

EFL English Student's Ability and Difficulties in Dealing with Academic Phrases

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Abstract

The high quality of academic writing is highly influenced by the sufficient use of academic phrases. This research examined the students with English major backgrounds in both English education and English literature and found their difficult recourses. This research developed an academic phrase test and adopted a questionnaire on students' perception on the source of academic phrase difficulties. There were 58 respondents from English majors with 49 from English education and 9 from English literature. The result of the test indicated that the student's ability in academic phrases needs to be improved. The students perceived those unfamiliar words usage, the absence of the syllabi, insufficient teaching, and less experience in using them are the source of difficulties. Therefore, it can be said that academic phraseology should be included in the English student's curriculum to solve the student's issues. By doing this students' exposure to academic phrases can be also increased so they will have more experience dealing with the phrases and can resolve their unfamiliarity with the words used in academic phrases. The findings of this study suggest that students in the English background majors should be assisted with academic phrases lessons to improve their academic writing in general and academic phrase usage in particular.

Keywords: *Academic phrases, English students, Source of difficulties, Academic writing.*

INTRODUCTION

Understanding phrases could be helpful in reading and writing because some words are highly possible to occur together. According to (Groom, 2005) phrases is a group words that tend to occur in a preferred order rather than just at random or according to grammatical rules. Many phrases will always be found in readings and can help writers to use the same phrases in the same context because they are preferable to be grouped.

Academic words are important in academic writing. It assists authors to use correct common academic phrases. Furthermore, the academic phrases could be an indication of academic writing quality (Hyland, 2008; Jones and Haywood, 2004). Highly profile writers can be identified by the appropriate use of these multi words. The sufficient use is helpful for the readers to follow the writer's idea.

There has been much research conducted on creating academic word list which can be used as guide in writing and reading. Academic words are mainly divided into two, general and specific academic words. General academic words are the word that are used in any academic context whereas the other one is the words used in specific field. Both categories can be mixed in one term, academic word list. Academic phrases are part of academic word list should be independent from the single word terms because in the writing has different challenges. It should be taught differently. Therefore, student's ability in employing academic phrases should be assessed.

In academic reading, phrases occupy at least one third of the text. After calculating phrases in academic text discourses. It was reported that the number of phrases employed in average range from one third to one half (Conklin, & Schmitt, 2012). This high proportion of multi word expressions indicate their importance in academic reading for readers. By having sufficient understanding on them, it will be very helpful to understand at least one third of a reading text. This importance has been suggested that due to the high number of phrases in academic writing in general or in specific purposes they are likely to have significant contribution to the reader's comprehension (Martinez & Murphy, 2011).

It is clear that academic phraseology or multi word expressions play an very important role in writing. Therefore, it is highly suggested to understand them, it is not only for EFL learners but also the First language learners because the Phrase Bank developed in University of Manchester has shown that at least 50 per cent native speaker students downloaded the phrase list (Davis & Morley, 2018).

Academic word list has been transforming from single word list into multiple word list. The first and Academic Word List (AWL) which is still widely used is AWL by Coxhead published in 2000. A decade after the first AWL published, researchers have started to include multiple words in their list such as academic list by Paquot (2010). Unfortunately, the was only about 3% multiword list in the entire list (Granger, 2017). More complete multiword list was studied and published by for example The Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon (OPAL, 2023) and Measey (2021)

Academic phrases concept should be made clear. They are not mainly about grammatical rules for the words' combination, but they are potential group of words that would occur in similar sequences (Davis & Morley, 2018). The high probability to many words' combination will lead to an issue of plagiarism because taking the same words from other sources could be classified as plagiarism. This concern has been addressed by previous researchers (Davis & Morley, 2018). They believe that the reuse of formulaic words could potentially put the user falling in a plagiarism trap. Therefore, they highly suggested to raise the students or authors' awareness on rules of using them correctly so they can avoid plagiarism.

Using academic phrases should not be categorized as plagiarism if the phrases do not contain opinion. Davis and Morley (2018) reported that instead of risking the students to plagiarize, the formulaic words assist the students to avoid plagiarism because they take the group of words, and they can adjust them according to their own need and interest. Furthermore, employing the phrases are certainly not plagiarism if the phrase commonly used in academic writing (Swales et al., 2004) and they do not contain opinion (Davis & Morley, 2018). It clear that, students or authors should not hesitate of using the formulaic words as far as they use frequent academic phrases and they do not contain other people's opinion. Instead, authors especially students and novice writers are encouraged to learn and use them in their writing because they have a lot advantages.

Many benefits of understanding and employing academic phrases for students especially the EFL students. As academic phrases list is organized according to their functional framework in academic writing, they are a good tool to understand and structure their academic writing in the right way (David and Morley, 2018). Also, the list can assist the students to improve their writing quality (Sword, 2012). This is because they use the phrases effectively and make their writings sound academic. Each phrase has been offered according to their use. The students need only the ability to put the right phrases in the right place. If they can do it, then their sentences will be easy to understand by readers. Having said that that ability to use correct phrases in writing can assist the students to produce a native like writing (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015). The novice writers will always find it difficult to be able to write like native speaker authors. But with formulaic lists which have been provided by many researchers and university websites, the possibility for novice writers from EFL countries to write like English native writing experts are achievable if they are able to place the phrases in the right context.

The phrases comprehension is also beneficial for readers. It is reported that after comparing the EFL student's grammatical rules, phraseology, and vocabulary, it is found that phraseology is independent construct from syntax and vocabulary. Furthermore, students with high phraseology knowledge outperform students with good traditional syntax and vocabulary mastery in reading comprehension (Kremmel et al., 2017). This finding has strengthened the important of formulaic words for students not only in writing but also reading. Another very interesting finding from the research is that it is against the belief that phraseology is under the grammar construct or vocabulary. The independent of phraseology could become another force to do more research on phraseology especially in the academic writing or reading.

For EFL language learning, the list can assist them for their academic writing and academic reading. By having good understanding of the formulaic word expression, it will help them to understand their readings and the list can help them to write their academic assignments. When the students find the words in their reading, the cognitive process will not take long time understand the same as in writing it will be easier for them to choose the right phrases in their writing. All they must do is to make sure the right formulaic words in the right place by choosing the phrases according to their functionality. One of the requirements of successful academic writing is the formulaic academic phrases knowledge (Davis & Morley, 2018).

In the context of Indonesia where English is taught as foreign language the phraseology knowledge will be very important especially for the undergraduate students of English teaching department. At the end of their study, they are required to write journal article and undergraduate thesis. One of the signs of good writings either for EFL or ESL writers is the sufficient use of academic phrases or multi word expressions. Unfortunately, many cases students cannot perform well in academic writing because they do not have a good understanding about academic writing due to insufficient support (French, 2011). The best way to identify either students need support or no and what support they need is to test them. The best support for them is the one that they need. Here where this research will play an important role by identifying the student's ability to recognize the academic phrases. If the student's performance is poor, then it means one of the supports that must be prepared for them is the multi words lessons.

Another important factor to be able to support the students is to find their source of difficulties. There are eight main factors that become the student's main source of difficulties in learning multi words. They are cultural background of the words, insufficient experiences, excluded in the course syllabi, poor instructional, inefficient cultural courses, unfamiliar words use, inequivalent meaning in the student's mother tongue, and the absence of context (Alhaysony,

2017; Orfan, 2020). Of the eight Orfan (2020) found that the top 4 reasons in her research were unfamiliarity of the used words, the absence of multi words at teaching and learning process, the insufficient teaching, and inexperience dealing with the multi words. These four reasons were used in the current research to explore either students in Indonesia found it them as the source of difficulties in academic phrases learning or not.

The use of formulaic words in academic writings can be found in the anywhere in the writing. However, the formulaic phrases can be found according to their function mostly found in introduction writing because in this section the pattern is similar across the different types of academic writing articles or theses. In this section generally the writing contains research gap description, goals, aims, scope, and the outline of the research. It is even believed that this part is the section where formulaic phrases are big in number because the required elements (Davis & Morley, 2018). Therefore, this research will focus on identifying the student's ability to identify the functional formulaic phrases in the introduction section and finding the student's source of difficulties.

The objectives of the research were to assess the EFL student's ability in using academic phrases by developing formulaic words test in introduction section and to determine the student's difficulties in using the academic phrases. The result of this study can be used by the curriculum developer in the English majors to assist students in the learning academic phrases and conduct more research in the issue as it has been suggested by one of prominent experts in phrases called Schmitt (2022).

METHOD

The data obtained from test and questionnaire would be analysed using descriptive qualitative. The first 5 questions indicated the number of students who can answers the right function of the phrases. The data would be presented in percentage of positive and negative responses and the mean would be also presented. The personal achievement and the average can be easily evaluated and presented. Meanwhile the second 4 questions about the student's perspective on the reasons why phrases were difficult would be also presented by showing its percentage of students who agree and strongly agree, students who are disagree and disagree and the mean. This make it possible to evaluate the students perspective.

The respondent were students with English major either English education or English letters at one of the private universities in Makassar. There were 58 of English students who responded our questionnaire. They were all at the end of their 7 semester. Of 58 respondents, 48 (84.5%) were English education students and 9 (15.5%) were English literature students. The 7 semester students were chosen because they had almost finished their study and they were currently focused on writing their proposal and undergraduate thesis. The questionnaire was administered one week before the final exam at the seven semester students up to two weeks after their exam. This timing was chosen to avoided bias answer from the students. The students responded to the questionnaire online.

This research develop a test to measure the student's phrasal ability and adopted questionnaire to find out the student's perception. The developed test consisted of 5 questions. The questions are derived from Davis and Morley (2018) and Morley (2014). They stated that most of the formulaic phrase can be easily found in the introduction part. Therefore, the 5 questions are about formulaic phrases in introductory section. One of the most significant current discussions in X is..., However, far too little attention has been paid to ..., The major objective of this study was

to investigate, This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part deals with ..., Throughout this paper the term X will be used to refer to.... The faction of the five phrases are establishing the importance of the topic, highlighting a knowledge gap, focus and aim, outlining of structure, and explaining keywords respectively. The test was set in multiple choices with 4 choices.

The difficulty level of each questions was analysed using difficulty index by Magno and Ouano (2010) as shown in the table 1. The formula is $P=R/T$ (Item of difficulty index=number of correct responses/ total responses). The distribution of student’s answers would be also presented so that the overall performance can be evaluated.

Table 1. Difficulty Index and Verbal Interpretation

Difficulty Index	Verbal Interpretation
0.76 or higher	Easy Item
0.25 to .75	Average Item
0.24 or lower	Difficult Item

In relation to adopted questionnaire. It consisted on top four reasons why university students find phrases difficult. These four reason were the top four reasons for students to believe that why academic phrases are difficult. They are multiword using unfamiliar words, they are not in the course syllabi, they are not thought well in the student’s English classes, and they are lack of experience dealing with the multiword (Al-Kadi, 2015; Alhaysony, 2017; Orfan, 2020). The questionnaire was designed with multiple choice where students chose strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

The result of the first test would indicate the students ability in academic phrases whereas the questionnaire on students perspective would find out the student’s perspective on why academic phrases were difficult. The result of the test and the result of the students perspective can be used to support each other. The result can be used as an initial information to identify the students score with their perspective. They score could be low and the same time they found the unfamiliar words usage, the absence of phrasal lessons in the syllabi, insufficient teaching, and unexperienced use were difficult. This could be an indication of the relation between the low score and the four factors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting the research, the following is the result of the research on academic research student’s test and their source of difficulties.

Table 2. Student’s test result

No	Function of Phrases	Difficulty Score	Difficulty Index			Verbal Interpretation
			≤ 0.24	0.25-0.75	≥ 0.76	
1	"One of the most significant current discussions in X is..."	0.48		X		Average
2	However, far too little attention has been paid to ...	0.40		X		Average

3	The major objective of this study was to investigate	0.24	X		Difficult
4	This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part deals with ...	0.47		X	Average
5	Throughout this paper the term X will be used to refer to....	0.29		X	Average

The table above indicates that the questions are average and difficult level. Students found that the phrase “the major objective of this study was to investigate ...” as the most difficult phrase to find its function which is focus and aim. The other four questions are in the average range 0.25-0.75.

Table 3. Distribution of correct answers

Correct Answer	Total Correct Answer	Precent
0	6	10.34
1	15	25.86
2	20	34.48
3	14	24.14
4	3	5.17
5	0	0
Total	58	100

The above table presents how many questions can student’s answer correctly. Interestingly, there is no one out of 58 students can answer all the 5 questions correctly. Majority students can answer 2 questions only (34.48%) followed by 1 correct answer only (25.86%), 2 correct answers (24.14%), no right answer (10.34%), and 4 correct answers (5.17%). The average correct score number was 1.88%. This is less than half of the questions.

Table 4. Source of difficulties in learning English

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
1	Academic phrases are difficult because they use unfamiliar words	13.8%	62.2%	19%	5.2%	0
2	Academic phrases are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi	5.2%	31%	44.9%	17.2%	1.7%
3	Academic phrases are difficult because they are not taught well in English courses	10.3%	51.7%	20.8%	17.2%	0

4	Academic phrases are difficult because lack of experience dealing with academic phrases	22.4%	53.4%	17.2%	7%	0
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Table 5. Mean and Standard Deviation of Source of difficulties in learning English

No	Statement	% Agree and Strongly Agree	Mean	Std
1	Academic phrases are difficult because they use unfamiliar words	76%	3.84	.721
2	Academic phrases are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi	36.2%	3.21	.853
3	Academic phrases are difficult because they are not taught well in English courses	62%	3.55	.902
4	Academic phrases are difficult because lack of experience dealing with academic phrases	75.8%	3.91	.823

The table 4 and 5 presented the students' responses on the source of difficulties in learning English. The data showed that students realised that the four items are their sources of difficulties in learning academic phrases. Interestingly the second item, Academic phrases are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi obtained only 36.2% for strongly agree and agree responses, but the mean is high, 3.21. The reason is because the student's responses in the Undetermined is high, 44.9%. In fact, majority of the students respond Undetermined in the second item.

Academic writing is an urgent ability for students in the semester 7 above. In the seventh semester they start writing research proposal and finish their study in their eighth semester. By the end of this semester they have finished all skills in relation to academic writing. Therefore, they should have the ability to write proposal, undergraduate thesis, and academic articles. One of the most important parts of academic writing is using academic phrases. If they use academic phrases effectively their writing can be a native like, many experts (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015; Liao & Fukuya, 2004) believed that student's ability in academic phrase can help students to produce writing like native English people.

The test of academic phrases indicated that no students can answer all the five questions correctly and only 3 out of 58 answered 4 questions correctly. Most of them (20%) get two correct answers. The average correct answer was 1.88. Interestingly the difficulty test of the questions showed that 4 of the questions were average and 1 is very difficult. According this result it can be concluded that academic phrases are still challenging for the English students. This result can be

an indication that students writing ability is still not good enough because the academic phrase use indicated academic writing quality (Hyland, 2008; Li & Schmitt, 2009). This result indicated that students are not ready enough to start writing high quality academic writing.

There were many reasons why academic phrases are difficult for students. This research indicated that four of them: unfamiliar words usage, the absence at the syllabi, insufficient teaching, and inexperience in using them. These four issues have also become source of difficulties in learning multi words, specifically in idioms learning (Al-Kadi, 2015; Alhaysony, 2017; Orfan, 2020). An interesting result regarding the questions “Academic phrases are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi”. Majority of the students (44.9%) are not sure but the mean is 3.21 and standard deviation is .853. This could be concluded that the item is also as source of difficulties of the students in learning academic phrases.

Discussion

Based on the students' perception, academic phrases were difficult for them because they were not in syllabi and not taught well. Therefore this research suggests that academic phrases should be included in the syllabi and taught in the classroom well. It could be in the academic writing classes or in reading classes. These will increase their exposure and experience and make them familiar with the phrases. If the students are taught well academic phrases it will help them to write their academic writing. According to French (2011) the students do not have a good academic phraseological knowledge due to insufficient support. One of the best supports is by including them in the curriculum.

The four difficulties that are encounter by the students in academic phrases are similar with other EFL students in Yemen (Al-Kadi, 2015), Saudi Arabia (Maha Alhaysony, 2017), and in Afghanistan (Orfan, 2020) who are struggling in multiword items specifically in idiomatic expression. The result indicated that in multiword learning either academic phrase or idiomatic expression the EFL students experience similar difficulties.

To sum up, the result of the research has an implication to the learning academic phrases for students in English majors in EFL context. Their performance was poor therefore they need assistance to improve their ability. In their improvement process the 4 difficulties should be taken into consideration to maximize the result of the instructional process.

CONCLUSION

Academic phrases is an important part of academic writing. Vast majority of students in English education and English literature in Indonesia are required to write proposal, undergraduate thesis, and journal article in English at the end of their semester. Their academic phrases play an important role in their academic writing. According to result of this study, the students with English background did have a good academic phrases performance. There were four reasons why students believed academic phrases were difficult for them: unfamiliar words usage, the absence at the syllabi, insufficient teaching, and inexperience in using them. The findings of this research suggest that students of English majors need assistance in the use of academic phrases in their academic writings. Therefore, it is recommended to include academic phrases in the curriculum either in writing or reading lessons. With this, student's exposure can be improved as the same time so they could have more experience and understand more the unfamiliar words in academic phrases. For further research, it is suggested to explore more about the factor of difficulties and the model of academic phrases incorporation in the curriculum.

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