

Reusing Academic Phrases in Student Writing: Tertiary ESL Instructors' Views on Pedagogical and Ethical Implications

Masturah Sabri, Noor Farahhein Johari, Zaliza Zubir, Nor Syamimi Mohamed Adnan, Ina Suryani Ab Rahim, Afifah Hanani Yusuf

Universiti Malaysia Perlis

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0234>

Received: 18 April 2025; Accepted: 23 April 2025; Published: 27 May 2025

ABSTRACT

Using multi-word units, particularly prefabricated academic phrases, is essential for non-native English-speaking students to improve their writing and meet the structural expectations of academic discourse. However, depending too much on these phrases raises concerns about plagiarism, as universities often define it as the unauthorised use of another's words or ideas. This study examines how tertiary-level ESL instructors view the reuse of academic phrases in student writing, especially in relation to teaching practices and academic integrity. A small-scale research was conducted using an online survey with 30 ESL lecturers from two Malaysian public universities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience teaching English at the tertiary level. The study used a structured questionnaire to explore lecturers' views on the appropriateness, benefits, and concerns surrounding students' use of prefabricated phrases in academic writing. The results show that most instructors consider the reuse of academic phrases to be a helpful learning strategy, especially for improving writing fluency, coherence, and technical accuracy. They also agreed that structured reuse helps reduce grammatical errors and misinterpretation, leading to clearer writing. However, concerns remain about students becoming too dependent on such phrases, which could hinder the development of original thought. These findings highlight the need for a balanced approach to teaching—one that encourages strategic phrase use while guiding students to develop their own voice in academic writing.

Keywords: multi-word units, prefabricated phrases, academic writing, ESL, tertiary education.

INTRODUCTION

The role of prefabricated phrases—also referred to as multi-word units or formulaic sequences—has been widely explored in second language (L2) learning. These repeated language patterns are frequently used by native speakers and are recognised for their contribution to fluency, comprehension, and coherence, particularly in academic contexts. Writing in English can be especially challenging for second language learners at the tertiary level. In addition to expressing ideas clearly, students must meet the structural and stylistic expectations of academic writing. One common strategy that learners adopt is borrowing academic phrases they encounter in reading materials or model essays. While this can help them build confidence and fluency, it also raises concerns about plagiarism—particularly when the boundary between learning and copying is unclear. With the shift to digital and online learning environments, recent studies have emphasised the importance of making formulaic sequences more visible and accessible to L2 learners to support writing fluency and academic accuracy (Sabri et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the ongoing pedagogical relevance of formulaic language in supporting academic writing development among ESL students. This study explores how tertiary-level ESL instructors perceive the use of prefabricated academic phrases in student writing, focusing on whether such reuse is seen as beneficial or problematic, and the conditions under which it is considered acceptable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Prefabricated Phrases

Davis and Morley (2015) define prefabricated phrases as recurrent word combinations across contexts. The terminology used to describe these sequences is diverse, with over fifty related terms identified by Wray (2002), including “prefabricated phrases” (Hakuta, 1976), “lexical phrases” (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1993), and

“formulaic sequences” (Wray, 1999). While definitions vary, the core idea remains consistent: these are pre-assembled language chunks stored in memory and retrieved as single units to ease communication. Recent advances in AI-assisted writing have introduced new modalities for accessing language resources; however, the fundamental concept of internalising and retrieving prefabricated phrases remains highly relevant to language learning and academic writing.

Recent studies have further explored how technological advancements, particularly AI-assisted writing tools, influence students’ language practices. For example, Bui & An (2025) found that English-major students perceive AI writing tools as offering both opportunities and challenges, particularly in maintaining academic honesty. Similarly, Wang (2024) examined native and non-native English speakers’ experiences with generative AI writing tools, highlighting diverse perceptions that impact students’ engagement with academic writing conventions. These findings suggest that while access to pre-assembled language through technology is increasing, the pedagogical emphasis on internalising prefabricated phrases remains critical for authentic academic development.

Roles of Prefabricated Phrases in Academic Writing

Prefabricated sequences play a significant role in improving fluency by reducing the cognitive load during language processing. Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that these sequences are stored holistically in long-term memory and retrieved quickly when needed in context. Compared to creatively generated phrases, prefabricated expressions are processed more efficiently, allowing for faster and more fluent communication (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Wray, 2002).

Moreover, these sequences serve communicative functions by helping learners achieve pragmatic goals in spoken and written language. They are instrumental in speech acts like greetings and condolences (Hatami, 2015; Schmitt, 2010), and in academic writing, they facilitate coherence, structure, and technical accuracy.

L2 Learners and the Use of Prefabricated Phrases

Second-language learners typically acquire prefabricated expressions through repeated exposure, either through listening or reading (Hinkel, 2018). In academic writing, learners often model the phrases and structures in sample essays or reading passages. These borrowed phrases serve as linguistic templates or sentence starters, which students use to construct their arguments (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1993).

Over time, as learners’ linguistic repertoire expands, they may begin to replace these stock phrases with more personalised, creative language. However, in the early stages, phrase reuse is a practical and strategic tool to support clarity and accuracy in writing.

Phrase Reuse and Plagiarism Concerns

Despite the clear pedagogical benefits, reusing prefabricated phrases raises questions about academic integrity. Plagiarism, defined by the University of Manchester, is “presenting the ideas, work or words of other people without proper, clear and unambiguous acknowledgement.” Similarly, the University of Oxford refers to it as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own.” At the same time, Universiti Utara Malaysia defines it as the wrongful appropriation and representation of another author’s language or ideas as original work.

These institutional definitions frame plagiarism as unethical, which may discourage students from reusing language—even when that language is considered conventional or widely shared in academic discourse. This tension between pedagogical practice and policy highlights the need for more straightforward guidelines on what constitutes acceptable reuse of academic language.

In parallel, the rise of AI-generated text has introduced additional complexities in defining originality and ownership, further reinforcing the need for clear pedagogical and institutional guidelines. As academic writing continues to evolve alongside technological advancements, the role of prefabricated phrases remains critical in supporting L2 learners’ development of fluent and coherent academic discourse.

Research Questions

In light of the discussion above, this study seeks to explore the following questions:

1. What factors influence the acceptability of borrowing and reusing academic phrases in student writing?
2. What are the perceived pedagogical benefits of reusing prefabricated phrases in developing students' academic writing skills?

Study Design Overview

To address the identified gap concerning the unclear boundaries between acceptable reuse of academic phrases and concerns about plagiarism among L2 writers, this study adopted a quantitative approach. A structured online questionnaire was used to collect data from tertiary-level ESL instructors. The study was designed to ensure direct alignment between the research gap, research questions, methodology, and analysis of findings, thereby providing coherent insights into both the pedagogical and ethical dimensions of phrase reuse.

METHOD

Sample / Participants

Through purposive sampling, the study recruited 30 English language lecturers from two public universities in northern Malaysia, ensuring that all participants possessed relevant expertise in tertiary-level English language instruction. The cohort represented diverse academic and professional backgrounds, with specialisations in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Applied Linguistics, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Teaching experience among participants varied widely, spanning from 5 to over 20 years. Notably, most lecturers had substantial experience in delivering academic writing courses and evaluating undergraduate student writing, making them well-positioned to provide informed perspectives on the pedagogical use of prefabricated phrases.

Instrument

The study used a structured online questionnaire adapted from Davis and Morley's (2015) 33-item list of academic phrases. The questionnaire was divided into three parts—the first gathered demographic information such as gender, qualifications, and teaching experience. The second focused on lecturers' views about the acceptability of phrase reuse and whether it could be considered plagiarism. The third part examined how lecturers perceived the benefits of using prefabricated phrases to improve students' writing. Some sample items included: "It is not plagiarism if students use commonly repeated academic phrases such as 'the results suggest that...'," and "Borrowing phrases is acceptable only if students understand and apply them correctly." A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

Data collection procedures and data analysis

The survey was distributed electronically via personalised invitations sent through text messaging, containing a link to the online instrument. Data collection occurred during the academic semester. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) via SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to identify overall trends and instructor perspectives.

RESULTS

This section addresses the two main research questions: (1) the factors that influence the acceptability of borrowing and reusing prefabricated phrases in student writing, and (2) the perceived pedagogical benefits of these phrases in supporting students' academic writing development.

Acceptability of Prefabricated Phrase Reuse

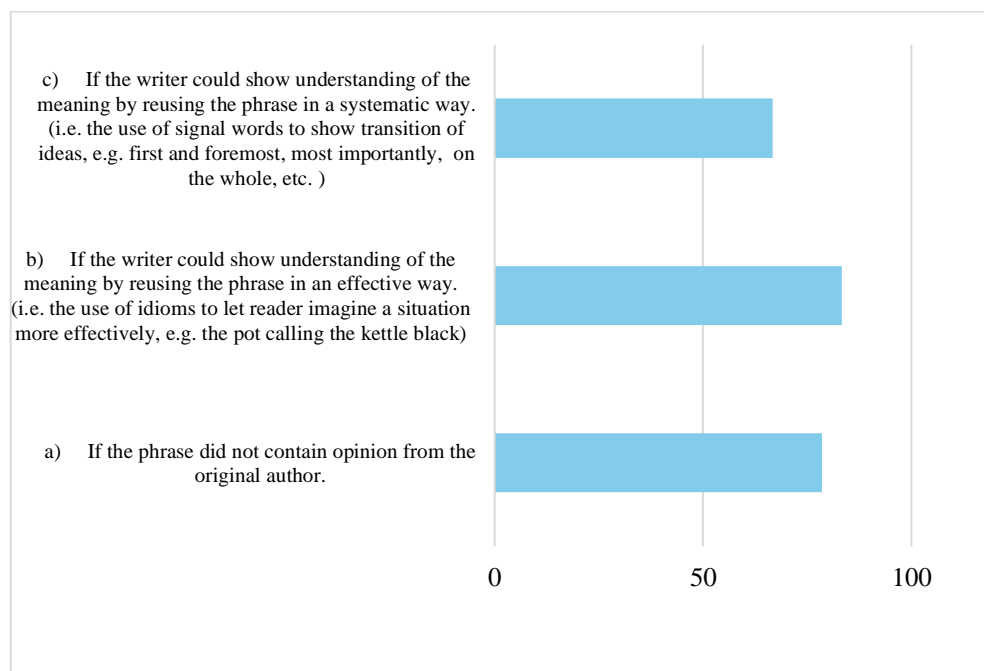
The first part of the survey explored lecturers' general attitudes toward students' reuse of academic phrases. Referencing the work of Swales and Frank (2004), which supports the pedagogical value of reusing common academic expressions, respondents were asked whether such reuse constitutes plagiarism. An overwhelming majority—91.7%—agreed that borrowing words and phrases from others can be a helpful language learning strategy. Furthermore, 91.7% of participants concurred that it is not considered plagiarism if students reuse commonly or frequently used academic phrases, such as “the results from this experiment seem to suggest that...”. This strong consensus among lecturers indicates a shared belief in the pedagogical function of formulaic language, particularly when the phrases reused are widely recognised as standard in academic writing.

Conditions for Accepting Phrase Reuse

Respondents were then asked to indicate the conditions under which they would permit the reuse of phrases. They were allowed to select multiple options.

As illustrated in Figure 1, 88.3% of respondents supported phrase reuse if the student could demonstrate understanding by applying the phrase appropriately in context. Additionally, 66.7% endorsed reuse if the student used the phrase systematically to support their argumentation or structure. More than half of the respondents agreed that borrowing and reusing phrases is acceptable if the phrase does not contain the original author's opinion. These findings suggest that instructors are more likely to approve phrase reuse when accompanied by evidence of student comprehension and when the borrowed phrases serve structural rather than conceptual functions.

Figure 1 The extent of Conditions Under Which Phrase Reuse Is Considered Acceptable



Acceptability Based on Phrase Structure

The next part of the survey evaluated the acceptability of specific prefabricated phrases, focusing on three criteria: length, presence of content words, and phrase generality. Table 1 highlights that phrase length plays a role in determining acceptability. Shorter phrases were generally preferred over extended versions, even when both conveyed similar meanings. For instance, the shorter phrase “The findings are consistent” (92.9%) was more acceptable than its more extended version (76.8%). This pattern was repeated in other phrase pairs.

This preference may stem from shorter phrases being seen as more general, widely used, and structurally versatile, making them less likely to be perceived as unique authorial expressions.

Table 1 Acceptability of Phrases Based on Length

Phrases	Acceptable (%)	Non-acceptable (%)
1a. The result	100	0
1b. The result of this study shows that	100	0
2a. The findings are consistent	92.9	7.1
2b. The findings of the current study are to a great extent, consistent with...	76.8	23.2
3a. Several possible explanations	92.9	7.1
3b. Several possible explanations for this result might be	78.6	21.4

Acceptability Based on Content-Specific Words

In the second criterion, the presence of domain-specific content words was tested. The data indicated that instructors were more cautious about reusing phrases with technical or field-specific vocabulary.

As shown in Table 2, phrases with embedded content words were more frequently rejected. For example, only 35.7% accepted the final phrase, while 64.3% rejected it. This trend reflects a belief that such phrases are more likely to be original, subject-specific constructions that may require citation or clearer attribution.

Instructors appear to distinguish between generic academic expressions and phrases containing intellectual or technical contributions, the latter being more tightly associated with plagiarism concerns.

Table 2 Acceptability of Phrases Containing Content-Specific Words

Phrases	Acceptable (%)	Non-acceptable (%)
A set of stable energy levels describes...	50	50
The main weakness of the propagation system was the lack of...	42.9	57.1
From another point of view, clear instructions are important in order to have an organised day-to-day operation...	35.7	64.3

Pedagogical Value of Phrase Reuse

The final section of the survey focused on lecturers' views regarding the benefits of reusing prefabricated phrases in academic writing instruction.

Table 3 Perceived Pedagogical Benefits of Phrase Reuse

Phrases	Agreement (%)
Do you think students' writings can be more technically appropriate when using borrowed phrases?	85.7
Do you think students' writings can appear more fluent when they use borrowed phrases?	92.9
Do you think it can reduce grammatical errors when students use borrowed phrases?	78.6
Do you think it can reduce misinterpretation when students reuse phrases?	85.7

As Table 3 shows, many respondents acknowledged the value of phrase reuse for improving students' writing fluency, accuracy, and clarity. Specifically, 92.9% believed it improved fluency, 85.7% believed it reduced misinterpretation, and 78.6% believed it reduced grammatical errors.

Moreover, 100% of respondents reported that they do not discourage students from referring to or using useful academic phrases, and 92.9% disagreed that doing so constitutes plagiarism. Additionally, 85.7% of instructors stated they actively recommend the use of phrases encountered in reading materials, and 92.9% said they provide students with guidance on how to reuse such phrases effectively in writing tasks.

These results highlight a strong pedagogical endorsement for phrase reuse as a scaffold for novice writers. Instructors view these prefabricated units as tools for technical improvement and as stepping stones toward independent academic language use.

In summary, Table 4 presents the alignment between the research gap, research questions, methodology, and the key findings, providing a structured overview of how the study addressed its research objectives.

Table 4 Alignment of Research Gap, Research Questions, Methodology, and Key Findings

Research Gap	Research Questions	Methodology	Findings for RQ1	Findings for RQ2	Discussion
Unclear boundaries between acceptable reuse of academic phrases and concerns about plagiarism among L2 writers. Need for instructors' perspectives on when reuse is pedagogically acceptable.	1. What factors influence the acceptability of borrowing and reusing academic phrases in student writing? 2. What are the perceived pedagogical benefits of reusing prefabricated phrases in developing students' academic writing skills?	Quantitative approach using structured online questionnaire. Participants: 30 tertiary ESL instructors (purposive sampling). Analysis: Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means).	Lecturers generally view reuse of common academic phrases as acceptable when students demonstrate understanding. Shorter, general-purpose phrases preferred. Concerns arise with longer or content-specific phrases.	Phrase reuse helps improve writing fluency, coherence, and technical accuracy. Reduces grammatical errors and misinterpretation. Phrase reuse is seen as scaffolding towards developing students' academic voice.	The discussion highlights strong pedagogical support for the reuse of academic phrases, reinforces a nuanced understanding of plagiarism, and emphasises the importance of providing explicit instruction and guidance to students. It also acknowledges the evolving context of AI-assisted writing tools while maintaining a focus on the development of academic literacy among L2 learners.

Building on the key findings summarised above, the following discussion interprets the results in light of existing literature and pedagogical considerations.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study suggest that tertiary-level ESL instructors largely support the pedagogical use of prefabricated phrases in academic writing, particularly for novice learners. The majority of survey participants agreed that formulaic sequences—such as signal words (e.g., *first and foremost*, *on the other hand*), idiomatic expressions (e.g., *see eye to eye*, *play by ear*), and lexical bundles (e.g., *the results of*, *in accordance with*)—are beneficial in developing students' writing fluency, coherence, and technical accuracy.

The data shows that lecturers view these phrases as valuable scaffolding tools that can help students meet the structural and stylistic demands of academic discourse. This aligns with previous research asserting that L2 learners rely on familiar, frequently encountered expressions, especially in the early stages of writing development (Hinkel, 2018; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1993). Despite recent technological shifts, such as the availability of AI-assisted writing tools, the reliance on prefabricated phrases continues to play an important role in supporting language development. In this context, reusing common academic phrases enables students to

focus on content and organisation without being overwhelmed by the need to generate complex academic language from scratch.

A notable finding was the high level of agreement (91.7%) that using frequently occurring academic phrases does not constitute plagiarism. This perspective is consistent with Swales and Feak (2004), who argue that certain phrase types—especially those widely used in academic English—are considered part of the shared discourse of a community and, therefore, acceptable for reuse. Additionally, most lecturers (88.3%) indicated that phrase reuse is acceptable when students understand and use the expressions appropriately, suggesting that acceptability is closely tied to comprehension and context.

The analysis of specific phrase types further supports this position. Instructors were more accepting of shorter, general-purpose phrases than longer, more content-specific ones. This may be due to the perception that shorter phrases are more universal and less attributable to a particular author, while longer or more technical sequences may reflect original intellectual contributions and therefore raise concerns about plagiarism. This distinction highlights instructors' nuanced understanding of what constitutes ethical language borrowing in academic writing.

Furthermore, the results reinforce the idea that prefabricated phrases contribute to fluency and reduce common issues such as grammatical errors and misinterpretations. Many instructors agreed that these sequences aid in clarity, particularly when used by students with developing language proficiency. This aligns with the notion that formulaic language can act as a functional shortcut, allowing learners to communicate effectively while gradually building their own academic voice (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Wray, 1999).

Overall, this study extends existing research on the use of formulaic language by emphasising instructors' perspectives on its pedagogical value and ethical boundaries. While previous studies have focused on learners' acquisition and processing of such language, the current study contributes insights into how instructors perceive and manage the balance between promoting structured language use and maintaining academic integrity. In an academic environment increasingly influenced by technological tools, including AI, these findings reaffirm the ongoing importance of scaffolding language learning through prefabricated sequences.

In terms of pedagogical implications, these findings highlight the need for explicit instruction on how and when to appropriately reuse academic phrases. Future research may consider exploring how instructors incorporate prefabricated language into their teaching practices, including how they guide students to transition from reliance on fixed phrases to developing original academic expression. This direction is especially important considering that some forms of formulaic language—particularly idiomatic or discipline-specific phrases—remain difficult for L2 learners to master (Biber et al., 2004; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This study explored tertiary-level ESL instructors' perceptions of the use of prefabricated phrases in academic writing, focusing on both pedagogical value and concerns around academic integrity. The findings reveal a strong consensus among instructors that reusing commonly accepted academic phrases is a legitimate and helpful strategy for developing writing fluency, coherence, and grammatical accuracy—particularly for novice writers.

While lecturers support phrase reuse, they emphasise that such use should reflect students' understanding of meaning and appropriate context. Phrase length and the presence of content-specific words were found to influence acceptability, with shorter, more general phrases viewed more favourably. Importantly, the majority of instructors rejected the notion that reusing standard academic phrases constitutes plagiarism, distinguishing between shared academic language and original intellectual contributions.

As academic writing continues to evolve alongside technological advancements, the continued pedagogical emphasis on prefabricated phrases remains crucial in fostering academic literacy among L2 learners. These insights highlight the importance of guided instruction on the ethical and strategic use of formulaic language in writing. Educators are encouraged to scaffold students' use of such phrases, while also helping them develop originality and academic voice over time.

Further research could explore how evolving technologies, including AI-assisted writing tools, may influence learners' interaction with prefabricated phrases as they transition to more advanced levels of academic writing.

REFERENCES

1. Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Cortes, V. (2004). If you look at ...: Lexical bundles in university teaching and textbooks. *Applied Linguistics*, 25(3), 371–405. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/25.3.371>
2. Bui, T. T. T., & An, T. T. V. (2025). The impact of AI writing tools on academic integrity: Unveiling English-major students' perceptions and practical solutions. *AsiaCALL Online Journal*, 16(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.54855/acoj.251615>
3. Conklin, K., & Schmitt, N. (2008). Formulaic sequences: Are they processed more quickly than nonformulaic language by native and non-native speakers? *Applied Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amm022>
4. Davis, M., & Morley, J. (2015). Phrasal intertextuality: The responses of academics from different disciplines to students' reuse of phrases. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 28, 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2015.02.004>
5. Hakuta, K. (1976). A Case Study of a Japanese Child Learning English as a Second Language. *Language Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1976.tb00280.x>
6. Hatami, S. (2015). Teaching formulaic sequences in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Journal*, 6(1), 112–129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.143>
7. Hinkel, E. (2018). Teaching and Learning Formulaic Sequences and Prefabs. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0925>
8. Mohammadi, M., & Es-hagi, S. J. (2007). Examining EFL Learners' Formulaic Competence and Factors Affecting Formulaic Sequences' Learnability,' 195–208.
9. Nattinger, J. R., & DeCarrico, J. S. (1993). *A Lexical Phrase Dictionary for Language Learners*. 27th Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
10. Nesselhauf, N. (2004). Learner corpora: Learner corpora and their potential for language teaching . <https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.12.11nes>
11. Pawley, A., & Syder, F. (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. *Language and Communication*, 191(January 1983), 225. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315836027-12>
12. Sabri, M., Ab. Rahman, F., & Nawati, A. (2023). Noticing formulaic sequence through typographic enhancement technique: Using an online platform. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijiet.2023.13.4.1857>
13. Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching Vocabulary*. Researching Vocabulary. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230293977>
14. University of Manchester. (n.d.). Plagiarism and referencing. The University of Manchester. <https://www.doctoral-academy.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/essential-information/thesis-submission/plagiarism-referencing/>
15. University of Oxford. (n.d.). Plagiarism. University of Oxford. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>
16. Universiti Utara Malaysia. (n.d.). UUM code of ethics for student research and academic writing. Universiti Utara Malaysia. https://cob.uum.edu.my/images/PG_Unit_COB/Form-Downloads/New-Student-Form/UUM_Code_of_Ethics_for_Research_and_Academic_Writing.pdf
17. Wang, C. (2024). Exploring students' generative AI-assisted writing processes: Perceptions and experiences from native and nonnative English speakers. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-024-09744-3>
18. Wood, D. (2015). *Fundamentals of Formulaic Language : An Introduction*. Fundamentals of Formulaic Language : An Introduction. London, United Kingdom.: Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474218771>
19. Wray, A. (1999). Formulaic language in learners and native speakers. *Language Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800014154>
20. Wray, A. (2000). Formulaic sequences in second language teaching: Principle and practice. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 463–489. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/21.4.463>

21. Wray, A. (2002). Formulaic Language in Computer-supported Communication: Theory Meets Reality. Language Awareness. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658410208667050>
22. Wray, A. (2012). What do we (think we) know about formulaic language? an evaluation of the current state of play. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 32, 231–254. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026719051200013X>