

## Role of Formulaic Sequences in Teaching English Writing to College Students

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### Abstract

Writing represents a critical component of English language acquisition, serving not only as a vital educational goal but also as a fundamental means of facilitating language internalization. Within the domain of teaching English at college, the pedagogical value of formulaic sequences is particularly noteworthy. Formulaic sequences enhance the efficiency of language processing, significantly improving the accuracy and idiomatic quality of English writing. Consequently, a focus on fostering college students' interest in English writing, alongside efforts to strengthen their overall language proficiency, is essential for advancing their writing capabilities. This paper seeks to elucidate the role of formulaic sequences in teaching English writing at college, with the aim of enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and providing valuable insights for educators.

### Keywords

Formulaic Sequences; English Writing; College English Teaching.

### 1. Introduction

Writing is a critical skill within English learning, reflecting students' ability to apply language in real-time contexts—a capability that presents substantial challenges for both educators and learners. As a foundational skill, writing occupies a central position in college English curricula, offering a scientific means of assessing students' linguistic proficiency and promoting the internalization of language (Shi & Yu, 2019). Given the global prominence of English as a lingua franca, developing students' ability to write and communicate effectively in English is of paramount importance. Despite students' extensive vocabulary memorization and mastery of grammatical rules through traditional listening, speaking, and reading exercises, they frequently encounter difficulties in writing, such as incorrect collocations and improper word usage. Additionally, issues related to textual coherence and cohesion often undermine the logical structure of their compositions, further highlighting the significance of writing in language education (Lewis, 1993).

Recent years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in English writing research, with a particular focus on various instructional approaches, including process-based methods, genre pedagogy, and formulaic sequence (FS) instruction. Among these, the integration of FSs into writing pedagogy represents a relatively novel strategy, attracting considerable attention from researchers. FSs, as defined by Lewis (1993), are prefabricated, frequently occurring word combinations with specific structures and relatively fixed meanings. Wray (2002) further conceptualizes FSs as sequences of words that are stored and retrieved directly from memory, without the need for grammatical generation or analysis.

Despite variations in the definitions provided by scholars, the essence of FSs remains consistent: they are linguistic units with relatively fixed grammatical structures and specific pragmatic functions. The integration of FSs into writing pedagogy can thus enhance students' awareness of these constructs, increase their frequency of use, and ultimately improve their English writing proficiency (Wei, 2011; Ma, 2011). Moreover, FSs serve as the smallest units of input and output, combining syntax, semantics, and context, thereby facilitating efficient vocabulary acquisition and enabling students to complete writing tasks accurately and effectively (Shi & Yu, 2019). This instruction not only saves time and effort in language learning but also engages students in meaningful, context-based learning, thus addressing the current challenges in college English writing instruction.

This paper seeks to explore new avenues for English writing pedagogy by leveraging the effective strategies of teaching FSs, aiming to provide novel insights into teaching methodologies that can inform and enhance college English writing instruction.

## 2. Current Research on FSs in English Writing

A comprehensive search was conducted on CNKI and Web of Science using "formulaic sequence" or "lexical chunk" and "English Writing" as keywords, with the search period spanning from 1990 to 2023. The results of a bibliometric analysis reveal the research landscape over the past few decades, indicating a total of 768 related foreign publications and 881 domestic publications. The overall trend suggests a steady increase in research activity on this topic (Bi, 2020; Su, 2021).

In recent years, both domestic and international scholars have increasingly recognized the pedagogical value of teaching FSs in English writing instruction, leading to a proliferation of studies in this area. Lewis (1993) was one of the earliest proponents of teaching FSs, advocating for students to actively accumulate and learn FSs as a means of enhancing their language proficiency. He later applied this approach to writing instruction, emphasizing the primacy of FSs over grammar in language teaching.

In China, numerous studies have explored the application of FS instruction in English writing. For example, Shi and Yu (2019) conducted an empirical study using a corpus-based approach to examine the impact of FS instruction on first-year high school students' English writing abilities. Their findings suggest that corpus-based FS instruction significantly improves students' writing performance, with a positive correlation observed between the quantity of FSs used and students' writing scores.

Bi (2020) investigated the application of teaching FSs in vocational English writing, analyzing the current state of vocational English writing instruction, the importance of FSs, and specific instructional strategies. The study highlights the potential for improving English writing instruction through the application of teaching FSs in vocational education contexts.

Su (2021) conducted a comparative study on the effects of grammar-assisted FS instruction on the writing abilities of English majors and non-English majors at Sanya University. The results provide empirical support for improving writing pedagogy in higher education, suggesting that FS instruction can enhance the writing proficiency of students across different academic disciplines.

These studies offer valuable insights into the relationship between FSs and English writing, providing a foundation for further exploration in this area. Despite the increasing number of studies on teaching FSs and English writing, the application of FS instruction to college English writing remains relatively underexplored, particularly in studies focusing on college students as the primary research subjects. Therefore, this paper seeks to address this gap by examining the application of FS instruction in teaching English writing at college, with the aim of offering practical insights for educators.

### 3. Challenges in Applying Formulaic Sequence Instruction to College English Teaching

The interactive nature of teaching requires both teachers and students to engage in the process of knowledge transfer and acquisition. However, several challenges hinder the effective application of FS instruction in college English teaching. These challenges are analyzed from both the teacher and student perspectives.

#### 3.1. Low Awareness of Writing among College Students

Many college students approach English learning with a goal-oriented mindset, often driven by the need to pass standardized tests such as CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, and TEM-8. This exam-focused approach leads to extensive mechanical training on question banks, which is detrimental to the long-term development of English proficiency (Bi, 2020). Consequently, students tend to prioritize vocabulary and reading skills over writing, often resorting to memorizing templates to improve writing efficiency. Addressing the challenges in teaching English writing requires effective strategies to enhance students' writing awareness and develop their writing cognitive processes (Su, 2021).

#### 3.2. Monolithic Teaching Methods

In college English writing classes, the limited number of instructional hours often compels teachers to adopt rigid teaching methods, such as rote memorization of vocabulary and sentence patterns related to specific writing topics. While this approach may facilitate short-term memory retention and writing skill development, it risks leading to the fossilization of students' writing thought processes and negative transfer from their native language (Shi & Yu, 2019). Although some educators have attempted to incorporate innovative methods into their teaching, the overall approach remains predominantly monolithic, stifling students' initiative and creativity.

### 4. Application of FSs in College English Writing Instruction

#### 4.1. Enhancing English Communication Skills

The integration of FS learning can significantly improve students' English communication skills. FSs, as basic linguistic units, are stored in the brain as conventional language chunks that can be retrieved and used holistically during communication. This process reduces cognitive load and shortens response time, thereby enhancing language expression. FS instruction facilitates the analysis of writing performance by examining the richness of content and the organization of language, ultimately contributing to improved writing scores (Lewis, 1993; Wray, 2002).

The use of FSs enhances the accuracy of language expression by involving the accumulation of topic-related FSs. Moreover, the coherence provided by FSs strengthens students' organizational skills in writing. From a pedagogical perspective, FS instruction offers an ideal method for promoting vocabulary acquisition and language output, as evidenced by the expansion of students' lexical repertoire. FSs, generated based on relatively fixed grammatical structures and specific pragmatic functions, help avoid language errors and improve accuracy (Wei, 2011; Ma, 2011).

#### 4.2. Preventing Fossilization of Interlanguage

To prevent fossilization during language learning, teachers must adopt scientific methods to analyze the underlying causes of students' errors in output of FSs. Understanding the dynamic nature of interlanguage, as well as the role of errors, fossilization, and language transfer, is crucial for guiding students toward accurate language use. FSs learning allows students to address language errors in second language acquisition, thereby facilitating the dynamic

development of interlanguage (Krashen, 1982). Educators can employ contrastive analysis and interlanguage error analysis to help students self-correct and improve their interest in FS learning (Shi & Yu, 2019).

Peer feedback, as an effective corrective mechanism, also plays a critical role in enhancing the accuracy of FS usage in writing. The classification of FSs, such as the differentiation between synonyms (because of; due to; owing to) and antonyms (a piece of cake; a tough nut to crack), is instrumental in expanding students' FS repertoire and enhancing their linguistic diversity. Mastery of a substantial number of FSs enables students to construct and expand sentences effectively, thereby elevating their writing proficiency (Su, 2021).

### 4.3. Cultivating Cultural Connotation

Language serves as a carrier for culture, with different languages embodying distinct cultural connotations. In the context of contemporary efforts to articulate Chinese culture globally, the cultural significance of language has become increasingly important. Consequently, language learning must involve an understanding of the cultural background and connotations underlying linguistic expressions. During English writing instruction, educators should raise students' awareness of FSs and guide them in exploring the cultural connotations embedded within these linguistic units (Bi, 2020).

For students who lack awareness of FSs, educators must provide explicit guidance, encouraging students to engage in overt learning of the cultural literacy underlying FS learning. By understanding the inherent logical structures and thought processes of English, students can recognize the foundational role of FSs in communication. Moreover, enhancing students' exploration of the cultural awareness embedded in FSs is essential for enabling them to convey specific cultural meanings accurately in their writing (Shi & Yu, 2019).

### 4.4. Addressing Individual Differences

FS learning must also emphasize comprehensible input. Therefore, the selection of teaching materials should prioritize content that is engaging and relevant to students' lives. Only by closely aligning with students' lived experiences can educators stimulate their interest in communication and enhance their input and output of linguistic material (Krashen, 1982). While increasing the input of FSs, educators must also address individual differences among students, recognizing that each student has a unique baseline level of language proficiency.

To facilitate targeted language learning, educators can implement differentiated instruction through student grouping, layered teaching objectives, stratified task delivery, and differentiated assessment. This approach ensures that students of varying levels receive scientific and targeted instruction, enabling them to progress based on their original proficiency levels. Given the differences in students' cognitive approaches and value orientations in language learning, educators should not only integrate FS learning into English writing instruction but also be mindful of students' diverse proficiency levels (Su, 2021). By adjusting teaching plans based on students' specific needs and developing explicit stratified plans, educators can ensure that all students maintain a positive attitude toward language learning.

## 5. Conclusion

English writing constitutes a critical aspect of college students' English learning, with a particular emphasis on language communication and the application of linguistic norms. However, students often experience anxiety and difficulty in writing, which can be exacerbated by the absence of comprehensible input. FSs, as input materials, offer a valuable means of enhancing students' language proficiency and understanding the cultural connotations underlying them. Furthermore, educators must introduce students to the definitions,

classifications, and functions of FSs, thereby highlighting the importance of FS learning. Finally, appropriate teaching activities and exercises should be designed to accommodate students of varying proficiency levels, ensuring that FS learning is effectively integrated into English writing instruction. Throughout this process, educators must also remain vigilant against the fossilization of interlanguage. The study of college English writing is a long-term endeavor that requires continuous exploration of the application of FS instruction. Future research should expand the scope of teaching FSs to other aspects of English learning, such as listening, reading, and speaking, thereby deepening the understanding and application of FSs.

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