BALEAP Conference 2017

Launch, toolkit, lifesaver: the use of metaphors by students and staff to conceptualise the role of formulaic phrases

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How important are formulaic phrases to academic writing?

- ‘it is impossible to perform at a level acceptable to native users … without controlling an appropriate range of multiword units’ (Cowie, 1992: 10)
- ‘important building blocks of coherent discourse’ (Hyland, 2008: 8)
- Use of formulaic phrases reduces processing effort for the reader (Wray, 2002)
Pedagogic responses

- equip learners with an awareness of the nature of a typical native speaker’s language production ‘both in speech and in writing’ (Howarth, 1998: 186).
- adopt an explicit instructional approach (Jones and Haywood, 2004; Al Hassan & Wood, 2015; Peters & Pauwels, 2015).
- encourage and equip novice writers to be able to identify useful formulaic phrases in the texts they are reading and to recycle these in their own writing (Swales & Feak, 2004).
- provide writers with a list of commonly-used formulaic sequences for reference and incorporation into their own writing. (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010; Fox & Tigchelaar, 2015)
Aims of this study:

- Explore the views of student writers who use a list of academic phrases, and the views of staff supporting student writers
- Analyse the metaphors they used to describe this process
Why study the metaphors?

- ‘So many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated... We need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts we understand in clearer terms’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003: 115).
How important are metaphors to our thinking?

‘Metaphors structure the way we think and the way we act, and our systems of knowledge and belief, in a pervasive and fundamental way… metaphors are not just superficial stylistic adornments of discourse’ (Fairclough, 1992:194)
Our data collection method

- Google survey attached to Academic Phrasebank (AP)
- 2,571 respondents to date
- Respondents = students (UG, PG, PhD) and staff (learning advisors, EAP lecturers, lecturers of other subjects), NS/NNS, based in the UK and many countries overseas
- 796 answered open question about how AP had helped them
- 100 (approx) used metaphors
- Follow-up interviews with 8 respondents
Our analysis

- Manual identifying of metaphors in open question responses to survey and interviews
- Confirming metaphor through checking against METALUDE database (Goatly, 2002)
- Interpretation of metaphor based on Goatly (root analogy, literal and metaphorical meaning) and our understanding of the context of respondent
- Grouping of metaphors based on academic writing process
DIFFICULTY IS OBSTACLE

- I find that it helps with motivation when I am writing - If I feel stuck, or if I'm having writers’ block, reading through the Phrasebank gives ideas of how to move on to the next part of my writing. (PG student, Social Sciences L1 English)
ARGUMENT IS BUILDING

- AP helps to give them a starting point, and **build** that framework and the groundwork which is really important (EAP lecturer based in Malaysia, L1 English)
It has allowed fresh ideas on structuring my essay to let it flow easier and connect key themes while not repeating my writing throughout. (UG student, Medicine, L1 English)
ACTIVITY IS BOAT TRAVEL

- They are **like a launch**. It is as if you are an artist with a blank canvas...Once you have started with the words moving along the line, the continuation is much, much easier (Dyslexic support advisor, Education, UK, L1 English)
SUCCESS/CONTINUATION IS DISTANCE

- I came across this structure for writing and it made the world of difference. I think it helped me order the disordered, as it were. It put a structure on everything. It gave it a logic, so it was easier to read. It gave a discipline to my writing. My writing improved in leaps and bounds. I think before, I tried to put across things that were far too complicated in a far too unstructured way, it just read like a mess.

(PhD student, Education, L1 English)
Out of all the resources that I use, students’ eyes always **light up** when I show them the AP. (Learning support advisor, Social Sciences, L1 English)
When they see how they could phrase it, sometimes *the penny drops*, they get a sense of ‘oh right, that’s the sort of thing I should be saying’. In their feedback, sometimes the markers will say things like ‘more discussion is needed’ but the students are not sure what that would really look like, so I think it can help them pin a more abstract concept onto something more specific (Learning advisor, Education, L1 English, UK)
I think it certainly does help with ideas because there are examples, like ‘the argument is not valid because x’… it might even help them steer the content of an entire paragraph at times in a certain way. (Learning advisor, Education, USA L1 German)
Phrasebank has de-shrouded the mechanics of academic language formulae. Prior to phrasebank no one had explained the strategy of having phrases on a page to contribute to the structure of a paragraph. It also demystified the concept of academic rigour and gave me practical tools to approach structuring critical arguments quickly and efficiently. (PG student, Social Sciences, L1 English)
QUALITY IS SHAPE/SIZE

- Phrasebank has *transformed* my life. It has given me confidence in my academic writing, which accumulated into gaining confidence in other areas of my academic work such as presentations and therefore in myself as a person (PG student, Education, other L1)
Metaphor groups

Unblocking
- Writer’s block
- Stuck
- Flow

Constructing
- Build
- Tool
- Framework

Moving
- Steer
- Launch
- Leaps and bounds

Demystifying
- Light
- Transform
- The penny drops
Instances metaphors were used by category

- Unblocking
- Constructing
- Demystifying
- Moving
Metaphor groups and the writing process

**Unblocking**
- Getting started, articulating, gaining confidence, avoiding repetition

**Moving**
- Being productive and creative, focusing on continuous writing, connecting to rhetorical moves, establishing a direction

**Constructing**
- Organising, following a given structure, CARS model (Swales, 1981)

**Demystifying**
- Understanding how to write, coping
Conclusion

- A well-structured set of formulaic phrases can help student writers.
- Attention needed to phraseology in academic writing courses.
- Metaphors give insights into the kinds of problems student writers face.
- Metaphors can be used to inform teaching of academic writing.
 References


References