

**An Awareness of Formulaic Clusters in Conclusion Moves of Applied
Linguistics Research Articles**

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Abstract

Writing academic research article is one of the most important endeavors through which the writer can contribute his own knowledge and create a voice among the members of disciplinary community. Exploring the linguistic features which are used to identify the rhetorical structures of academic research articles is of value to have a clearer view of this widely practiced genre. The present research investigates the use of formulaic clusters as a type of linguistic feature in writing research article conclusions by non-native writers. A corpus of 200 research article conclusions written by Iranian L2 users in the field of applied linguistics was compiled and the most frequent four-word formulaic clusters were identified and categorized structurally in the corpus. Then, the identified bundles were classified based on the communicative purpose they serve in each move and step of the conclusions following Yang and Allison's (2003) move organization of research article conclusions. Findings demonstrated that L2 writers relied heavily on the use of specific formulaic bundles to perform the communicative functions associated with the moves and steps. The largest number of clusters was used to show Move 1, *Summarizing the study* and the least bundles occurred in Move 2, *Evaluating the study*.

Keywords: Communicative function, formulaic language, formulaic clusters, move and step, RA conclusion

1. Introduction

Among different academic genres, research articles (RAs) is considered as one of the most well-studied and important methodological issue in a field of knowledge since they communicate information on the basis of the norms and conventions of that field (Hewings, 2006). One way to gain credibility and get acceptance from the discourse community is to publish RA in a field

(Hyland, 1998). Therefore, it is deemed necessary for writers (especially novice ones) to have a better view of the genre of RA (Hyland, 1998). To this end, an analysis of the rhetorical feature of RA could be a great help to cover this. Several studies have been conducted to highlight the rhetorical organization of RA. They found that RAs are made up of a number of rhetorical moves and steps (Bahtia, 1997; Brett, 1994; Kanoksilapatham, 2003; Swales, 1981; Yang & Allison, 2003). Kanoksilapatham (2003) defined moves as those units in the genre or register which are used to show the related communicative purposes. In the identification of each move, there are a number of linguistic and lexico-grammatical features which are used to characterize moves or steps of a move. For instance, Swales (1981) found that in recognizing the moves of RA introduction, certain words and combination of words are to be used more than others. Investigating such relationships between the rhetorical structure of RA and the type of linguistic feature used to serve functions in the moves and steps can provide novice writers with ways that academic RAs are organized.

Several studies have endeavored to highlight the rhetorical organization of different sections of RA (Bahtia, 1997; Brett, 1994; Swales, 1981; 1990). However, little is known about the role of linguistic features in moves and steps of RA conclusions, especially those written by L2 writers, to see how they summarize their study in this section. This would be beneficial for those who aim to publish in academic journals and equip themselves with information regarding ways to organize their language. It is hypothesized that “knowledge of the specific language associated with each move” of the register or discourse is required (Henry & Rosenberry, 2001, p. 155) in order to have a positive instruction. Thus, identifying linguistic features such as those of word clusters which co-occur more frequently than we expect in the moves of RA conclusion could be an influential guide for novice writers to become familiarized with the type of language used in this section.

Adel and Erman (2012) define idiomaticity as the knowledge of word combinations which are conventionalized. In order to realize this knowledge, it is deemed necessary to use recurrent word expressions that have communicative functions peculiar to various registers which are referred to as formulaic sequences (Erman, 2009; Wray; 2000; 2002; Wray & Perkins, 2000) or

lexical bundles (Biber & Conrad, 1999; Biber et al, 1999). Biber et al. (1999) defined formulaic clusters as a combination of words which are used recurrently in the text or speech. They are considered as building blocks of discourse (Biber & Barbier, 2007) and a main source of fluency in writing. Having a good command of formulaic clusters can signal a writer's maturity in writing. Examples of formulaic clusters in academic writing are *on the other hand*, *as can be seen*, and *in terms of the*.

Formulaic clusters are retrieved automatically based on their frequency in the given register using computer software such as Wordsmith Tools. Frequency of occurrence is regarded as the defining characteristics of formulaic clusters, that is, in order to identify them in the language, certain criteria are needed. However, such cut-off point criteria are arbitrary and different from one research to another. For example, to Biber et al. (1999), those strings which occur more than 10 times in a million words are called formulaic clusters. Cortes (2004) selected a different cut-off point criterion and set the cut-off point at 20 times per million words. Another criterion is called dispersion, that is, a string had to be used in at least five different texts in order to guard against a single writer's idiosyncratic effects. Formulaic clusters normally have incomplete structures and are mostly phrasal or clausal (e.g. *in terms of the*, *it is important to*). The last characteristic is that unlike idiomatic expressions, their meaning can be understood from the individual parts which make them up.

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the use of formulaic clusters in academic writing disciplinarily and linguistically (Adel & Erman, 2012; Chen & Baker, 2010; Cortes, 2004, 2006; Hyland, 2008; Karabacak & Qin, 2013; Strunkyt & Jurkūnait, 2008). Among them, Hyland (2008) conducted a quantitative and qualitative research of lexical bundle use in a 3.5 million word corpus of research articles, doctoral dissertations and Master's theses across four disciplines, while Adel and Erman (2012) compared the use of bundles in English native-speaker writing and Swedish L2 learners of English.

Previous research has also shown that there is a meaningful correspondence between certain lexico-grammatical features and the rhetorical structure of RA (Bahtia, 1997;

Kanoksilapatham, 2003; Swales, 1981; 1990). In other words, moves and steps in RA are identified through a range of words or word combinations. In this line, Swales (1981) found that in move 1 of RA introduction, words such as *interest* or *important* are highly used to display centrality. Other expressions such as *the purpose of this study* or *the aim of this research* are used frequently in move 3 of RA introduction. Another justification for this close affinity comes from the fact that many researchers found both formulaic clusters and move patterns to be building blocks of language use (Biber & Barbier, 2007; Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007; Cortes, 2013). Thus, unveiling such relationship between how the most frequent word clusters are employed in different moves of RA would provide valuable hints for researchers about how different sections of RA are constructed. Yet, to our knowledge, little research has been conducted to explore the function of such expressions in the moves of RA conclusion section, especially those written by non-native writers. Therefore, the present research attempts to investigate and highlight the use of the most commonly used formulaic clusters in the moves and steps of RA conclusion sections written by Iranian L2 writers in order to provide insights into how such conclusion sections are organized and what expressions are the most formulaic. Writing the conclusion section has found to be challenging for non-native authors since it “provides not only an outline of the study conducted, but also other significant elements such as implications and recommendations” (Sandoval, 2010, p.1). Giving such significant elements would provide researchers with the privilege they need to have academic voice in their disciplinary communities. Achieving this academic voice is one of the fundamental purposes that L2 learners of English pursue in order to contribute to knowledge and publish in esteemed journals. To qualify as such, it is widely realized that the frequent use of formulas such as lexical clusters gives L2 writers the change to attain native-like fluency and competence they require to establish themselves as credible researchers.

2. Corpus and method

This study is based on a corpus of 200 RA conclusions, totaling 119,785 words written by Iranian L2 writers in the field of Applied Linguistics. The L2 writers are defined by a language learning culture that is strongly anchored in a country that uses English as a foreign language. In the field of Applied Linguistics, the final section of RA can be discussion, conclusion or even

implication. Therefore, the closing section of each RA was checked carefully by the researcher to decide on the concluding section for analysis. The conclusion sections were extracted from the articles and pasted in a separate document in the form of text to be ready for analysis. The selected articles were taken from two journals published in Iran: *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics* and *Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 100 texts from each journal. Table 1 below illustrates the details of the corpus used in this study.

Table 1. Details of the corpus in the study

Journal	Number of texts
Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics	100
Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies	100
Total	200
Number of words	119,785

This study only analyzes four-word formulaic clusters as a unit of analysis since previous literature has found that four-word units are the most frequent (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber et al., 2004; Cortes, 2004, 2006) and furnish the researchers with clearer structures and functions (Hyland, 2008). The computer software, Wordsmith Tools, was used to identify and make a list of the most frequent four-word clusters. A cut-off frequency criterion of 40 times per million words was assigned to the software as a threshold for the identification of clusters. This decision is in line with the previous research on formulaic clusters and also based on the small size of the corpus. In addition, to guard against an individual writer's idiosyncratic influences, another criterion was set, that is, a four-word cluster must occur in at least 5 different texts to be called formulaic.

The target clusters retrieved from the software were first categorized according to their structure using the taxonomy by Biber et al. (2004). Based on this categorization, formulaic clusters have three main structures, namely verb phrases, dependent clauses, and noun and prepositional phrases. In the final phase of the qualitative analysis, each move and its related steps of RA conclusions were found in order to see what communicative functions formulaic

clusters convey in each move and step. For this purpose, Yang and Allison's (2003) move organization of RA conclusions was used as an analytical framework in this study. They found three main moves and some related steps in analyzing the RA conclusions of their study, as is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Yang and Allison's model of conclusion

Moves	Steps
Move 1. Summarizing the study	
Move 2. Evaluating the study	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Indicating significance/advantage2. Indicating limitations3. Evaluating methodology
Move 3. Deductions from the research	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Recommending further study2. Drawing pedagogic implication

As can be seen, RA writers use move 1, *summarizing the study*, to provide a summary of their main findings in the study. Move 2, *evaluating the study*, is used to appraise the research in general in correspondence to the three related steps as shown in Table 2. They are used to indicate the significance of the study, limitations and evaluate the methodology of the research. In move 3, *deductions from the research*, authors move a step forward and expand their results by recommending a new line for further research or drawing pedagogic implications (Yang & Allison, 2003, p. 382). Once formulaic clusters were identified in the corpus, they were analyzed in their context to find out to what extent and how they were manifested in the moves and steps of the conclusions. In order to better arrive at the communicative aims conveyed by the clusters, all the tokens of each cluster were checked manually in their context. To enhance the reliability of explanation, a second rater helped the researcher in identifying the discursive and communicative meaning of the clusters used in the moves and steps.

3. Result and discussion

There were 35 target clusters in the corpus of RA conclusions. Among them, the most frequent was *the results of the* with 33 occurrence, followed by *results of this study* and *of the present study*, with 26 and 23 occurrences. Table 3 presents the list of top ten most frequent four-word clusters in the corpus. The cluster *in English and Persian* was found to be used based on the specific context being investigated by Iranian writers.

Table 3. The top 10 most frequent formulaic clusters in the corpus

Clusters	Raw frequency
the results of the	33
results of this study	26
of the present study	23
findings of this study	22
The results of this	20
can be concluded that	19
on the other hand	19
results of the study	18
findings of the present	16
the findings of the	14

3.1 Structural classification of formulaic clusters

Structural analysis of the identified clusters showed that most of them were in the form of a phrase. Academic discourse have previously been found to use such a structure in the construction of formulaic clusters (Adel & Erman, 2012; Biber et al., 2004; Cortes, 2004, 2006; Hyland, 2008). The most prevalent structure of this type used by Iranian L2 writers was noun and prepositional phrase, comprising almost 65% of the total clusters (see Table 4). It seems that in the field of Applied Linguistic, writers rely the most on the combination of noun and prepositions to summarize their study in the conclusion section of RA. As can be seen in Table 4, 25% of the clusters were made up of verb phrases and the least attention was dedicated to dependent clause clusters with only 10% of use. Such percentages of use can be translated into

the fact that Iranian L2 authors may have found the use of verbs in the form of phrases more coherent and lucid in summing up their study than those of dependent clauses. Another way to justify this usage comes from the influence from their first language, Farsi.

Table 4. Structural distribution of formulaic clusters

Verb phrase	Dependent clause	Noun and prepositional phrase
25%	10%	65%

3.2 Formulaic clusters and moves

Once the structural characteristic of the clusters was identified, they were analyzed in their context to discern the communicative function they convey in each move and step of the conclusions. Firstly, it was found that a number of clusters did not appear to fit into any move or step of a move. They were used to serve other functions than those related to moves and steps of conclusion, including shell noun (Aktas & Cortes, 2008; Schmid, 2000) which is a type of “abstract noun that has little or no meaning in itself” (Cortes 2013, p. 40), such as the noun *term* in the cluster *in terms of the*:

1) a higher inter-group correlation between ‘narrative’ and ‘academic’ talk samples *in terms of the* distribution of pronominal and NP anaphors ...

The list of clusters which occurred in moves and steps of RA conclusions are presented in Table 5, with the bold items occurring in only one move or step and the italicized items occurring in more than one move or step. The superscript numbers next to them show the number of move or step in which the cluster was used. As can be seen, the number of clusters which occurred in more than one move or step is relatively high in the corpus of L2 conclusions. It is commonly realized that there are some fixed expressions that we keep in our mental lexicon which will be retrieved from our memory at the time of use. The high repetition of some of these expressions in the corpus can depict how L2 writers lack the knowledge of prefabricate expressions and have a small mental lexicon. Such a small range could simply drive the authors to repeat the same expressions when serving other purposes in other moves and steps. Another possible justification may result from L2 writers’ tendency to use the same

typical and ‘ready-made’ expressions which they found the most frequent and thus required no processing. This peculiarity could be discussed based on the grounds that linguistic background of writers can influence their language choice and selection of lexico-grammatical features.

Table 5. Formulaic clusters in the moves and steps of RA conclusions

Moves	Clusters
Move 1. Summarizing the study	<p><i>the results of the</i>³ <i>of the present study</i>³ <i>this study can be</i>³ <i>findings of this study</i>³ <i>results of this study</i>² <i>the results of this</i>²</p> <p>can be concluded that on the other hand <i>results of the study</i>² <i>the findings of this</i>²</p> <p>it can be concluded results of the present <i>the effect of the</i>²</p> <p>be concluded that there in the present study the result of the <i>there seems to be</i>² were found to be <i>in the use of</i>² <i>findings of the present</i>² <i>the findings of the</i>² <i>findings of the study</i>²</p>

Move 2. Evaluating the study

Step 1. Indicating significance/advantage

Step 2. Indicating limitations

Step 3. Evaluating methodology

Move 3. Deductions from the research

Step 1. Recommending further study

Step 2. Drawing pedagogic implication

-

of the study is

*this study can be*³
*of the present study*³

*in the use of*²
*the results of the*³

in the process of
in the production of

*this study can be*³
*findings of this study*³
*the effect of the*²
*of this study can*²

*the results of the*³
*this study can be*³
*findings of this study*³
*of the present study*³
*results of this study*²
*the results of this*²
*results of the study*²
*findings of the present*²
*the findings of the*²
*findings of the study*²

*the findings of this*²

*of this study can*²

*there seems to be*²

the present study can

Results plotted in Table 5 indicate that L2 authors used the largest number of formulaic clusters to serve move 1, *summarizing the study*. This signals that providing the outline of the conducted study is an obligatory move in writing the RA conclusion. Iranian authors employed a number of formulaic clusters to summarize their research. Further analysis of the clusters indicated that a number of words such as *findings*, *results*, *study* and *present* were used in most of the clusters of this move and worked as a trigger to start the move:

2) ***The results of the study*** also showed that the students' writing ability, as indicated by their writing scores, influences their views about three grammatical units-verb tenses, adverbs, and punctuation

Few other clusters in this move were located in the middle of clauses and functioned as a complement. In example 3, the cluster *in the use of* was used in the middle of a long sentence signaling move 1.

3) However, no significant difference was found between the Middle group and the other two groups ***in the use of*** these types of strategies.

Table 5 indicates that L2 writers devoted the least number of formulaic clusters to move 2, *evaluating the study*. This proposes that in gauging the study in the conclusion section, Applied Linguistic writers did not feel the need to use much formulaic clusters and might have decided to rely on other non-formulaic expressions to serve this function. In this regard, no cluster of this type was found in Step 1, *indicating significance/advantage*, of this move. This scarcity of use is likely due to the fact that the introduction section of RA may be the suitable place where researchers mostly provide the significance of their study. In addition, writers may find it necessary to vary their style of reporting from that of other sections. Thus, a more conscious effort to avoid formulaic expressions could be an implicit guide.

The three clusters *of the study is*, *this study can be* and *of the present study* were used in the conclusions to show move 2, step 2, *indicating limitations*. As for the clusters occurring in more than one move, it was found that *of the present study* and *this study can be* were used in move 1 to summarize the study (example 4) and move 2, step 2 to show the limitation of the research (example 5):

- 4) The findings *of the present study* demonstrated that learners who are highly tolerant are likely to use metacognitive reading strategies more frequently.
- 5) The fact that the study was small scale in nature constitutes the first limitation *of the present study*.

Concerning move 2, step 3, *evaluating methodology*, results in Table 5 indicate that only four clusters (*in the use of*, *the results of the*, *in the process of*, and *in the production of*) were used to address this move. Again the lack of such usage in the conclusion section implies the fact that other sections of RA such as the method section accounts for the evaluation of methodology of the research. Therefore, it can be inferred that referring to the method of the study through formulaic sequences is a redundant action in the conclusion section.

- 6) However, *in the process of* materials selection, reorganization and sequencing, three kinds of consideration were stressed.

Apart from summarizing the study in move 1, the clusters *in the use of* and *the results of the* were also used in move 2, step 3 to appraise the approach used, as in:

- 7) The Persian L2 learners resembled the PNSs *in the use of* Excuse, Reason, and Explanation strategies.
- 8) With regard to *the results of the* t-test which was run to compare the obtained means on the recall test

L2 writers also employed a number of formulaic clusters to signal move 3, *Deductions from the research*. As can be seen in table 5, most of these clusters were used in other moves as well. Such a reliance on the use of similar expressions and a lack of diversity could reflect the L2 writers' immaturity in the choice of formulaic combinations to serve several communicative purposes relating to conclusion section. To display recommendation for further research (step 1

of move 3), L2 writers used these four clusters; *this study can be*, *findings of this study*, *the effect of the*, and *of this study can*.

9) Hence, the *findings of this study* suggest that further complementary studies be conducted to improve upon the hypothesis, especially on the effect of the evaluation element on task type.

Apart from summarizing the study (example 10), the cluster *the effect of the* was also used to provide recommendation for future research (example 11):

10) In this study, we investigated *the effect of the* overarching issue of L1 lexicalization pedagogically with respect to the interrelationships between the involved groups.

11) Further study is needed to investigate *the effect of the* above-mentioned strategies at different levels of language proficiency

Presenting the pedagogical contribution of the research is seen as an important endeavor in writing the conclusion section. This way, authors find the way to have an academic voice in their respective discourse community by providing implications to their field of research. One way to attain such credibility in the community is to have dominance over formulas. To present the implication of their research (move 3, step 2), L2 writers employed 14 formulaic clusters (See table 5). Except for *the present study can*, all the other clusters used in this step were those which occurred in other moves as well. Once again, this repetition mirrors the L2 writers' overreliance on a limited range of multi-word combinations to convey different communicative functions relating to conclusion section. In the following example, the two clusters *the findings of the* and *the present study can* are combined to show the implication of the study:

12) *The findings of the present study can* have implications not only for teachers and learners, but also for materials developers.

The cluster *of the present study* was found in all the three moves. Along with occurring in move 1 (example 4) and the second step of move 2 (example 5), it occurred in move 3 to draw a pedagogical implication:

13) Hopefully, the findings *of the present study* will encourage L2 teachers to pay closer and more consummate attention to the concepts of noticing and FonF(s).

Apart from indicating the limitation of the research, L2 writers used the cluster *this study can be* to provide recommendation for future research:

14) The results of *this study can be* useful for novice Iranian researchers who are not yet familiar with the characteristics of the review genre.

4. Conclusion

Through a corpus-driven approach, this study attempted to examine the use of the most frequent four-words formulaic clusters in RA conclusions written by Iranian L2 writers and find the link between the clusters and the moves in which they occurred. Structurally, it was found that more than half of the clusters were of noun and prepositional phrases, while the least number were of dependent clauses. The results also reported that some formulaic clusters did not belong to any move or step of conclusions. Instead, they were used to serve other functions relating to this section such as framing the discourse as in the bundle *in terms of the*.

L2 writers used specific formulaic clusters to serve the communicative functions connected to each move of RA conclusion. Move 1, *summarizing the study*, comprised the largest number of clusters, signaling the requisite nature of this move in RA conclusion section. It was also disclosed that most of these clusters were used in the initial position of the clause, functioning as trigger to start the move, such as *The results of the, The findings of the, In the present study*. Move 2, *evaluating the study*, accounted for the least number of clusters, reflecting the low inclination of L2 writers to use formulaic expressions in indicating the significance of the study or in evaluating the methodology in the conclusion section. They might have preferred to choose other section of RA such as the method section to do so. Another interesting outcome was that L2 authors used specific range of clusters repeatedly in the three moves to serve related functions, such as *the results of the, findings of this study, this study can be, and of the present study*. This high reliance on similar clusters could reflect the L2 writers' control over a narrow variation of prefabricated word combinations in writing the conclusion section.

Findings of this research can serve to provide information on formulaic cluster usage in writing RA conclusion in the field of Applied Linguistics. The data give information about the connection between rhetorical organization of RA and the type of formulaic units to be used in the conclusion section which would help novice writers to have a better picture of the way that RA conclusion is structured. This would aid them to publish in leading journals and as a result, find a voice in their respective disciplinary community. This study can also help EAP practitioners and aspiring writers to realize the context of formulaic language usage in RA conclusion. However, novice writers should be alerted about the over reliance of some of these clusters in their texts.

The knowledge of formulaic clusters can empower non-native writers to find efficient ways to best communicate extended meanings and create a desired impression on readers. One way to improve this skill is through learning how native speakers of English use formulaic language to convey contextual meaning. The most prevalent formulaic clusters used by native speakers could be identified and prioritized for learning to aid fluency in academic settings. As such, meaningful exposure and practice must be integrated into second language acquisition courses. The learning of formulaic clusters is potentially influenced by current language instruction procedures and the cultural norms of L2 learners. It is proposed that a combination of both unconscious learning and overt instruction of frequently occurring formulaic clusters would be invaluable in ensuring the acquisition and proficient use of these useful expressions. In effect, these approaches will help language learners to internalize the types and functions of formulaic clusters to convey thoughts and ideas in a university setting.

Overall, this study presents linguistic and disciplinary perspectives of academic writing skill highlighting formulaic language use in the rhetorical structure of RA conclusion. Exploring such realizations in other sections of RA such as introduction, methodology, result and discussion and across various disciplines or languages can furnish scholars with insights into the convention and standards of writing academic RAs. Such cross-disciplinary and cross-linguistic studies can be a great value for novice writers from the selected disciplines and languages to get

a mastery over the rhetorical sections of RAs and draw an attention on the linguistic features used to convey the communicative purpose of these sections.

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