mediating tools—a depiction that constituted the seeds from which several generations of AT were developed and each of which included three elements: the subject, the object, and mediating artefacts (Artemeva, 2008; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). As a learning theory, AT conceptualizes learning as an expanding process, that is, a social and collective activity rather than an individual action. Effective instruction is, thus, not an individual task “but a *whole cycle of activity generation, of learning activity...* [which can] be depicted as the general cycle of expansion,” a cycle composed of five phases that help guide pedagogical intervention (Engeström, 1987, p. 173).

After identifying, in the first phase, a need state which arises when a need cannot be satisfied by the existing activity system, instructors, in the second phase, define the problem, its causes, and possible solutions (Engeström, 1987). The third phase, in turn, involves the identification of the object (i.e., the outcome) in order to develop a new model to help mold the object of the activity. In the fourth phase, the subject of the activity (e.g. a group of students) starts to perform certain actions that are in line with the proposed model of the new activity; in the last phase, the emerging activity system competes with the existing one until it fades away or “succeeds in creating its own social infrastructure” (Engeström, 1987, p. 174).

Engeström’s (1987) proposed cycle of expansion was applied to this study as a model in order to identify the 12 participants’ need state (difficulties in reporting graphical information), analyse its causes (limited range of formulaic sequences typical of this task) and possible solutions (teaching formulaic sequences explicitly), develop instruments that may model the object of the activity (selecting formulaic sequences typical of the task under investigation and developing instruments), and introduce the instruments and test them.

In addition to introducing a model for pedagogical intervention, Engeström (1987) proposes a cycle for developmental research that has five phases akin to those presented in the general cycle of expansion to guide research design. The researcher, in this cycle, provides a description of the subjects’ problem; pinpoints the subsequent developmental phases along with the contradictions that may result from the introduction of new models; identifies a springboard which comprises a language that organizes and models the object; records the contradictions that arise between old and new activity systems and finds solutions for them; and, finally, reports the results (Engeström, 1987). The cycle of developmental research was applied to this study as a heuristic model along with the general cycle of expansion in order to guide the study through its multiple phases and answer the following research questions:

1. Will EAP students acquire formulaic sequences as a result of focused instruction and utilize them when approaching similar writing tasks that relate to different themes?
2. Will focused instruction of formulaic sequences help the participants reduce the number of mistakes they make and receive better evaluation for different reading and writing tasks?
3. Will the increase, if any, in the use of formulaic sequences positively correlate with better evaluation for different writing tasks but negatively correlate with mistakes?
4. In what ways and to what extent, if any, does such an intervention improve the participants’ academic writing skills?
5. What are the perspectives of other EAP instructors on such an instructional approach?

### Methods

#### Design and rationale

To answer the above-listed research questions, a mixed methods study that has an explanatory sequential design with a dominant quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (QUAN → qual) was designed, a design that was driven by the objectives of this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007). That is, applying AT as a heuristic framework in order to (a) deliver the pedagogical intervention which may highlight the effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences and (b) explore EAP instructors' perspectives on such an instructional approach necessitates the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data to “overcome the limitations of one method” and “provide a more complete understanding of the research problem” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 8).

#### Participants

The pool of participants comprised 12 EAP students and three EAP instructors. The 12 EAP students, henceforth referred to as student-participants, were six males and six females from four different first language backgrounds. During the training period, they were all registered in an intermediate EAP program, five courses in total, at a large Canadian community college. Four courses focused on one language skill (i.e., reading, writing, listening, or speaking), but the fifth course, during which the intervention occurred, was an introduction to the academic version of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. The three EAP instructors (two females and one male), hereafter referred to as rater-participants, were teaching EAP at the same college during the training period. The researcher, therefore, used convenience sampling strategies by recruiting the EAP students who were registered in one section; she also applied homogeneous sampling strategies by recruiting three instructors who shared one characteristic, having taught EAP at the same community college for at least six months when the study was conducted (Dörnyei, 2007).

#### Instruments

The instruments designed for this study can be classified into instruments used for data collection and instruments used during the training period.

**Instruments used for data collection.** Different types of instruments were designed in order to collect quantitative and qualitative data for this study. The researcher first designed six prompts for quantitative data collection: three different reading prompts and three different writing prompts that presented changing trends over a period of time, whether graphically or textually (see Appendix A for sample reading and writing prompts). The rationale for choosing such a task is to account for the students' needs at this level (i.e., mastering one type of the first writing task for the academic IELTS test). It is worth noting that different reading and writing prompts were assigned at three different points in time in different order: at the beginning of the training period (a pretest), at the end of the training period (a posttest), and fifteen days after the training period (a delayed posttest). Administering different prompts at each stage of data collection in different order aimed at controlling for what Dörnyei (2007) refers to as experience effects (i.e., mastering a task due to

redoing it) and reducing the effects of the task itself, which may affect the student-participants' performance due to the difficulty of the topic or the amount of information reported in a particular prompt. In addition, the researcher designed a rubric to guide the rater-participants' evaluation of the writing tasks. She also developed five interview questions that were used for the qualitative data collection.

**Instruments used during the training period.** In addition to the instruments used for data collection, the researcher designed 11 worksheets to introduce 63 formulaic sequences. The target formulaic sequences (see Appendix B) were extracted from lists deemed to be formulaic in previous research (e.g. Hyland, 2008; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010) and the academic sub-corpus of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) by checking their frequency (30 occurrences per one million words). The 11 worksheets were modelled on the suggestions of AlHassan and Wood (2015), Lewis (1997), and Wood (2010b), among others, and they presented examples and activities (i.e., sentence writing/rewriting, cloze, and dictogloss) that relate to different topics in order to reduce the possibility of mere memorization of the sentences presented (see Appendix C for sample worksheets).

### Procedure

The study consisted of multiple stages during which intervention and data collection took place. Prior to the training period, the researcher, who was also the instructor, had each student-participant complete a reading and a writing task (the pretest) in order to assess the student-participants' comprehension and production of graphical information. The researcher, then, explicitly taught the target formulaic sequences following consciousness-raising, a teaching strategy that is adapted to explicitly address less salient language forms in that a language form is practiced and produced after being explicitly taught (Ellis, 2002). During the training period, which lasted for 10 hours over a two-week period, the student-participants practiced the target formulaic sequences using the 11 worksheets. At the end of the training period, each student-participant was asked to complete a different reading and writing task (the posttest) to identify any improvement in their reading comprehension and writing production. The delayed posttest, in turn, was administered in order to evaluate the student-participants' performance 15 days after the training period.

The collected data were evaluated by different raters. The collected writing samples were blindly evaluated by the three rater-participants (i.e., they did not know which texts were produced before or after the training period) using the rubric designed for this study. The reading tasks, in turn, were evaluated by the researcher and another EAP instructor, hereafter referred to as a co-rater, who did not teach at the same college, in order to eliminate any possible identification of the student-participants based on handwriting and avoid biased evaluation on the part of the researcher. The researcher, then, conducted a semi-structured interview with each rater-participant to obtain feedback on the student-participants' writing and to explore the rater-participants' perspectives on the instructional approach used in this study.



**Quantitative data analysis.** The collected writing tasks along with the raters' evaluations of the reading and writing tasks were analysed quantitatively. To start with, the writing tasks collected from the student-participants were manually coded following quantitative content analysis, a coding method that is guided by a list of predefined categories to count the frequency and occurrence of words or phrases (Dörnyei, 2007). By applying this coding method, the researcher counted all the target formulaic sequences that the student-participants used in the textual data including the repeated ones (i.e., frequency) and identified the different types of formulaic sequences (i.e., occurrence). Moreover, the mistakes made by each student-participant were also counted. It is worth noting that the term *mistakes* is used to collectively refer to errors—"deviation in learner language which results from lack of knowledge of the correct rule" (Ellis, 1994, p. 701)—and mistakes—"failure to utilize a known system correctly" (Brown, 2000, p. 217)—because investigating the nature of linguistic inaccuracy was beyond the scope of this research study. Furthermore, the raw scores for the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences, the number of mistakes, and the evaluation of the reading and writing tasks were statistically tested on the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 by computing Cronbach's alpha, descriptive statistics, paired-samples *t*-tests, and correlation coefficients.

**Qualitative data analysis.** The interviews were analysed based on constructivist grounded theory following line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). The coding process consisted of two phases: after an initial coding phase that helped generate codes for data, the focused coding phase was intended to select the most useful codes; similar codes were grouped into theoretical categories under unifying themes (Charmaz, 2006).

### Findings

#### Internal consistency coefficient

Cronbach's alpha was computed on the evaluation of the reading and writing tasks. The results displayed a strong level of internal consistency among the scores for the EAP rater-participants' evaluation of the writing tasks ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $n = 3$ ) and those for the raters' evaluation of the reading tasks ( $\alpha = .97$ ,  $n = 2$ ).

#### Descriptive statistics

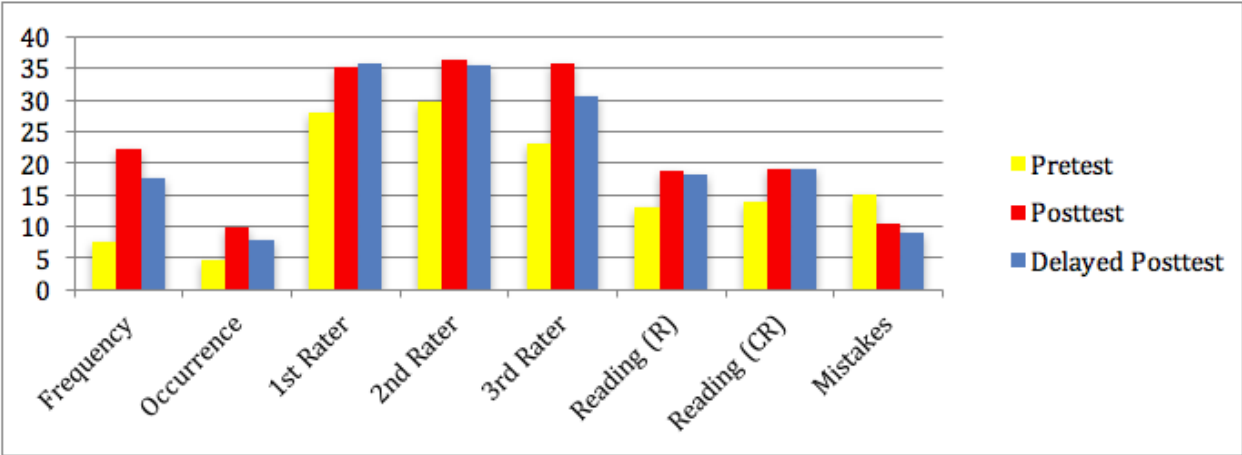
The mean scores of the frequency and occurrence of formulaic sequences, the evaluation of the reading and writing tasks, and the mistakes made at each production stage were calculated. The results, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 below, indicated that the student-participants used more formulaic sequences in, received better evaluation for, and made fewer mistakes in the posttest and the delayed posttest when compared to the pretest.



Table 1  
Mean Scores at Three Different Points in Time

	PRETEST	POSTTEST	DELAYED POSTTEST
Frequency	7.41	22.33	17.60
Occurrence	4.58	9.77	7.80
1st Rater	27.91	35.22	35.90
2nd Rater	29.83	36.38	35.35
3rd Rater	23	35.88	30.60
Reading (R)	12.91	18.75	18.25
Reading (CR)	13.75	19.06	19
Mistakes	15.16	10.55	9.10

Figure 1. Mean scores



**Paired-samples *t*-tests.** In order to reveal whether the differences in the mean scores represented in Figure 1 above were statistically significant and, hence, answer the first two research questions guiding this study, eight paired-samples *t*-tests were computed<sup>1</sup>.

To answer the first research question, two paired-samples *t*-tests were computed on the raw scores for the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences. The results of the paired-samples *t*-test computed on the scores for the frequency of the target formulaic sequences indicated that the increase in the number of formulaic sequences used in the posttest ( $M = 22.33$ ,  $SD = 7.38$ ) was statistically significant when compared with the pretest ( $M = 7.41$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ );  $t(8) = -4.81$ ,  $p = .001$  and the magnitude of the difference was very large ( $\eta^2 = .74$ ). Another statistically significant increase was detected in the delayed posttest ( $M = 17.60$ ,  $SD = 5.91$ ) when compared to the pretest ( $M = 7.41$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ );  $t(9) = -3.90$ ,  $p = .004$ , and the magnitude of the difference was very large

1 Note that no correction for multiple correlations was performed because the tests were few, preplanned, and motivated by the design of the experiment.

( $\eta^2 = .62$ ). Furthermore, the absence of any statistically significant difference in the scores for the frequency of the target formulaic sequences in the posttest and the delayed posttest ( $p > .05$ ) indicated that the student-participants utilized approximately the same number of formulaic sequences in their production after the training period.

Another paired-samples *t*-test run on the raw scores for the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences showed that the increase in the number of formulaic sequences used by the student-participants after the training period was due to utilizing different types of formulaic sequences rather than repeating the same ones in their writing production. This can be inferred from the statistically significant increase in the scores for the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences in the posttest ( $M = 9.77, SD = 3.23$ );  $t(8) = -3.57, p = .007$ , ( $\eta^2 = .61$ ) and the delayed posttest ( $M = 7.80, SD = 1.81$ );  $t(9) = -3.30, p = .009$ , ( $\eta^2 = .44$ ) when compared with the pretest ( $M = 4.58, SD = 2.10$ ). Moreover, the student-participants' use of different types of formulaic sequences after the training period was relatively stable ( $p > .05$ ).

To answer the second research question, paired-samples *t*-tests were computed on the scores for the number of mistakes and the evaluation of the reading and writing tasks. The results of the paired-samples *t*-test computed on the scores for the mistakes made indicated that the student-participants made fewer mistakes after the training period, which is evident in the statistically significant decrease in the scores for the mistakes made from ( $M = 15.16, SD = 6.79$ ) for the pretest to ( $M = 10.55, SD = 4.66$ );  $t(8) = 3.31, p = .01$ , ( $\eta^2 = .57$ ) for the posttest and again to ( $M = 9.10, SD = 4.30$ );  $t(9) = 2.83, p = .02$ , ( $\eta^2 = .47$ ) for the delayed posttest. More importantly, the absence of any statistically significant difference in the scores for the posttest and the delayed posttest ( $p > .05$ ) indicated that the participants' performance after the training period remained relatively stable.

The paired-samples *t*-tests computed on the scores for the researcher's and the co-rater's evaluations of the reading tasks collected from the student-participants at three different points in time indicated that the increase in the mean scores for both the researcher's and the co-rater's evaluation was statistically significant. In other words, the researcher assigned higher grades for the posttest ( $M = 18.75, SD = 2.31$ );  $t(7) = -2.56, p = .03$ , ( $\eta^2 = .48$ ) and the delayed posttest ( $M = 18.25, SD = 3.73$ );  $t(9) = -2.86, p = .019$ , ( $\eta^2 = .47$ ) when compared to the pretest ( $M = 12.91, SD = 6.29$ ). Similarly, the co-rater assigned better evaluation for the posttest ( $M = 19.06, SD = 1.86$ );  $t(7) = -2.60, p = .35$ , ( $\eta^2 = .46$ ) and the delayed posttest ( $M = 19, SD = 2.41$ );  $t(9) = -2.97, p = .01$ , ( $\eta^2 = .49$ ) when compared to the pretest ( $M = 13.75, SD = 6.16$ ). Moreover, the absence of any statistically significant difference in the scores for both the researcher's and the co-rater's evaluation of the posttest and the delayed posttest ( $p > .05$ ) indicated that the student-participants received very similar evaluations for the two reading tasks they completed after the training period.

As for the evaluation which the student-participants received for the writing tasks they completed at three different points in time, the increase in the scores for the first and third rater-participants' evaluation of the posttest and delayed posttest was statistically

significant. That is, there was a statistically significant increase in the scores for the first rater-participant's evaluation from ( $M = 27.91$ ,  $SD = 5.35$ ) for the pretest to ( $M = 35.22$ ,  $SD = 5.11$ );  $t(8) = -2.62$ ,  $p = .031$ , ( $\eta^2 = .46$ ) for the posttest and to ( $M = 35.90$ ,  $SD = 6.47$ );  $t(9) = -5.66$ ,  $p = .000$ , ( $\eta^2 = .78$ ) for the delayed posttest. Likewise, the difference in the scores for the evaluation assigned by the third rater-participant for the posttest ( $M = 35.88$ ,  $SD = 4.01$ );  $t(8) = -4.64$ ,  $p = .002$ , ( $\eta^2 = .72$ ) and the delayed posttest ( $M = 30.60$ ,  $SD = 8.88$ );  $t(9) = -3.34$ ,  $p = .009$ , ( $\eta^2 = .55$ ) was statistically significant when compared to the pretest ( $M = 23$ ,  $SD = 5.75$ ).

Different results were obtained when computing a paired-samples  $t$ -test on the scores for the evaluation of the second rater-participant. While the difference in the scores for the second rater-participant's evaluation of the posttest was not statistically significant when compared to the pretest ( $p > .05$ ), there was a statistically significant increase in the scores for her evaluation of the delayed posttest ( $M = 35.35$ ,  $SD = 4.80$ );  $t(9) = -3.58$ ,  $p = .007$ , ( $\eta^2 = .58$ ) when compared with the pretest ( $M = 29.83$ ,  $SD = 5.10$ ). Moreover, the absence of any statistically significant difference in the scores for the three rater-participants' evaluation of the posttest and the delayed posttest ( $p > .05$ ) demonstrated that the student-participants received very similar grades for the two writing tasks they completed after the training period.

**Correlation coefficients.** Four correlation coefficients were computed to identify any possible association between the above-mentioned variables and, thus, answer the third research question guiding this study.

**Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients.** Three Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed on the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and the evaluation of the three rater-participants. The first, compared the raw scores for the frequency of the target formulaic sequences with the first rater-participant's evaluation. It revealed a strong positive correlation that was statistically significant ( $r = .56$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 31$ ), suggesting that 31% of the increase in the first rater-participant's evaluation was associated with an increase in the frequency of the target formulaic sequences. There was another significant positive correlation between the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and the first rater-participant's evaluation ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 31$ ), indicating that 21% of the increase in her evaluation correlated with the increase in the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences.

Very similar results were obtained for the second and the third rater-participants' evaluation of the writing tasks. In other words, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the frequency of the target formulaic sequences and the evaluation of the second rater-participant ( $r = .68$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 31$ ), with 46% of association between the variables, and the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and her evaluation ( $r = .59$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 31$ ), with a 34% association. Likewise, there was a statistically significant strong positive correlation between the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and the evaluation of the third rater-participant ( $r = .70$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 31$ ) and

( $r = .62, p < .05, n = 31$ ) respectively, indicating that 49% of the increase in the evaluation was associated with the increase in the frequency of the target formulaic sequences and 38% of the increase in the evaluation correlated with the increase in the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences.

**Spearman's rho.** Because of normality violations, Spearman's rho was carried out to reveal any possible association between the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and the number of mistakes made at each production stage. The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between the frequency of the target formulaic sequences and the number of mistakes made in writing ( $r_s = -.56, p < .05, n = 31$ ), suggesting that 31% of the decrease in mistakes was associated with the increase in the frequency of the target formulaic sequences. Another statistically significant negative correlation was identified between the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences and the number of mistakes ( $r_s = -.40, p < .05, n = 31$ ), indicating that 16% of the decrease in the mistakes correlated with the increase in the occurrence of the target formulaic sequences.

In a nutshell, the quantitative results indicated that focused instruction of formulaic sequences helped the student-participants (a) successfully acquire a considerable number of the target formulaic sequences, (b) augment their writing production with different types of formulaic sequences, (c) reduce the number of mistakes they made, and (d) receive better evaluation for the reading and writing tasks they completed after the training period. Moreover, using more formulaic sequences in the student-participants' writing production was associated with higher grades and fewer mistakes.

### Qualitative results

The qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed some commonalities and contradictions in the rater-participants' responses to the questions about the level and areas of improvement in the student-participants' writing production and their perspectives on the effectiveness of an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences. These responses were clustered under two unifying themes: improved writing proficiency and different perspectives on focused instruction of formulaic sequences. This answered the fourth and fifth research questions, respectively.

**Improved writing proficiency.** Despite the fact that the three rater-participants explained that some of the texts produced by the student-participants were of better quality than others, they disagreed on the level and areas of improvement. That is, while the first and the third rater-participants thought that there was an obvious improvement in some written texts, the second rater-participant noted that there was limited improvement in the students' writing. For example, after revealing the order in which the writing samples were collected to Mike, the third rater-participant, during the interview, he referred to an obvious improvement in the student's writing: "So the first sample [the posttest] I gave a really high score, the second sample [the delayed posttest] was good, and the third sample [the pretest] was really poor and weak...so the student really improved!" Similarly, Tina,

the first rater-participant, explained that most of the students showed an improvement in their writing samples: “Absolutely! I would say in 90% of the papers that I went through I saw a huge improvement.” On the other hand, DG, the second rater-participant, explained that the student-participants’ writing skills slightly improved.

As for the areas of improvement, the three rater-participants disagreed on the aspects that improved the most in the students-participants’ writing. Tina said that, in some writing samples, the student-participants exhibited better performance in regards to content and lexical choice, but a limited syntactic improvement: “In terms of content, in terms of context-required words... in terms of language usage, they had huge improvement... to me, it was so impressive, but... in terms of grammar, I would not say it was a huge improvement.” Mike, in turn, suggested that some writing samples showed obvious improvement in structure, lexical choice and content: “There were some I would definitely say crossed not only the content but also the language used to express that content... In a way, the language was good, the structure was good, and they actually answered the question.” DG, however, explained that there was some improvement in grammar: “I did see some improvement in grammar.”

**Different perspectives on focused instruction of formulaic sequences.** The interviews revealed the three rater-participants’ different perspectives on an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences in EAP programs. Tina thought that such a teaching approach is highly effective for teaching reading, writing and speaking, but not listening:

The phrase is so useful and I would love to use it for my students.... I would say it is transferable from writing to reading comprehension and speaking as well.... Compared to speaking or I would say writing, it could have less effect [on listening].

DG, on the other hand, noted that such an instructional approach may have some advantages, but she emphasized the importance of time and stress-free contexts to learn the target language. As she put it, “You know, teaching itself has its benefits, but they also need time to work with it, and they need time to make errors and feel comfortable without having the fear of having the red mark all over the place.”

To Mike, the effectiveness of teaching formulaic sequences is register-bound; that is, it might be effective in some writing tasks but not others. He also added that only by applying it to other writing tasks and analysing its effects could one reach a conclusion: “Reports, maybe, yes, because reports are pretty similar, so it makes sense to teach that register-related phrases, but I don’t know about the other writing tasks..., but, like I said, it needs to be tried on different writing tasks.”

### Discussion

#### Successful acquisition of formulaic sequences

The results suggested that an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences enhanced their acquisition and promoted the student-participants' tendency to use different formulaic sequences in their writing production. Such effectiveness can be inferred from the statistically significant increase in the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences in the posttest and the delayed posttest when compared to the pretest. Such an increase was also obvious to the first and third rater-participants. Mike, for example, explained that similar phrases were used by almost all the participants: "Mostly, what I saw they used ah... the vocabulary was very similar." These results adduce further evidence in support of the effectiveness of an explicit instructional approach to formulaic sequences in augmenting their acquisition and promoting L2 users' tendency to utilize them in language production (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009). They are also in line with Engeström's (1987) suggestion that using interventional instruments (e.g. worksheets) represents an "aspect of guided or even imposed acquisition" regardless of the type of tasks in which the subject is involved (p. 154).

The manual coding also revealed the student-participants' ability to successfully use the formulaic sequences that are typical of the writing task (e.g. *increased dramatically*) rather than randomly using memorized formulaic sequences from the worksheets. In other words, the worksheets included formulaic sequences relating to reporting graphical information and other writing tasks (e.g. compare/contrast essays); however, the student-participants only used those that were typical of reporting graphical information. Such a tendency is particularly important because, as Handl (2008) suggests, the inaccurate use of formulaic sequences has negative effects on students' writing akin to those of avoiding them.

#### Formulaic sequences and better achievement

The results of the study showed that the student-participants received higher grades for the reading and writing tasks produced after the training period. These results were evident in the statistically significant increase in the scores for almost all the raters' evaluation of the reading and writing tasks. More importantly, the increase in the scores for the rater-participants' evaluation of the writing tasks was associated with the increase in the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences. Not only do such results confirm Wray's (2002) suggestion that a rich repertoire of formulaic sequences may improve L2 users' reading and writing proficiency, but they also support Engeström's (1987) view that "reading and writing are such abstract or indirect instruments that they cannot be learned by simply participating in work activity" (p. 109).

#### Formulaic sequences and increased linguistic accuracy

The results indicated that the student-participants exhibited increased linguistic accuracy, both grammatical and lexical, in the writing tasks produced after the training period. This was evident in the statistically significant decrease in the scores for the number of mistakes made in the posttest and delayed posttest. Moreover, the decrease in the mistakes negatively correlated with the increase in



the frequency and occurrence of the target formulaic sequences. The increased linguistic accuracy was reflected on by the rater-participants who, as mentioned above, explained that there was a significant improvement in the choice of lexis and a limited improvement in grammar, a finding that echoes Willis' (2003) suggestion that teaching formulaic sequences to EAP students can reduce their lexical and grammatical errors and Engeström's (1999) explication that mediating tools can help the subject model the object.

### Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

This research study suggests some pedagogical implications for EAP instructors and curriculum designers. It might be suggested that EAP instructors should develop some thematic worksheets that explicitly tackle the use and function of formulaic sequences to promote the acquisition of this language phenomenon and raise EAP students' awareness of the use of different formulaic sequences that relate to different themes. As for curriculum designers, including this language phenomenon in textbooks might not only help achieve the objective outlined above, but it may also provide other instructors who are still unaware or resistant to this teaching approach with the opportunity to test its effectiveness in improving the performance of their students.

It is worth noting that this research study has some limitations. First, being a pilot study, the results of this research study are not generalizable because of the small sample size. Second, without a control group, it is difficult to determine whether the improvement identified in the participants' performance after the training period could be solely attributed to the training period or other factors, such as receiving instruction in other courses. The fact that the researcher is also the instructor in this study is the third limitation; that is, it is not clear if other instructors, who have different teaching styles and philosophy, used the same materials in their classroom, the same results would be obtained.

The study also provides some suggestions for future research. This study should be replicated on a larger sample size in order to obtain generalizable results. An investigation of the effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences in other writing tasks (e.g. essay writing) is as well needed. Last but not least, the apparent contradiction in the rater-participants' views on such a teaching approach entails that a research study should be devoted to this aspect only.

### Conclusion

By using AT to guide the pedagogical intervention implemented in this study and to interpret the findings, this mixed methods research study has yielded some insights into the effectiveness of focused instruction of formulaic sequences in augmenting their acquisition and improving 12 EAP students' academic reading and writing skills. It has as well explored the areas of improvements from the perspective of three EAP instructors and their contradictory views of such an instructional approach. Although the results of this pilot research study cannot be generalized because of the small sample size, they have provided some pedagogical implications for both practitioners and curriculum developers.



Whether other practitioners will adapt this teaching approach remains an open question for future research to answer.

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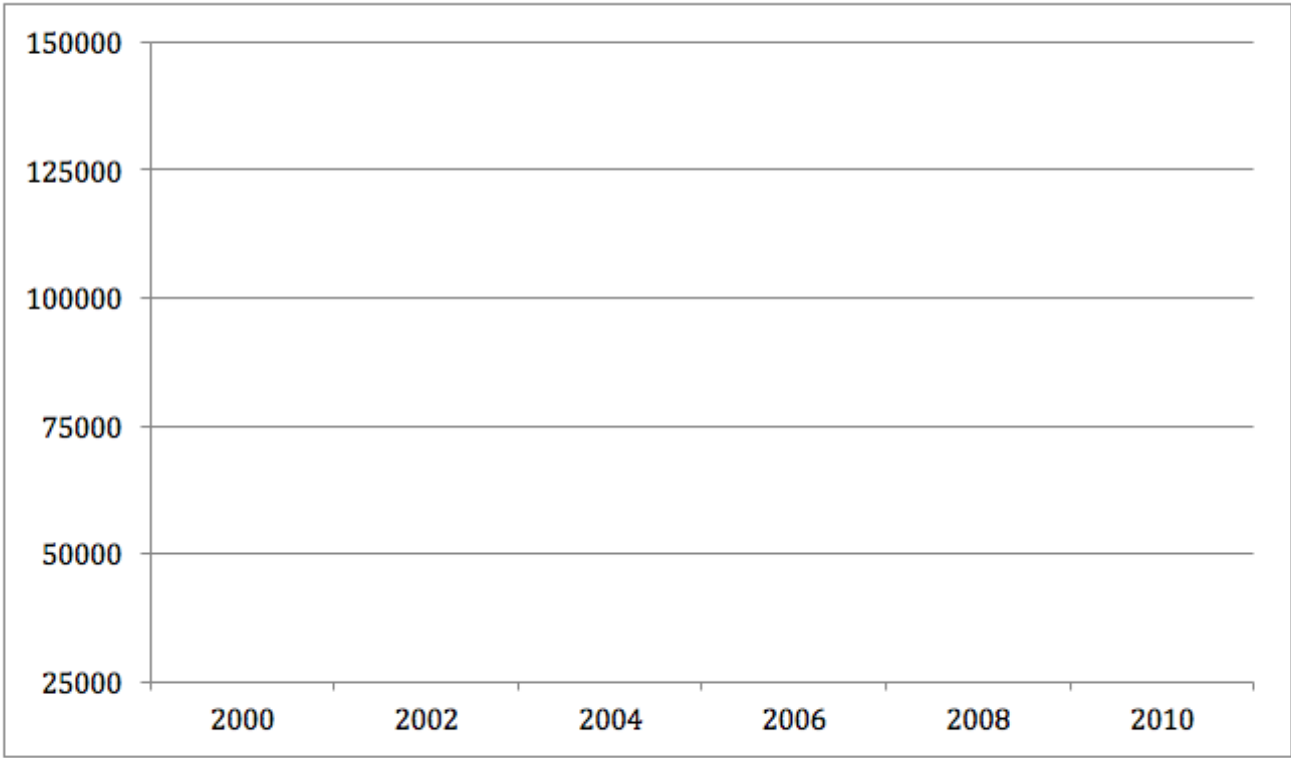
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Appendix A: Sample Prompts for Data Collection

Reading Prompt 1

Read the following text and draw a line graph representing the data presented in the text. Use the chart below.

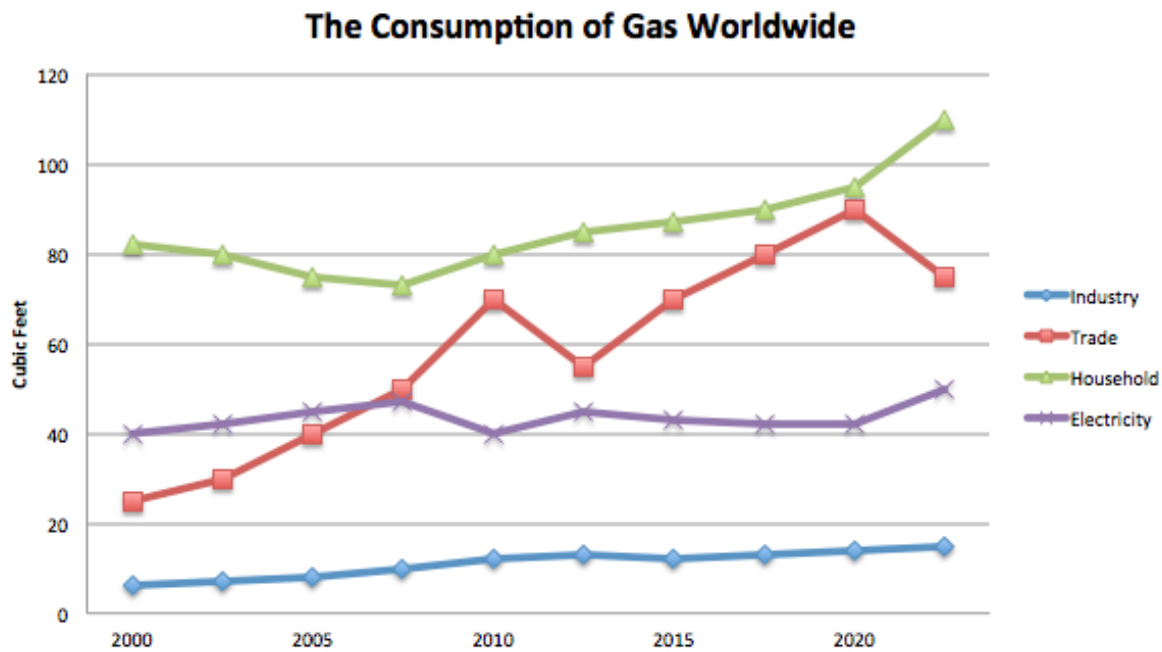
Britain and Canada are primary English-speaking destinations for many international students. These two countries have increasingly attracted international students from several countries since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The number of international students registered in British universities, for example, gradually increased from 30,000 to 75,000 between 2000 and 2006. After this gradual increase, it dramatically increased to 120,000 over a two-year period, tailing off after 2010. In addition to Britain, international student enrollment in Canadian universities has also increased since 2004. After remaining stable between 2000 and 2004 at about 45,000, there was a sharp increase (from 45,000 to 134,000) in enrollment rates in Canadian universities between 2005 and 2010. In sum, enrollment rates of international students in both Australian and American universities continued to increase, especially in the last five years.



Adapted from:  
Institute of International Education  
<http://www.iie.org/Blog/2012/October/US-Australia>

### Writing Prompt 1

Write a paragraph in which you summarize the trends presented in the following chart.



### Appendix B: List of Formulaic Sequences

Table B1

List of Formulaic Sequence

SENTENCE BUILDERS	DISCOURSE MARKERS	COLLOCATIONS
The (A) of (B)	In other words	Significant increase
Over a period of	In addition to	Dramatic increase
Between (A) and (B)	In conclusion	Rapid increase
From (A) to (B)	In sum	Sharp increase
Play(s) an important role	In summary	Slight increase
(Due to) the fact that	In a nutshell	Increase dramatically Increase
As a result of	To sum up	significantly
The reason for	To conclude	Significant decrease Dramatic
It is clear	For example	decrease
As/It can be seen/noted	For instance	Sharp decrease
(A) and (B)	Such as	Slight decrease
(A) as well as (B)	At the same time	Decrease significantly Decrease
Both (A) and (B)	According to the	slightly
Both of these	As shown in	Decrease dramatically
There is a/an/not	On the one hand	Steady decline
There are a number (of)	On the other hand	Sharp decline
It has been (adverb) noted/believed/ asserted		Significant decline
It is important to		Rapid decline
It is necessary		Gradual decline
It is possible to		Dramatic decline
The (A) shows/demonstrates/presents		Remain stable
Not only... but also		Remain the same
		Rise and fall
		The fluctuation in the price
		Prices fluctuate

*Note. These formulaic sequences are extracted from lists proposed by Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004), Hyland (2008), Lewis (1997), and Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010) as well as the academic sub-corpus of the COCA*

Appendix C: Sample Worksheets

Worksheet 1: Practice

I. Rewrite the following sentences using the transition phrases in brackets.

1. John’s wedding is next week. He is very excited. (*In other words*)

.....
2. The change in the temperature brings about several artificial changes to the habitats of wild animals. People are not safe because of the depletion of the ozone layer. (*In addition to A*)

.....
3. There are different forms of plagiarism. Copying other writers words with proper citation and submitting classmates’ work as one’s own are both forms of plagiarism. (*For instance*)

.....
4. I like action movies. I like *Face off* and *Mission Impossible*. (*Such as*)

.....
5. It can be seen that eating too much sugar and salt can have serious negative effects on people’s health. (*In sum*)

.....
6. The graph shows the rise and fall in the prices of different products. (*Add a period of time using from... to..../ 1900–2000*)

.....
7. The number of international students increased significantly between 2005 and 2007. (*According to the graph*)

.....

### Worksheet 2: Cloze Activity

Complete the following text using the words in the box. Add punctuation marks if necessary.

it has been generally believed that for example in conclusion in addition to in other words public events and achievements both the accuracy and the credibility

.....people read newspapers in order to know the world current affairs, and they read magazines for entertainment purposes. Although people expect to find articles on the private lives of celebrities in magazines, such stories which are neither informative nor useful increasingly appear in newspapers. .... stories that feature the people's private lives should not be in newspapers. If newspapers want to publish stories about celebrities, they should focus on the achievements of those famous people. .... if there is an article about a princess, it should be about her charity work because such a story is likely to increase public awareness of important problems. .... focusing on ....., journalists should write about facts only, not rumors. If newspapers publish rumors, readers may question ..... of all types of information reported in them. ...., newspapers should concentrate on real news and important events rather than personal lives of celebrities.

Adapted from

[http://www.ielts-exam.net/ielts\\_writing\\_samples\\_task\\_2/698/](http://www.ielts-exam.net/ielts_writing_samples_task_2/698/)



### Worksheet 3: Dictogloss

Complete the following paragraph with the exact phrases provided in the dictation. Add punctuation marks if necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_ the increase in the population of three different countries  
\_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ the population of country A  
\_\_\_\_\_ between 1970 and 1980 from 15000000 to 35000000.  
\_\_\_\_\_ the population of country B \_\_\_\_\_ to  
just under 36000000. The population of \_\_\_\_\_ remained relatively  
stable between 1980 and 2000. \_\_\_\_\_, country C's population  
\_\_\_\_\_ between from 1970 to 1980. There was, then, \_\_\_\_\_  
in the population of country C by nearly 50% between 1980 and 2000, with the greatest real  
increase in 1998, when the population reached 125000000. \_\_\_\_\_,  
while \_\_\_\_\_ increased between 1970 and 2000, the most  
significant increase in the population was that of country C.

#### ***Complete Text for Dictation***

The line graph shows the increase in the population of three different countries over a thirty-year period. According to the graph, the population of country A dramatically increased between 1970 and 1980 from 15000000 to 35000000. In addition to country A, the population of country B increased significantly to just under 36000000. The population of both country A and country B remained relatively stable between 1980 and 2000. On the other hand, country C's population remained the same from 1970 to 1980. There was, then, a rapid increase in the population of country C by nearly 50% between 1980 and 2000, with the greatest real increase in 1998, when the population reached 125000000. In conclusion, while the population of the three countries increased between 1970 and 2000, the most significant increase in the population was that of country C.

Adapted from [http://www.ielts-exam.net/academic\\_writing\\_samples\\_task\\_1/809/](http://www.ielts-exam.net/academic_writing_samples_task_1/809/)

# LEXICAL BUNDLES IN L2 ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

## Proficiency level differences

By Randy Appel, Concordia University

### Abstract

Research on formulaic sequences, frequently occurring multiword units, has seen significant growth in recent decades. However, relatively few studies have focused on how non-native English users make use of formulaic sequences in their academic English writing and how these structures contribute to assessments of linguistic ability. In order to better understand how second language English writers make use of this aspect of language, a collection of argumentative essays written by test takers of the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL) was analyzed for the use of lexical bundles, a frequency driven sub-category of formulaic sequences. Dividing this collection of writing into three corpora, based on assessed proficiency, revealed marked differences in how lexical bundles were used by each group of writers. Implications for the teaching and assessment of second language English academic writing are discussed.

Second language (L2) learners face a seemingly monolithic task when confronted with the challenge of attaining a high-level of proficiency in their target language. Not only do L2 learners need to develop general-level abilities related to the processing and production of their L2, but they are also frequently required to develop genre- and register-specific skills. These skills include, among others, knowledge of discipline specific jargon, culturally appropriate organizational patterns, and conventionalized forms of expression that may vary substantially from one genre or register to the next. As L2 learners progress, they quickly realize that their task is not simply to acquire one version of the target language, but multiple versions that all serve different purposes (i.e., conversational English, written English, academic English, business English). If L2 English learners are to be successful in their goals, they need to attain an adequate level of proficiency in each of the target genres and registers they will be using to communicate.

One particular genre that merits special attention for many L2 English learners is academic writing. Due to the fact that the academic success, and therefore eventual career aspirations, of many L2 English learners is reliant on their ability to effectively communicate in written academic English, high proficiency in this area has become an important goal for many L2 English learners.

Additionally, with the continued internationalization of postsecondary institutions in Canada expected to result in increased numbers of L2 English learners (AUCC, 2010), there is a growing need for quality instruction of academic English writing by English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Unfortunately, while the importance of academic writing for ESL teachers and learners continues to grow, our understanding of this genre of English and the factors that lead to differences in perceived proficiency within it, particularly from the perspective of multi-word utterances, remains underdeveloped.

Corpus research, and the ability to effectively analyze large collections of L2 discourse, presents a valuable tool that can be used to provide new insights and further our understanding of L2 English academic writing from various perspectives. Although corpora of learner English are a relatively new addition to applied linguistics research (Granger, 1998), corpus-informed studies have seen substantial growth in recent years and are now used to help study first language (L1) and L2 discourse in a variety of genres and registers (e.g., Granger & Rayson, 1998; Virtanen, 1998). While these and other related studies have helped to identify specific points of differentiation between L1 and L2 writers, comparatively few research endeavours have attempted to focus on differences within populations of L2 writers possessing differing levels of linguistic ability.

The present study aims to further understanding of L2 English academic writing by using a corpus-informed approach to analyse L2 English academic writing by test takers of the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) assessment. Since the use of conventionalized expressions, otherwise known as formulaic sequences, has been identified as an important aspect of English language ability (Bamber, 1983; Boers Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers & Demecheleer, 2006; McCully, 1985; Pawley & Syder, 1983, Wray, 2002), these multi-word sequences were targeted as a way of better understanding differences in perceived proficiency in L2 English academic writing.

### Formulaic Sequences

Dating back to at least Firth (1935), the study of formulaic sequences (FSs) holds a long history within linguistic inquiry. Defined as prefabricated sequences that are “stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use” (Wray, 2002, p. 9), FSs are considered an important part of native language users’ linguistic competence that help facilitate production of quick and accurate discourse (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Pawley & Syder, 1983, Wray, 2002). From the perspective of the listener or reader, experimental research has demonstrated important advantages associated with the use of formulaic language that can be linked to improved processing speed. For example, Underwood, Schmitt, and Galpin (2004) investigated the number and duration of eye fixations during reading tasks. Comparing time spent fixated on terminal words in formulaic and non-formulaic contexts, it was found that both L1 and advanced L2 participants spent less time fixated on terminal words in FSs than when the same words appeared in non-formulaic contexts.

With the importance of FSs increasingly recognized, attempts to better understand this aspect of language, and identify how it is used in various settings, have begun to grow. However, due to the fact that FSs can come in many different forms (e.g., idioms, collocations,

proverbs), the identification of FSs is an on-going challenge with no single solution. As a result, numerous methods of identification have been introduced. For instance, in oral discourse, phonological coherence, intonation contour, and speed of delivery have all been used to indicate formulaic status (Altenberg & Eeeg-Olofsson, 1990; Bybee & Scheibman, 1999; Kuiper, 1996). Similarly, for written discourse, multiple methods of identification are also available; however, a quantitative approach based primarily on minimum frequency and range requirements has emerged as the leading indicator of formulaic status in many corpus-driven studies. This method, originally developed by Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1999) is labelled the lexical bundle approach.

### Lexical Bundles

Defined simply as “the most frequently recurring sequences of words” (Biber & Barbieri, 2007, p. 264), the term lexical bundle refers to a specific subset of formulaic language that is statistically defined on the basis of adherence to minimum frequency and range criteria. While lexical bundles occur in multiple word lengths, research using this methodology generally focuses on the identification of four-word sequences (e.g., Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1999; Chen, 2008; Chen & Baker, 2010; Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008). This focus on four-word structures is based in the observation that shorter sequences are contained within four-word lexical bundles (Cortes, 2004), and that they offer a greater range of functional roles that are more easily identifiable than three-word sequences (Hyland, 2008).

In terms of identification, two main criteria are used in the lexical bundle approach: frequency and range. Frequency, refers to the number of occurrences of a particular structure within the collection of discourse being analysed. Although minimum frequency cut-offs are often viewed as arbitrary (Hyland, 2008) and necessarily influenced by the size and specificity of the corpus being analysed, a common trend has emerged that sets minimum frequency for the identification of four-word sequences at 20–25 occurrences per million words (Adel & Erman, 2012; Chen, 2008; Chen & Baker, 2010; Cortes, 2004, 2008; Hyland, 2008).

Range, the second main criterion, is used to measure the spread of identified sequences within the corpus as a whole. Here, the goal is to ensure identified structures are not confined to a limited number of writers, or a limited number of texts. Consequently, range is used to reduce the chance of including idiosyncratic tendencies of individual or small groups of writers in the resulting list of lexical bundles. Range requirements also vary from study to study, yet a minimum of five texts has emerged as a common trend (Biber, Conrad, Reppen, 2004; Chen, 2010; Cortes, 2004). However, given that each study implements a differing number of texts in the analysis, it may prove more beneficial to use a percentage based approach (i.e., Hyland, 2008).

### Research Questions

Although existing research has examined the use of lexical bundles within various genres and registers, research across proficiency levels is lacking. In order to better understand how L2 English users of differing proficiency levels make use of this aspect of language in their academic writing, the present study targeted lexical bundles as a way of investigating differences in L2 English academic writing ability. Comparisons along proficiency levels were performed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess differences in lexical bundle use by writers of varying levels of L2 English academic writing ability. The main question guiding this research was:

1. How do L2 English writers of differing proficiency levels make use of lexical bundles in their academic writing?

Answers to this question will help provide a greater understanding of how L2 English users make use of lexical bundles in their academic writing and which lexical bundles may be beneficial to L2 English learners and teachers aiming to increase target language proficiency. Consequently, an additional goal of the current study was to develop a list of lexical bundles that could be used in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs to help learners become more proficient academic writers. In order to analyse potential correlations between lexical bundle use and L2 English academic writing ability, the archives of the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) assessment were used as a data source.

### Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL)

CAEL is an integrated, topic-based test that evaluates L2 English learners' ability to use academic English as it is used in Canadian post-secondary institutions (CAEL, 2011). The test is frequently taken by L2 English learners aiming to gain entrance into English-medium universities and colleges throughout Canada. Composed of four sections (reading response, lecture response, oral language response, and written response), each test version focuses on one central theme or topic. In the final section of the test, the written response, test takers are allocated 45 minutes to handwrite an argumentative essay of between one and three pages that addresses a given prompt. During the composition of this essay, test takers are able to draw on information from two related readings and any previously encountered material to help strengthen the position they take.

Grading of the written response takes place during group marking sessions using a collaborative read-aloud protocol. These sessions consists of one rater who is assigned to read the essay aloud while two others listen and take notes. Once the essay has been read in its entirety, the three raters independently decide on a grade for the essay using one of nine possible grading bands (Appendix A). After raters independently decide on a grade, these scores are revealed to the group. If all raters are in agreement, the score is finalized. If independently assigned scores differ, a discussion of the reasoning for each score is initiated and continues until a consensus has been reached.

Corpora

The main corpus used in this study is composed of argumentative essays written by test takers of the CAEL assessment. All essays used in this study were written in response to the same prompt, and therefore focus on the same main subject matter. By keeping essay type and topic stable, a better evaluation of proficiency level differences was possible since these potentially confounding factors had already been controlled for.

Essays used in this study were divided into three main corpora based on the assigned score each essay received. The first corpus, the Lower Level Corpus (LLC) is composed of essays that received a grade of either 20 or 30; their authors are therefore considered limited or very limited writers. The second corpus, the Medium Level Corpus (MLC), is composed of essays that received a grade of either 40 or 50; their authors are therefore evaluated as intermediate level writers. Finally, the third corpus, the High Level Corpus (HLC), is composed of essays rated between 60 and 90 on the CAEL grading scale; their authors are therefore considered upper-intermediate and advanced writers (full descriptions of each scoring band can be found in Appendix A). Although the lowest-level scoring band available on the CAEL assessment is 10, no essays at this level were included in the present study since these essays were often extremely short and contained extended passages that were directly copied from the reading articles included as part of the test. Descriptive statistics for each of the corpora are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	LLC	MLC	HLC	TOTAL
Words	41,316	63,869	41,893	147,078
Essays	185	243	134	562
Words/Essay	223	263	313	262

Methodology

Since all CAEL test essays are hand-written, the first step in preparing for analysis was to transcribe all essays so that they could be stored and analysed digitally. Once this step had been completed, it was necessary to decide on the length of lexical bundles that would be extracted. Although previous corpus driven research into the use of recurrent word sequences has primarily focused the identification of four-word lexical bundles (Chen, 2010; Cortes, 2004, Underwood, Schmitt, Galpin, 2004), the present study extended this focus to investigate the use of three- to five-word structures. This decision was made to more fully capture the complete range of formulaic language being used by each group of writers and investigated whether lexical bundle length could be related to assessed proficiency.



### Identification Procedure: three- to five-word lexical bundles

Although a minimum frequency of occurrence in previous lexical bundle research has often been set at 20–25 occurrences per million words, the highly specialized nature of the corpora used in the present study necessitated substantial modification to previously used criteria. This was because the use of a high number of relatively small texts on the same topic was likely to result in greater overlap than the more standard book-length texts used in many previous studies. Therefore, in order to create manageable lists of lexical bundles that could be analysed in sufficient detail, the minimum frequency criterion in the present study was increased. For the LLC, the smallest corpus in the present study, frequency of occurrence was set at a minimum of nine instances. While this equates to relatively high 217 occurrences per million words, it was necessary in order to create a manageable list of sequences that could be used for subsequent analysis. As each corpus in the present study consisted of a differing number of total words, the minimum frequency of occurrence for the LLC was normalized to the remaining corpora to retain consistency. This process resulted in a minimum frequency of occurrence of 16 in the MLC and nine in the HLC.

The minimum range criterion was also influenced by the size and specificity of the corpora used in the present study. Although previous research has often implemented a raw range of five texts, a percentage-based approach was considered more suitable in the present study due to the large number of relatively short essays. Consequently, to ensure that the lists of lexical bundles identified in each corpus would not be negatively impacted by idiosyncratic tendencies representative of a few individual writers, and that identified sequences would be more representative of general trends within each collection of writing, a minimum range requirement of 7% was used. This criterion was chosen to help produce a sufficient, yet manageable, list of sequences that could be analysed in greater detail.

Once frequency and range requirements had been decided upon, WordSmith Tools 6.0 (Scott, 2011) was used to extract all three- to five-word recurrent word sequences that met the given criteria. Following this step, the most topic-dependent bundles were removed using a list of 12 content words that were considered potential indicators of test topic. Since the version of the CAEL test being analysed is still in use, this step helped to ensure the topic of the test would not be revealed.

Once overly topic-dependent lexical bundles had been removed, each list was examined for partially overlapping structures (e.g., *a marked increase*, *a marked increase in*, *a marked increase in the*) with the goal of discovering if any shorter lexical bundles contained within longer structures could be eliminated, thereby reducing overlap and leading to more accurate lexical bundle identification. To achieve this goal, in each case where partially overlapping structures were identified, frequency and range criteria were checked. If frequency and range for overlapping sequences varied by a maximum of plus or minus three, the shorter overlapping sequences were eliminated, and only the longer sequence was kept. For example, in the LLC there were 13 occurrences of each of the following sequences: *a marked increase*, *a marked increase in*, and *a marked increase in the*. Since

the frequency of occurrence and range for each overlapping bundle varied by a maximum of plus or minus three, these bundles were joined to create only one listing (*a marked increase in the*).

A final preliminary step in preparing for analysis was to normalize frequency of occurrence in each corpus so that standardized comparisons across each group of writers could be made. In order to achieve this goal, frequency of occurrence for each lexical bundle was normalized to the size of the smallest corpus used in this study, the LLC. In this way, the different sizes of each corpus could be controlled for.

### Analysis & Results

After revising the lists from each corpus to remove overly context-dependent structures and partially overlapping sequences, as well as normalizing frequency of occurrence so that more accurate comparisons between each corpus could be made, it was possible to begin analysis. In order to better understand how each group of writers made use of lexical bundles in their essays, three forms of analysis were implemented: i) number and length of lexical bundles used in each corpus, ii) degree of overlap between lexical bundles and source texts, iii) frequency comparisons for individual lexical bundles within each corpus with a focus on identifying proficiency level differences.

#### Number and Length of Lexical bundles

The first form of analysis used in this study focused on the number and length of lexical bundles identified in each corpus. In terms of raw numbers, a total of 64, 51, and 73 lexical bundles were identified in the LLC, MLC, and HLC, respectively. The high number of lexical bundles in the HLC supports the notion that higher level writers tend to make greater use of this feature in their academic writing. However, the fact that MLC writers used the fewest total number of lexical bundles of any group of writers was unexpected. Although numerous potential reasons for this finding are possible, the analysis of lexical bundles and source texts, the second form of analysis, helps to clarify and explain these differences. Consequently, this will be discussed in greater detail within that section.

Since this study focused on three- to five-word lexical bundles, it was possible to compare how each group of writers made use of structures of varying lengths in their essays. In comparing the length of lexical bundles used by each group of writers it was found that MLC and HLC writers tended to make greater use of shorter lexical bundles in their writing, with 87% and 88% of all lexical bundles in the MLC and HLC being of the three-word variety. Conversely, LLC writers displayed a tendency toward the use of longer structures, with four- to five-word lexical bundles accounting for 40% of the identified lexical bundles. Frequency statistics for all lexical bundles extracted from each corpus are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Lexical bundles by length

	LLC	MLC	HLC
three-word	38 (59%)	45 (87%)	64 (88%)
four-word	10 (17%)	3 (6%)	4 (6%)
five-word	15 (23%)	4 (8%)	5 (7%)
Total	64	51	73

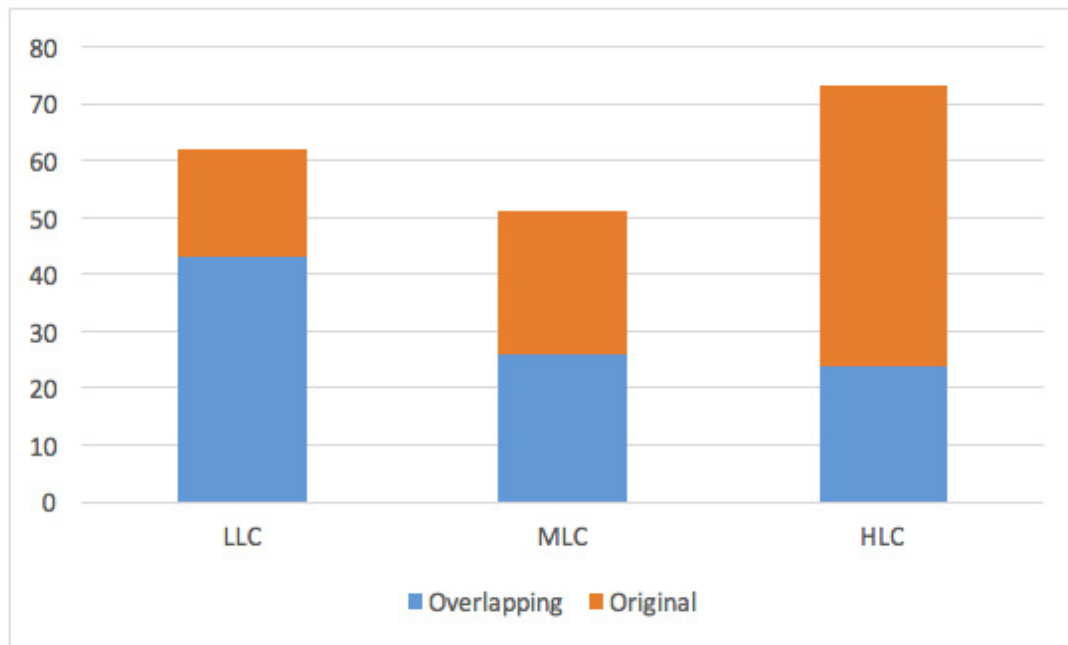
Lexical Bundles and the Source Texts

Given that the CAEL assessment uses two reading articles related to the topic of the test to help writers become familiar with the subject matter, and that these articles can be used as reference material during the writing task, it was possible to analyse overlap between identified lexical bundles in each corpus and the two source texts. Using this type of analysis, we can achieve a better understanding of the level of reliance on source texts by each group of writers, and which sequences may, or may not, be part each group of writers’ internalized linguistic competence. To distinguish between the two types of bundles identified, the term **OVERLAPPING** is applied to all bundles also appearing in the source texts, and **ORIGINAL** is used to refer to all other identified structures.

Although a significant portion of the lexical bundles identified in each corpus contained overlap with the reading articles, this tendency was most pronounced in the LLC. Of the 64 lexical bundles identified in the LLC, 43 (67%) were also found in at least one of the two reading articles. In comparison, only 26 (50%) of the lexical bundles identified in the MLC, and 24 (33%) of the lexical bundles identified in the HLC were also found in the source texts (see Figure 1). This finding suggests a greater reliance on source texts in LLC writing and that many of the lexical bundles identified in the LLC may not have been part of the internal lexical repertoire on these writers. While plagiarism is one explanation for this finding, it should be noted that alternative explanations are also possible, including a greater reliance on direct quotations, and a lack of knowledge regarding appropriate academic writing conventions.

By examining overlap between source texts and lexical bundles in each corpus, we can better explain the finding from the first form of analysis that suggested MLC writers produce the fewest total number of lexical bundles of any group of writers. If we remove the overlapping lexical bundles from these lists and focus instead on originally produced structures, we can see that MLC writers actually produce more original lexical bundles than their LLC counterparts. These modified lists show that the use of original lexical bundles increases with proficiency as 21 original bundles can be identified in the LLC, 25 in the MLC, and 49 in the HLC.

Figure 1: Overlapping and Original Lexical Bundles



### Individual Frequency Comparisons between Corpora

In light of the significant overlap present between the lexical bundles identified in each corpus and the two reading articles included as part of the test, the third form of analysis focused on frequency comparisons for original lexical bundles in each of the three corpora. These frequency comparisons revealed a total of 13 lexical bundles that could be identified as more frequently occurring in the LLC, and 33 lexical bundles that could be identified as more frequently occurring in the HLC. Table 3 provides a list of all originally produced lexical bundles more frequently used by LLC writers in this study.

While numerous conclusions can be drawn from the list provided in Table 3, there are several important items that can be highlighted. First, the frequent use of *a lot of* by LLC writers is noteworthy for the fact that this bundle is more commonly associated with casual spoken English, rather than formal written discourse represented by academic writing. Therefore, the frequent use of this bundle may be an indication that LLC writers have not yet begun to recognize the particular form of English that is needed when writing academic discourse. Secondly, the more frequent use of *according to the* and *according to the article* by LLC writers once again suggests a greater dependence on outside sources in writing at this level. Combined with the previous finding that LLC writers tend to make greater use of lexical bundles appearing in the reading articles, it is clear that LLC writers have a greater dependence on these sources than the other two groups of writers.

Table 3: Originally produce lexical bundles more frequently used by LLC writers.

	LLC	MLC	HLC
<i>A lot of</i>	49	40	13
<i>According to the</i>	52	17	15
<i>According to the article</i>	15	-	-
<i>First of all</i>	20	23	-
<i>In the future</i>	23	-	-
<i>In the world</i>	24	-	-
<i>Is very important</i>	16	-	-
<i>Life on the</i>	22	16	13
<i>The most important</i>	22	16	-
<i>The other hand</i>	16	12	-
<i>There are many</i>	30	21	12
<i>There are some</i>	13	-	-
<i>There will be</i>	13	-	-

In terms of lexical bundles appearing more frequently in higher level writing, a substantially larger number of lexical bundles were identified. This is at least partially a result of the fact that a greater number of originally produced lexical bundles were identified in higher level writing in this study. Table 4 provides a list of all originally produced lexical bundles that occur with greater frequency in the HLC.

Table 4: Originally produce lexical bundles more frequently used by HLC writers.

	LLC	MLC	HLC
<i>A result of</i>	-	7	14
<i>A threat to</i>	-	-	9
<i>As a result</i>	-	16	23
<i>As well as</i>	-	-	19
<i>Because of the</i>	18	20	28
<i>Caused by the</i>	-	-	11
<i>Does pose a serious threat</i>	-	-	10
<i>Due to the</i>	-	19	24
<i>Fact that the</i>	-	-	9

<i>In conclusion the</i>	-	-	10
<i>In order to</i>	-	-	15
<i>In the eyes</i>	-	10	14
<i>It is a</i>	-	14	18
<i>It is not</i>	-	-	12
<i>More and more</i>	-	23	24
<i>Of life on</i>	-	-	11
<i>Of the food</i>	-	-	9
<i>Poses a serious threat to</i>	-	16	25
<i>That it is</i>	-	-	11
<i>The amount of</i>	-	-	15
<i>The destruction of</i>	-	-	17
<i>The fact that</i>	-	-	15
<i>The increase of</i>	-	11	12
<i>The life on</i>	27	31	40
<i>The loss of</i>	-	-	10
<i>The surface of</i>	-	-	12
<i>The thinning of</i>	-	-	11
<i>This essay will</i>	-	-	12
<i>This is a</i>	-	-	11
<i>To the environment</i>	-	-	11
<i>To the life on</i>	-	-	16
<i>We need to</i>	-	-	15
<i>Which is the</i>	-	12	9

While numerous individual lexical bundles can be highlighted, there appears to be at least one clear pattern in the type of lexical bundles being used by higher level writers in this study, with ‘the (\_\_\_\_\_) of’ emerging as a common trend (e.g., *the amount of*, *the destruction of*, *the loss of*, *the surface of*). A total of seven (21%) of the bundles identified as more frequently occurring in the HLC exhibit this pattern. Additional examples that can be highlighted as more frequent in HLC writing include the discourse organizing bundles *in conclusion the*, *this essay will*, *as a result*, and *the fact that*. Each of these bundles can be seen as helping guide the reader by providing greater cohesion and coherence to the essay.



As such, these lexical bundles may lead to improved perceived proficiency by creating a more apparent organizational pattern.

### Discussion

This study used a corpus-driven approach to identify differences in the way recurrent word combinations are used by low-, medium-, and high-level L2 English academic writers. Based on the presented results, it appears that although LLC writers made frequent use of repeated word sequences, many of these structures were likely copied from the source texts included as part of the CAEL assessment. Combined with the fact that LLC writers also tended to use longer lexical bundles than MLC and HLC writers, the presented findings suggest that LLC writers are more reliant on information and structures found in these sources. Consequently, the use of these sources may be a strategy implemented by less proficient writers to help cope with their limited store of formulaic language. In other words, by incorporating passages and sentence fragments from the source texts, LLC writers may have been attempting to supplement their limited linguistic resources with structures they were confident would be considered “proper” academic English.

Based on these findings, caution should be taken when associating increased use of recurrent word sequences in L2 English academic writing with greater proficiency, and more in-depth analysis should be conducted before any firm conclusions can be made. Consequently, the distinction between skilled use of recurrent word sequences and plagiarism becomes an important issue that should be addressed in future research on this topic. While formulaic sequences may hold important benefits for L2 English academic writers, these learners need to be made aware of the potential pitfalls associated with an overreliance on extended sequences from outside sources, particularly without proper citation, since this may be viewed as plagiarism and result in negative consequences for the writer.

Despite the potential danger associated with the use of extended words sequences from source texts, it is clear that, when properly evaluated, this aspect of language can be associated with proficiency level differences in L2 English academic writing. This is evidence by the varying number of lexical bundles identified in each corpus, the differing lengths of lexical bundles used by each group of writers, and the numerous lexical bundles that were found to be more frequently associated with LLC and HLC writing, respectively. As a result, making students aware of common tendencies toward the preference or avoidance of these structures, and their in-context use, may prove beneficial in academically oriented ESL classrooms.

### Implications and Conclusion

Formulaic expressions have been identified by numerous researchers as an important part of native language users’ linguistic competence (e.g., Wray, 2002). With gathering evidence of the importance of formulaic expressions to L1 users, it seems this element of language may also prove beneficial to L2 learners aiming to increase proficiency and general linguistic ability in their target language. Therefore, for teachers and students

alike, understanding how formulaic expressions are used in the target language genre and register is an important step. For L2 English academic writing, the lists presented here can be used to achieve this goal by helping teachers and students better understand usage tendencies for specific formulaic expressions associated with higher perceived linguistic ability, and eventually helping these learners feel confident and capable enough of producing appropriate formulaic expressions on their own. Conversely, these lists can also be used to help students better understand which structures they may want to avoid in order to appear more linguistically competent in their academic English writing.

Although this study has focused specifically on L2 English academic writing, lists of common formulaic expressions in other genres and registers can also be explored (e.g., Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Chen, 2008; Cortes, 2008; Hyland, 2008; Wood & Appel, 2013). Wherever possible it is important to closely align the formulaic expressions being taught to the target genre and register of the learner. To investigate specific usage patterns for existing lists of formulaic expressions, several free on-line corpora can easily be searched and used as in-class tools (e.g., British National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English, etc.). Teachers and students can use these corpora to explore the frequency with which specific formulaic expressions occur and better understand how these structures contribute to the effectiveness of each piece of discourse. For example, formulaic expressions from the lists presented here could be searched for in online corpora and used as examples for in class discussion.

Despite the important benefits associated with the correct use of formulaic expressions, it is important to recognize the potential pitfalls that may result from teaching these sequences to students since their use can also be viewed as academic plagiarism (see above). In addition to reviewing definitions of academic plagiarism with students, writing samples could also be used in class as a way of highlighting how effective use of formulaic expressions differs from academic plagiarism. By further developing and using corpora of L2 English writing in ESL and EAP classrooms, students may be able to better identify deficiencies in their own writing and develop ways of remedying these issues.

By continuing to investigate the use of recurrent word sequences of various lengths, as opposed to the more standard approach that focuses solely on four-word structures (Chen 2008; Cortes, 2004, 2008; Hyland, 2008), it will be possible to develop a more complete picture of how formulaic expressions are used by L2 English users of varying proficiency levels and better understand the difference between skilled use of formulaic language and academic plagiarism. This is an important area that deserves increased attention, and the growing availability of computerized corpora should provide useful means of exploring these issues.

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### Appendix A: Writing Performance Band Score Criteria

<b>10-20</b>	<b>Very Limited Writer:</b> Is generally unable to express ideas effectively Uses very restricted and/or ungrammatical language Uses words randomly and without overall coherence
<b>30</b>	<b>Limited Writer:</b> Attempts to write something which is related to the topic but the writing is not predictable Uses restricted and/or ungrammatical language Seems to understand the topic, but is unable to develop ideas because language constrains or distorts expression
<b>40</b>	<b>Marginally Competent Writer:</b> Makes links among ideas and addresses the topic but the writing lacks clarity and cohesiveness Displays elements of control in the writing (e.g. a thesis statement, an introduction and conclusion) but internal coherence is lacking Uses little or no support (i.e., quotations, examples) to develop the thesis
<b>50</b>	<b>Competent but Limited Writer:</b> Addresses the topic to a degree but with somewhat limited clarity and cohesiveness Uses some support to develop the thesis Control of the argument is limited by poor comprehension of the readings and lecture, and/or poor understanding of the requirements of academic writing
<b>60</b>	<b>Competent Writer:</b> Develops a thesis using a range of support Uses language that is generally accurate but is constrained by a somewhat limited vocabulary Demonstrates general understand of the requirements of academic writing
<b>70</b>	<b>Adept Writer:</b> Responds readily to the demands of the topic and presents information clearly and logically Uses the readings and lecture effectively to support the thesis Demonstrated understand of the requirements of academic writing
<b>80-90</b>	<b>Expert Writer:</b> Demonstrates mastery of appropriate, concise, and persuasive academic writing Writes with authority and style

# EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF SITUATION-SPECIFIC FORMULAIC EXPRESSIONS AND SECOND LANGUAGE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

## A classroom intervention study

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### Abstract

Research in both formulaic language and interlanguage pragmatics has shown that situation-specific formulaic expressions may often serve pragmatic purposes (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012). The majority of the studies have focused on awareness-raising and attention-directing techniques in teaching formulaic language and pragmatics (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012). However, few studies have investigated the efficacy of instructed formulaic language for enhancing second language pragmatic competence. This paper reports on a study which explored the role of explicit instruction of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions in developing L2 pragmatic competence. Eight students from two Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs were assigned to treatment and control groups and engaged in six role-plays focused on refusal and thanking situational scenarios during pre-, post- and delayed post-tests. In addition, the treatment group was exposed to a nine-hour explicit instruction course that consisted of tasks designed to augment acquisition of meanings and/or functions of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions. The results suggest that after the explicit instruction course the treatment group participants' oral performance on both post- and delayed post-tests became more contextually appropriate and accurate, while the control group participants' performance did not change considerably throughout the experiment. Furthermore, in their reflections on the impact the course had on their learning experiences, treatment group participants reported that they started to feel more confident about their L2 oral communication skills.



Several decades ago Pawley and Syder (1983) argued that few non-native speakers can fully acquire the native speaker repertoire of formulaic sequences, whereas native speakers possess what they called *NATIVELIKE SELECTION* of speech. According to Pawley and Syder (1983), *nativelike selection* is the ability of native speakers of English to use expressions that are not only grammatically accurate but also natural and idiomatic. To date, multiple studies have been devoted to defining and categorizing formulaic language as well as to addressing possible issues of acquisition of this complex phenomenon by second language (L2) learners. For example, Weinert (2010) concluded that the most recent studies tend to use the label *FORMULAIC* as an umbrella term to refer to various language phenomena, such as proverbs, collocations, lexical bundles, fixed sequences, and many others. According to Wray and Perkins (2000), formulaic language has a multi-faceted nature. Based on their widely-cited definition of a formulaic sequence, such expressions have a prefabricated nature and are stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use (Wray & Perkins, 2000). Bardovi-Harlig (2012), in her recent review on formulaic language in pragmatics research, argued that formulaic expressions often carry a strong sense of social contract, or, in other words, are highly situation-specific. The particular subset of situation-specific formulaic expressions (e.g., *nice to meet you*; *can I leave a message*; *how are you doing*), also known as *SITUATION-BASED UTTERANCES* (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012), is the focus of the study presented in this paper. The term *FORMULA* may also be used as a shortened form of *SEMANTIC FORMULA* which usually describes a component of certain speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012) (i.e., expressing surprise or delight, expressing affection or emphasizing the depth of gratitude). According to Cohen (2005), such semantic formulas tend to be used in a given speech act and add the pragmatic value to the utterance if used appropriately.

### Pragmatics and Communicative Language Competence

With the rise of the communicative approach to language teaching (Savignon, 1976), it has been recognized that both pragmatic competence and grammatical accuracy are important components that constitute overall L2 communicative language ability. There emerged an understanding that learners need to know how to achieve their communicative goals through linguistic forms to ensure successful communication. The study of pragmatics is largely concerned with language use in various sociocultural contexts as well as with individual's linguistic choices that can have various effects on an interlocutor (Laughlin, Wain, & Schmidgall, 2015). Nattinger and De Carrico (1992) noted that researchers, especially those concerned with language pedagogy, were troubled because of the lack of descriptions of pragmatic knowledge with respect to competence and performance in the Chomskyan model of linguistic competence. This resulted in the development of the term *COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE*, which expanded the notion of linguistic competence and included the ability to understand meaning in context. Canale and Swain (1980) distinguished four components that create the construct of communicative competence. In this model, the first two components (grammatical and discourse competences) reflect the use of the linguistic system itself; the last two (sociolinguistic and strategic competences) define the functional aspects of communication. Another framework of communicative language ability, that

first introduced the term *PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE*, was proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and based on findings from language testing research (Bachman & Palmer, 1982). In this model, language knowledge is divided into two main types: organizational and pragmatic. While organizational knowledge involves an understanding of how individual utterances or sentences are organized to form texts, *PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE* involves an understanding of how utterances are related to the communicative goals of the language user, and how they are related to features of the language use setting (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68). Taguchi (2016) noted that while “the early models conceptualized pragmatic competence as knowledge of form-function-context mappings, more recent models have emphasized interaction skills that enable learners to implement this knowledge in interaction” (p. 2). Drawing on the combination of both early and recent models of communicative competence (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 2007), Taguchi proposed a synthesized definition of pragmatic competence which was adopted for the purpose of the present study. According to Taguchi’s (2016) definition, pragmatic competence is a socially co-constructed phenomenon and consists of three main components: knowledge of linguistic forms and their functional meanings; sociocultural knowledge; and the ability to use this knowledge to create a communicative act in interaction.

### Formulaic Language and Pragmatics in L2 Teaching

Research on formulaic language and interlanguage pragmatics has shown that teaching these two linguistic aspects can be very advantageous for L2 learners. Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) found that students who were made aware of standardized word combinations in authentic reading and listening materials significantly improved their oral proficiency. Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) listed three main approaches to focused or explicit instruction of formulaic sequences in the L2 classroom. These include: (1) drawing learners’ attention to formulaic sequences as they are encountered; (2) stimulating the use of dictionaries and corpus tools; (3) helping learners memorize particular formulaic sequences (p. 83). A study by Wood (2009) explored the effects of focused instruction of formulaic sequences on L2 learners’ fluent expression while producing spontaneous narratives; it was concluded that the development of a wide repertoire of formulaic sequences had a direct impact on improving L2 speech fluency. Another reason why formulaic expressions should be explicitly taught to L2 learners is the fact that the majority of such word strings are not easily translated into learners’ L1s. Despite the fact that developing pragmatic competence is a time-consuming process, it is possible to enhance learners’ pragmatic competence through pedagogical interventions (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005). Cohen (2005) argued that introducing L2 learners to various strategies of learning and performing speech acts may be a key to the successful development of L2 pragmatic ability. Likewise, evidence from L2 pragmatics research indicates that there is an urgent need for teaching pragmatics in L2 classrooms since target language pragmatic structures are not always salient to L2 learners. Research has shown that it might be equally challenging to become *PRAGMATICALLY FLUENT* at both beginner and advanced levels of proficiency (House, 1996). Furthermore, previous research has suggested

that pragmatic failures may lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings caused by improper usage of formulaic expressions in certain speech contexts (Decapua & Dunham, 2007).

Despite the strong relationship between mastering formulaic expressions and developing L2 pragmatic competence, the potential of teaching formulaic language for developing L2 pragmatic competence has been overlooked in previous research. Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of instructed formulaic language and pragmatics not only for awareness-raising purposes, but also for the sake of stimulating retention of formulaic sequences that possess pragmatic functions in students' active lexicon (Webb & Kagimoto, 2011). The majority of studies have been mainly devoted to the instructional effects of L2 pragmatics on learners' noticing and recognition ability and on raising meta-pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Cruz, 2013). Having considered this research gap, the objective of the present study was twofold. First, it investigated whether and how the explicit instruction of situation-specific formulaic expressions (i.e., refusal and thanking) could develop L2 pragmatic competence and foster both acquisition and retention of such expressions; second, it explored whether and in how the explicit instruction can help L2 learners overcome challenges they might face during spontaneous communication in L2. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Can the explicit instruction of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions and semantic formulas:
  - a. foster their acquisition and retention by second language (L2) learners;
  - b. develop L2 pragmatic competence?
2. What are the challenges L2 learners may face while performing refusal and thanking speech acts?
3. Does the explicit instruction help L2 learners to overcome those challenges? If yes, in what ways?

### Method

#### Overview and Participants

The present study took a form of a quasi-experimental collective case-study (Dorneyi, 2007) with elements of instructional intervention. The data was collected during several stages over a period of four months. Overall, eight students took part in this study and were assigned to treatment and control groups.

#### *Treatment group*

The treatment group included four participants (two males and two females) at an intermediate level of spoken English proficiency. The participants spoke different L1s (Arabic, French and Mandarin Chinese) and came from different cultural and educational backgrounds. At the time of the study, they were enrolled in one of Ottawa's Language

Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs (level 5). I refer to the four students by their assigned pseudonyms: Mustafa, Julia, Marcus, and Amandine. **Mustafa** (L1 Arabic) was a 27-year-old male from Lebanon, where he had received an associate's degree in nursing. **Julia** (L1 Mandarin Chinese) was a 35-year-old female from China, where she had received a college diploma in international trade. **Marcus** (L1 French) was a 33-year-old male from Cameroon. He had received his master's degree in management in France, where he had worked for a big company for the past several years before moving to Canada. **Amandine** (L1 French) was a 28-year-old female from Ivory Coast, where she had obtained her master's degree in marketing.

### ***Control group***

The control group also comprised four intermediate (LINC-5) participants (one male and three females) who came from different cultural and L1 backgrounds. I refer to the four students by their assigned pseudonyms: Anand, Tisha, Brianna, and Kim. The participants spoke French (Tisha), Korean (Kim), Bhutanese (Anand), and Burmese (Brianna) languages as their L1s. At the time of the study, the participants attended classes at a different Ottawa LINC (level 5) school. Since the control group participants did not receive any treatment, and their performance on the tests served only as a comparison factor, no further demographic information was collected.

### **Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis**

#### ***Creating the native speaker corpus***

Twenty native speakers completed six multiple-turn written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014) based on the following scenarios: refusing friend's invitation, rejecting sales offer, refusing manager's request, responding to compliment, thanking colleague for a favour, and thanking your manager. Their responses to these tasks comprised the *Native Speaker (NS) Corpus*. Recognizing that the written responses threaten authenticity of the collected data, and that the NS baseline would ideally be speech data rather than written one, it was nevertheless decided to collect native-like responses using the WDCTs for two main reasons. First, due to the limited time allocated to this research project, it was more feasible to collect the NS responses by means of the WDCTs; second, this data collection method seemed appropriate for collecting language data that would be relevant for the specific tasks that were later used during the pedagogical intervention. The topics for the WDCTs were selected from *LINC 5–7 Curriculum Guidelines* (Hajer, Kaskens, & Stasiak, 2007). According to this document, LINC curriculum has to provide newcomers with language instruction that will facilitates their social, cultural and economic integration into Canada. It contains topics and lesson strategies that are consistent with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000). An example of one WDCT is included in Appendix 1.

### ***Administration of the pre-, post- and delayed post-tests***

Refusal and thanking formulaic expressions as well as speech-act semantic formulas were elicited from both treatment and control group participants at three points in time: prior to the instructional intervention (pre-test); immediately after the explicit instruction course (post-test); and approximately one month after the post-test (delayed post-test). During the pre-test, the participants were given the same scenarios as the ones given to the native speakers, this time in a form of six multiple-turn oral discourse completion role-plays (DCRPs; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). During the post- and delayed post-tests, the scenarios of the DCRPs were slightly changed to ensure participants' exposure to different conversational contexts. All DCRPs were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded for refusal and thanking formulaic expressions and semantic formulas based on the pre-determined criteria. The total number of types and tokens of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions produced by the participants during each test was calculated. The TOKEN counts (the number of unique formulaic expressions that were used) served to show whether the quantity of formulaic expressions used by the treatment group participants increased in the post- and delayed post-tests; the TYPES (how many out of one type of formulaic expressions were used) determined whether the RANGE (variety) of formulaic expressions they produced during DCRPs increased after the treatment. Additionally, the researcher together with two independent native English speaker collaborators reviewed the treatment group participants' performance during each test to avoid researcher bias in favour of the treatment group participants and to ensure consistency in judgement.

### **Defining and Identifying Refusal and Thanking Formulaic Expressions**

The following criteria were applied to identify refusal and thanking formulaic expressions in the NS corpus:

- recurrent formulaic expressions used for specific pragmatic purposes (e.g., *I won't be able to make it; thanks so much for + doing something*; Bardovi-Harlig, 2012);
- greater length or complexity (e.g., *let me know if I can ever do anything for you*; example taken from the NS corpus);
- semantic irregularity close to idioms or metaphors (e.g., *that's a real vote of confidence*; Wray & Perkins, 2000);
- formulaic expressions that were part of a speech act but did not explicitly perform refusal or thanking functions (e.g., *prior commitment, not a good time*; example taken from the NS corpus);
- a combination of the above mentioned criteria and researcher's own judgement.

Overall, 40 refusal and 34 thanking formulaic expressions were elicited from the NS corpus; they were further used to design teaching materials for the pedagogical intervention stage (see Appendix 2 for the full list of the elicited formulaic expressions).



### ***Defining and identifying refusal and thanking semantic formulas***

Semantic formulas in the refusal speech acts were elicited based on the criteria outlined in Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). These were: statement of negative ability (e.g., *I can't*); statement of regret (e.g., *I'm sorry*); wish (e.g., *I wish I could help you*); excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., *I have to go to the hospital*); promise of future acceptance (e.g., *I'll do it next time*); and statement of principle (e.g., *I never do business with friends*). Semantic formulas in the thanking speech acts were elicited using a combination of taxonomies offered by Eisenstein and Bodman (1986; e.g., thanking + reassuring the listener; thanking + expressing surprise and delight; thanking + exaggerating to emphasize the depth of the gratitude) as well as by Schauer and Adolphs (2006; e.g., thanking + stating intent to reciprocate: to do or give something, because something similar was done or given to you). Later in the analysis, elicited utterances in both refusal and thanking speech acts (from both native speakers and L2 participants) were divided into components, and each component was assigned a corresponding semantic formula following the above mentioned taxonomy. Overall, 13 refusal and eight thanking semantic formulas and their verbal equivalents were identified in the NS corpus. Some examples of the refusal semantic formulas along with their verbal equivalents include:

- statement of regret + statement of negative ability + promise of future acceptance (i.e., *I'm sorry, I won't be able to make it. Hopefully, we can get together soon*);
- gratitude + explanation + excuse (i.e., *Thank you but I'm quite happy with my current phone plan. I'm afraid I'm not interested*).
- Examples of thanking semantic formulas and their verbal equivalents include:
- thanking + expressing surprise and delight + confirming commitment (i.e., *Woah! I am so surprised, thank you very much! So thoughtful of you! I will not disappoint you!*);
- thanking + promising to do or give something because something similar was done or given to you (i.e., *Thanks a lot for filling in for me today. I really owe you one*).

### ***Explicit instruction course***

Participants from the treatment group were exposed to a nine-hour explicit instruction course that followed immediately after the administration of the pre-test. The course was delivered in three-week period and consisted of six sessions (two sessions per week). Learners were encouraged to complete various activities designed by the researcher in order to stimulate acquisition and retention of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions. These activities were based on several fundamental approaches reviewed in Boers and Lindstromberg (2012). At the same time, the researcher drew on strategies for the initial learning of speech acts (Cohen, 2005) to design activities aimed at teaching semantic formulas of the refusal and thanking speech acts (see Appendix 3). In summary, during the course the participants received a significant amount of metapragmatic information (Taguchi, 2015); they also participated in various whole class discussions devoted to the



nature of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions, their meanings and pragmatic functions. Figure 1 below provides a schematic overview of the main pedagogical approaches used in the explicit instruction course (see Appendix 4 for an example of a lesson plan):

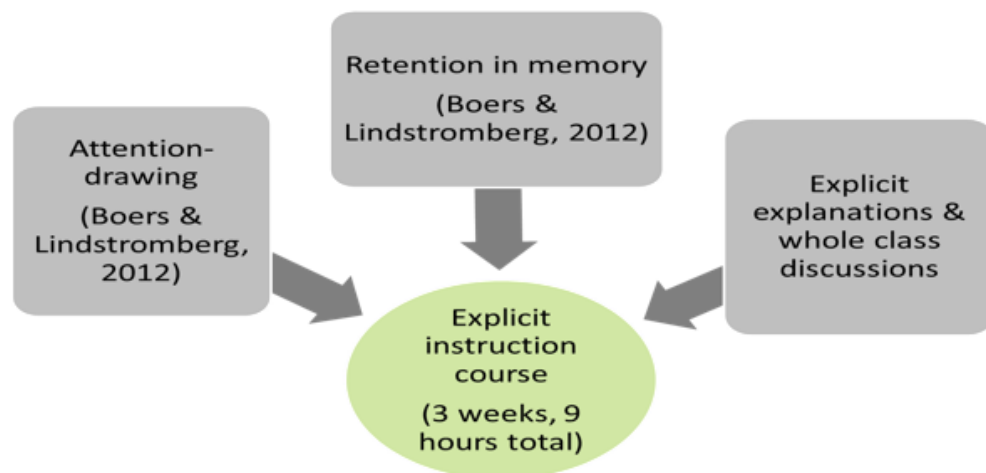


Figure 1. Teaching techniques used during the explicit instruction course.

### ***Students' oral reflections***

To better understand the role of instructed formulaic language in the development of L2 pragmatic competence, the treatment group participants were asked to reflect on their learning experiences during the explicit instruction course. They answered the following questions:

1. What challenges, if any, have you experienced while performing refusal and thanking speech acts?
2. Was the explicit instruction course useful for you? If yes, could you explain why? Has it helped you to overcome the challenges?

It is worth noting that the participants answered these questions in English which not only directed their attention to the target refusal and thanking formulaic expressions but also provided them with additional opportunities to practice these expressions in a meaningful context.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Acquisition and Retention of Refusal and Thanking Formulaic Expressions**

#### ***Treatment group***

The results revealed considerable improvement in the performance of the treatment group participants after the nine-hour pedagogical intervention. While the post-test showed

that these L2 learners had acquired a sufficient number of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions taught during the course, the delayed post-test showed that they were able to retain the majority of them one month after the course completion. It is possible to perceive the change in participants’ performance by looking at the two examples provided below.

The two most commonly occurring refusal and thanking formulaic expressions which **Mustafa** (L1 Arabic) used in the pre-test (Table 1) were *I’m sorry* or *Thank you*. On the contrary, the data collected during the post- and the delayed post-tests revealed a greater variety and complexity of formulaic expressions. The utterances he produced after the explicit instruction contain more complex and native-like formulaic expressions, such as *I am afraid to tell you* or *I am glad you called*. Moreover, Mustafa also used formulaic expressions that frequently occurred in the NS corpus, but did not directly perform the refusal or thanking pragmatic functions. Examples include phrases like *I am really satisfied with*, or *I really appreciate it*.

Table 1

Examples of formulaic expressions used by Mustafa’s pre-, post- and delayed post-tests

SCENARIO	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	DELAYED POST-TEST	SPEECH ACT
Rejecting sales offer	<i>thank you</i>	<i>I am afraid to tell you</i>	<i>sounds good</i>	Refusal
	<i>I’m sorry</i>	<i>I am really satisfied with current plan</i> <i>thank you for the offer</i>	<i>I am not interested</i>	
Thanking manager for promotion/ raising salary/ day off	<i>thank you</i>	<i>I am really very happy</i>	<i>I want to thank you for</i>	Thanking
	<i>thank you</i>	<i>I am very surprised</i>	<i>I really appreciate it</i>	
		<i>thank you very much</i>	<i>I am really thankful</i>	
		<i>I will be waiting for it</i>		

Note. All formulaic expressions were considered, including the repeated ones.

**Julia’s** (L1 Mandarin Chinese) responses to the refusal scenarios in the pre-test included incomplete formulaic expressions like *very sorry*. In the thanking speech acts, Julia mostly used cliché formulaic expressions like *Thank you* or *Thank you very much*. In addition, some of her pre-test responses contained grammar errors and non-standard word order (e.g., *Thank you for have me*). Unlike her pre-test responses, Julia’s post-test and delayed post-test utterances contained examples of formulaic expressions like *I’d like to, but; Thank you for your invitation* or *Thank you for understanding*. Such expressions made Julia’s responses sound more confident. In addition, she managed to express her gratitude in a native-like like manner (e.g., *Wow, I am so surprised; That’s so thoughtful of you*).

Table 2  
Examples of formulaic expressions used by Julia’s pre-, post- and delayed post-tests

SCENARIO	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	DELAYED POST-TEST	SPEECH ACT
Refusing friend’s invitation	very sorry	I’d like to, but	thank you for	Refusal
	very-very sorry	I have appointment	inviting but	
		thank you for your invitation	I won’t be able to make it	
		enjoy your time	I am sorry	
Thanking manager for promotion/ raising salary/ day off		see you next time	thank you for understanding	Thanking
	oh really	oh, really?	thank you for	
	thank you very much	wow, I am so surprised	giving a day off	
	thank you for	it’s thoughtful of you	I made a prior commitment	
	have me	thank you	let me know if I can do anything	
	thank you	I’ll do my best	anytime in future	
	I will try my best to work hard	thank you	thank you for understanding	

Note. All formulaic expressions were considered, including the repeated ones.

Figure 2 illustrates the overall results of the treatment group performance and includes the total number of types of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions used in all three tests.

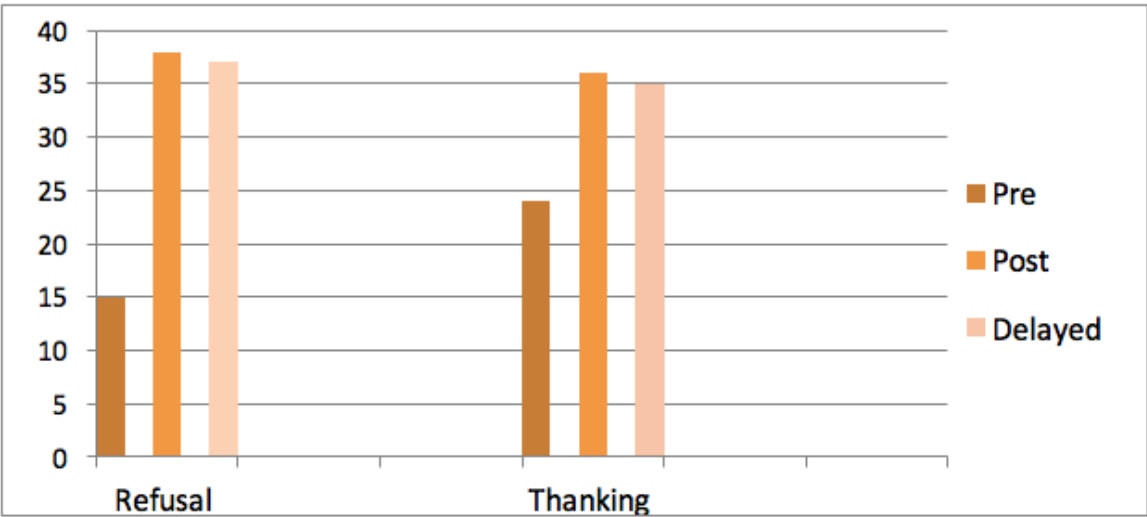


Figure 2. Total number of types of formulaic expressions used in three tests: Treatment group.

Previous research demonstrated that explicit instruction can facilitate development of L2 pragmatic competence. Developing learners' L2 pragmatic competence can help them become more grammatically accurate (Felix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012). The treatment group participants in this study used more grammatically accurate phrases in the post- and delayed post-tests. Interestingly, almost all those phrases contained refusal or thanking formulaic expressions from the NS corpus. These formulaic expressions helped learners to process chunks of grammatically accurate language and help them sound more proficient without necessarily having full control over the language grammar. Explicit teaching of L2 pragmatics helped learners to notice the differences between their L1 and L2 and better understand the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic choices that native speakers make in various speech acts (Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009).

### **Control group**

The control group participants, on the contrary, did not acquire a large number of the target refusal and thanking formulaic expressions during the period of the study. Despite the fact that the control group participants were receiving language instruction in LINC during the entire period of the study, their responses in all three tests were very inconsistent and contextually inappropriate in terms of the formulaic expressions they used in the DCRPs. Moreover, in some cases the number of both tokens and types of formulaic expressions decreased in the post-test (see Figure 3).

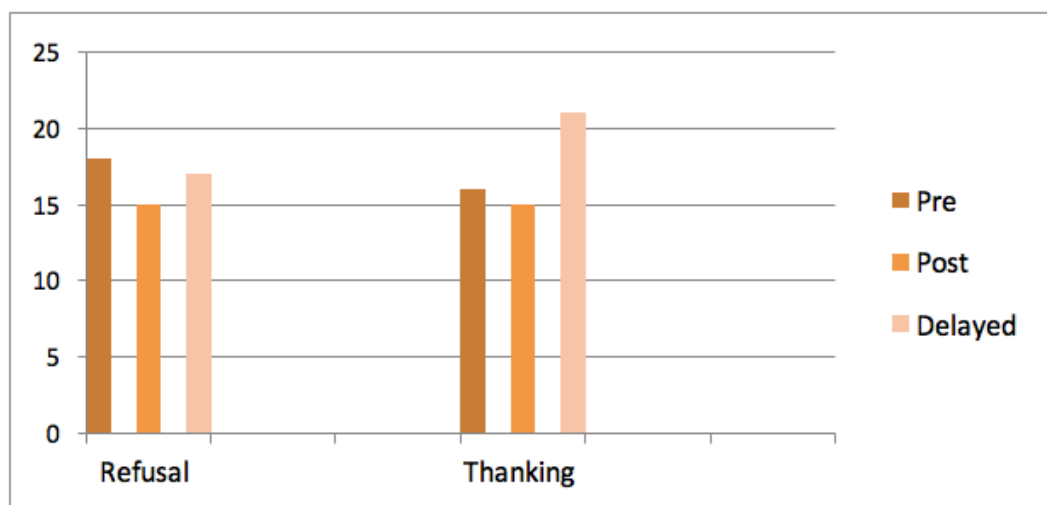


Figure 3. Total number of types of formulaic expressions used in 3 tests: Control group.

### **L2 Pragmatic Competence Development**

#### **Treatment group**

The analysis of the structure of the semantic formulas produced by the treatment group participants in all three tests has shown an increase in the quality of the semantic formulas produced after the intervention. Bardovi-Harlig (2009) argued that the recognition of

situation-specific formulaic expressions is a necessary condition for production, but is not sufficient for further successful retention and performance. Among the reasons for learners' low use of such expressions she mentioned lack of familiarity with some expressions and overuse of familiar expressions, which reduces the opportunity to use more target-like expressions. In addition to attention-drawing techniques used in the course of this study, the treatment group participants were also encouraged to complete several activities which focused on retention of formulaic expressions as well as semantic formulas of the target language. This could explain their improved performance in both post- and delayed post-tests.

**Mustafa.** During the pre-test, Mustafa produced phrases like *I just want to tell you that I will decline your invitation* or *I will not take it because I take this plan with Virgin mobile from three weeks ago* in order to express the *statement of negative ability*. However, the utterances produced by Mustafa after the explicit instruction course, were clearly more concise, native-like and pragmatically appropriate. For instance, the semantic formula of future acceptance was incomplete in the pre-test: *I wish, but I*. This may suggest that he did not know the proper formulaic expression that could fit that context. On the other hand, in the post-test as well as in the delayed post-test, Mustafa was able to attend to the same speech act of thanking in a more pragmatically effective way, despite the grammatical discrepancy: *I wish we will see each other later*.

**Julia.** Julia experienced a lot of difficulties while trying to formulate the structure of semantic formulas during the pre-test. Her responses were often interrupted with pauses and sounded quite abrupt and incomplete (e.g. *Oh, I see... But my cell phone, the... the... I don't know how to say, now the... the... is okay I think*). Julia expressed one semantic formula (thanking + promising to do or give something because something similar was done or given to you) in a very uncommon—for the English language—way by offering her pretended manager (the researcher) a drink after work (*have a drink, please, after work?*). In her post-test responses, however, she expressed the same semantic formula in a much more contextually appropriate way: *Thank you! If you need help, please, tell me!*

**Marcus.** Whereas in the pre-test Marcus gave a very long and unnecessary explanation (*I understand that your plan is very interesting [pause], so I very understand, but I can't change my plan because Rogers give me a good plan*), in the post- and delayed post-test he managed to use the formulaic expressions *I am satisfied with my current plan* and *I am not interested* which made his response more structured, concise and pragmatically appropriate. In the pre-test, Marcus tended to use very unnatural English language phrases like *I cannot disappoint you*. On the contrary, in the post- and delayed post-test he expressed a similar idea in a more native-like way: *You will not be disappointed*.

**Amandine.** Amandine's semantic formulas in the post- and delayed post-tests became better structured and clearer. She successfully used appropriate refusal and thanking formulaic expressions in such semantic formulas like expressing commitment (*I am able*

to work hard. I will wait for this) and promising to do or give something similar because something similar was done or given to her (*let me know if you have anything to do next time*).

### Control group

In comparison to the treatment group participants, the control group students did not develop their L2 pragmatic competence well enough in order to produce refusal or thanking formulaic expressions appropriately in a given context. In other words, due to the limited range of refusal and thanking formulaic expressions used by control group participants, their responses lacked a native-like way of expression. In addition, the results of all three tests show that the semantic structure of the responses to both speech acts produced by the control group lacked coherence and logic and most of the time were incomplete or abrupt. The following examples show that the L2 respondents produced incomplete refusal or thanking statements and were not able to successfully reach the communicative goals:

- *My son is sick...and now I am... I stay, or...* (Brianna, refusal);
- *Oh thank you for doing my work, it's really...* (Anand, thanking);
- *Thank you. Yes, I am really...* (Kim, thanking).

Moreover, the responses of the control group participants contain multiple examples of pragmatically inappropriate utterances or utterances with various semantic irregularities. These include: *Thank you so much, God bless you!* (Brianna, thanking manager); *I will remind this help* (Tisha, thanking colleague); *If I finish early I come for my office so I work very hard* (Kim, confirming her commitment and thanking manager).

### Challenges of the L2 Learners and the Benefits of the Explicit Instruction

The oral reflections collected from the treatment group participants immediately after the post- and delayed post-tests revealed multiple challenges they faced while performing refusal and thanking speech acts.

**Q1: What challenges, if any, have you experienced while performing refusal and thanking speech acts?** Among the challenges the participants identified the following major ones: inability to perceive formulaic expressions as holistic units; tendency to translate words one by one from L1; inability to speak spontaneously and fluently; tendency to misuse structures of English semantic formulas.

**Inability to perceive formulaic expressions as holistic units.** Almost all participants noted that before the explicit instruction sessions they were unable to perceive formulaic expressions as prefabricated or holistic units (Wray & Perkins, 2000). This is what Amandine said in her reflection:

I was trying to separate... to check the meaning one by one...But then you said: "No, it's bundle, you don't have to separate them." Now I know that the

bundles [formulaic expressions] cannot be separated. I didn't realize that the bundle word you have to put them together. If you say "I can't afford that" it makes you understand that you can't separate them.

Ellis, Simpson-Vlach and Maynard (2008) examined three corpus-derived metrics that affected accuracy and fluency of processing formulaic sequences: length, frequency, and mutual information. They found that for the native speakers it was predominantly the mutual information (association between the words) of the formula that determined processability, whereas for the non-native speakers the frequency of occurrence played the most important role. The results of the present study showed that all four participants were unable to perceive previously unknown formulaic expressions as wholes until their meanings and pragmatic functions were explicitly explained during the course.

### ***Tendency to translate words one by one from L1***

Negative transfer in pragmatics was previously discussed in Olshtain (1983), Kasper (1992), and Takahashi (1996). These studies discussed the effect of social-effective factors on the use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence. Almost every participant of the treatment group had a tendency to translate words one by one from the L1 when trying to produce an utterance. For instance, Marcus said:

In the beginning I always wanted to translate from my L1, but now I speak more fluent[ly].

**Q2: Was the explicit instruction course useful for you? If yes, could you explain why? Has it helped you to overcome the challenges?** In terms of how the students commented on the role of the explicit instruction of formulaic language (refusal and thanking formulaic expressions) and pragmatics (semantic formulas), the answers contained the following major themes: increase of confidence; increase in fluency; vocabulary enrichment; time-efficient way of learning English.

### ***Increase of confidence***

Almost every participant mentioned an increase in confidence in his or her speech after the explicit instruction. After the delayed post-test was administered Mustafa noted:

When I speak to my English-speaking friends or neighbours, I feel better and much confident.

Julia also mentioned that she was able to use her newly acquired knowledge for every-day communication, and that she felt more confident:

It's very useful, I think. Because every day I go outside to communicate with other persons and I use these words to talk to him. So every day I use it, it's very useful. Now I have the formulas [formulaic expressions] and strategies [semantic formulas], so I can feel more confident.



### ***Vocabulary enrichment***

The participants also noted that their English vocabulary expanded after the explicit instruction course. For example, Amandine said:

I think that was very helpful because I learnt new words, I learnt how I can ask for something or I can ask for help. I can also reply when someone complimented me about something.

### ***Time-efficient way of learning English***

Another important finding, that arose from the reflections, is that focused instruction of situation-specific formulaic expressions can not only improve learners' pragmatic competence, but can also serve as one of the ways to avoid tedious explanations of complex grammatical structures and memorization of long lists of vocabulary items. To become active members of their communities and find employment, LINC students need to adjust to their new country as soon as possible. As Marcus emphasized in his reflection, "we are here because we want to work. We are not here because we want to continue to go to school".

### **Conclusion and Implications for Language Teaching**

This small-scale qualitative study suggests that teaching situation-specific formulaic expressions and semantic formulas of various speech acts may bring for L2 teaching and learning. The results show that L2 learners benefit from a combination of explicit instruction techniques (e.g., attention-drawing, explicit explanations and whole class discussions) in terms of acquisition and retention of situation-specific formulaic expressions and, by this means, develop their L2 pragmatic competence. The study has also demonstrated that, while teaching formulaic language helps with developing fluency, explicit instruction of L2 pragmatics may lead L2 learners to produce more concise and contextually appropriate utterances. To this end, more activities focusing on formulaic language and pragmatics should be incorporated into day-to-day classroom practices, especially if the final objective of the course is to enhance oral proficiency. Language teachers might also consider initiating whole-class discussions about the meanings and pragmatic functions of various formulaic expressions that commonly occur in English speech acts. In this study, such discussions were an integral part of each session and proved to be very effective in fostering learners' acquisition and retention of formulaic expressions and semantic formulas. In addition, role-plays are effective techniques for stimulating meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning in the L2 classroom, and, therefore, should not be neglected by teachers. Moreover, by encouraging students to reflect on their language learning, teachers can deepen students' understanding of the target language structures; such reflections can also be used as part of the ongoing (formative) assessment of students' achievement. Since the present study's results cannot be generalised beyond the four participants of the treatment group, large-scale empirical research needs to be conducted to explore the potential of explicit instruction of formulaic expressions that occur in other speech acts. Findings from such studies can largely contribute to the development and improvement of LINC curriculum as well as provide a basis for teacher professional development programs.

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Appendix 1: An example of a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT)

Refusing manager’s request (refusal)

Scenario: Your manager is asking you to stay for several extra hours after work today. However, you have an appointment scheduled with your family doctor that you have been waiting for more than a month. How would you explain the reason of your inability to stay in a polite way? In the dialogue below please fill in the blanks and write your possible replies (what would you say in this situation). Make sure you have read the whole dialogue before you fill in the blanks.

Manager: Hi ... (name)! Will you be able to stay for some extra time today after work? We really need to finish that report.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Manager: Oh, that’s a pity. Do you think you can still reschedule your appointment? I would really appreciate it if you could stay with us today.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Manager: Okay, I see. I understand you have to take care of your health first. I will e-mail you the details of our meeting later today then.

Appendix 2: Refusal and Thanking Formulaic Expressions in the Native Speaker (NS) Corpus

*Refusal formulaic expressions in the Native Speaker (NS) corpus*

IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA	REFUSAL FORMULAS USED
Recurrent formulaic expressions used for pragmatic purpose of refusal	<div>1. Sorry, I am not interested</div> <div>2. It’s not a good time to talk</div> <div>3. Sorry, I can’t make it</div> <div>4. I won’t be able to make it</div> <div>5. Sorry, I can’t afford that</div> <div>6. Unfortunately I can’t make it</div>

<p>Greater length or complexity</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I wish I could have made it</li> <li>2. I'm afraid I won't be able to make it this time</li> <li>3. Unfortunately I can't, but I'd be willing to stay longer another day</li> <li>4. I promise I will make it next time</li> <li>5. I'm not in a position to afford this</li> <li>6. I am not currently in a position to deal with this</li> <li>7. It will have to be quick</li> <li>8. I am really sorry to inconvenience you</li> <li>9. I appreciate your understanding</li> <li>10. Hopefully, we can get together soon/another time</li> </ol>
<p>Formulaic expressions that were part of a speech act but did not explicitly perform refusal function</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I already have a ___ I am satisfied with</li> <li>2. I am glad you called</li> <li>3. Go ahead</li> <li>4. Prior commitment</li> <li>5. I will stick with</li> <li>6. I am satisfied with</li> <li>7. Look forward to</li> <li>8. Be willing to</li> <li>9. Sounds like a good plan</li> <li>10. Current plan</li> <li>11. Have fun</li> <li>12. Have a great time</li> <li>13. Say hi to everyone</li> <li>14. I'll miss you all as well</li> <li>15. Thank you for understanding</li> <li>16. Thank you for the offer</li> <li>17. Sorry about that</li> <li>18. Let me know</li> <li>19. It will have to be quick</li> <li>20. Perfect, thanks</li> <li>21. Thanks so much</li> <li>22. Thanks anyway</li> <li>23. Thank you and sorry again</li> <li>24. Thank you so much/very much</li> </ol>

Thanking formulaic expressions in the Native Speaker (NS) corpus

IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA	THANKING FORMULAS USED
Recurrent formulaic expressions used for pragmatic purpose of thanking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thanks so much for + doing something</li> <li>2. Thank you for + doing something</li> <li>3. Thank you, that's so sweet of you</li> <li>4. Thank you for your confidence</li> <li>5. Thank you, that's so thoughtful of you</li> <li>6. Thank you! Do you really like it?</li> <li>7. Thank you! Do you think it suits me?</li> <li>8. Thanks, I love it</li> <li>9. Thanks again</li> </ol>
Greater length or complexity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Let me know if I can ever do anything for you</li> <li>2. If you need anything, just let me know</li> <li>3. Let me know if I can repay the favor sometime</li> <li>4. I am glad you liked it</li> </ol>
Semantic irregularity close to idioms or metaphors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I really owe you one</li> <li>2. I'll do my best</li> <li>3. How much of a relief it is</li> <li>4. I can't thank you enough</li> <li>5. You can count on me</li> <li>6. It meant a lot to me</li> <li>7. Thank you for putting your confidence in me</li> <li>8. That's a real vote of confidence</li> <li>9. That's wonderful news</li> <li>10. You're the greatest</li> <li>11. It's what friends are for</li> <li>12. I was in a tight spot</li> <li>13. I was in a bind</li> </ol>

Formulaic expressions that were part of a speech act but did not explicitly perform thanking function	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I really appreciate it</li> <li>2. I'm honoured</li> <li>3. I am so surprised</li> <li>4. This is amazing</li> <li>5. This is awesome</li> <li>6. I am very excited to hear this</li> <li>7. That's wonderful news</li> <li>8. I will work hard</li> </ol>
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### Appendix 3: Examples of an Activities Used in the Course

#### Activity 1: Focus on refusal formulaic expressions

FORMULAIC EXPRESSION	MEANING/FUNCTION
1. To make a prior commitment	a. To wait for something impatiently
2. Look forward to	b. a commitment that you have to finish before you start the next one someone is asking you to do
3. Get together	c. I really like this idea
4. Be willing to	d. To go to a small informal meeting or social gathering
5. Sounds like a good plan	e. I can't talk right now because I am busy
6. Can't make it	f. I don't want to accept it/have it
7. Can't afford that	g. I am not able to do it
8. Not a good time to talk	h. To gladly agree to do something
9. Not interested	i. Won't be able to do it
10. Won't be able to make it	j. I don't have money/time to buy/do something

Note. Answer key: 1. B; 2. A; 3. D; 4. H; 5. C; 6. G; 7. J; 8. E; 9. F; 10. I.



### Activity 2: Focus on semantic formulas in thanking

EXAMPLE OF RESPONSE	SEMANTIC FORMULA
1. Thank you! Do you really like it?	a. Thanking+ reassuring the listener
2. Thanks a lot for filling in for me today. I really owe you one.	b. Thanking+ expressing affection
3. Thank you so much! I am really grateful. I know I'm ready for the job!	c. Thanking+ expressing surprise and delight
4. Wow, thank you. I appreciate you giving me this opportunity.	d. Thanking+ promising to do or give something because something similar was done or given to you
5. Thank you, that's so sweet of you!	e. Thanking+ expressing surprise and delight+ confirming commitment
6. Woah! I am so surprised, thank you very much! So thoughtful on you! I will not disappoint you!	f. Thanking+ emphasizing the depth of gratitude

*Note.* The terminology of semantic formulas is based on Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) and Schauer and Adolphs (2006). Answer key: 1. C; 2 D; 3. A; 4. F; 5. B; 6. E.

### Appendix 4: An Example of a Lesson Plan

#### Focus on THANKING

*Time:* 9:00- 10:30 am

*Number of students:* 4

*Objective:* To draw learner's attention to the common English formulaic expressions and semantic formulas which occur in thanking speech acts; give learners an opportunity to discuss the differences between their L1s and English in terms of the usage of such expressions and semantic formulas.

Proficiency level: LINC- 5

- Explicit instruction and awareness-raising (1 hour)
  - Students are given examples of **thanking formulaic expressions** from the NS corpus. Each student is given 15 formulaic responses, 5 from each scenario, in random order.
  - Students are given some time to review the responses and then asked to assign the type of **semantic formula** used in each response to its verbal equivalent. They choose from the following types:

Thanking+ complementing

Thanking + expressing affection

Thanking + reassuring the listener

Thanking + promising to repay

Thanking+ expressing surprise and delight

Thanking+ exaggerating to emphasize the depth of the gratitude

Thanking+ confirming interlocutor's commitment

Thanking + stating intent to reciprocate (to do or give something, because something similar was done or given to you)

- The meaning of semantic formula is explicitly explained by the researcher before students start completing the task to make sure every learner understands the task.

### 2. Discussion and reflections (30 min)

- The objective of the discussion session is to check how many semantic formulas were properly identified by the learners as well as to direct students' attention to the thanking formulaic expressions that those responses contain.
- Students are asked to write a short reflection and answer the following question (30 min):

Which thanking formulaic expressions and semantic formulas from those that you have just reviewed would you use when:

- complimenting your friend;
- thanking your co-worker for taking your shift;
- thanking your manager for promotion?
- Students discuss the following questions with other group members: Have you noticed any differences between NS' *thanking strategies (semantic formulas)* and those used in your L1?
- Have you noticed any differences between *thanking formulaic expressions (fixed phrases)* used in English (NS corpus) and those you use in your L1 when thanking somebody for something?