



Capítulo 8

What Goes Around Comes Around: a Corpus Study of Formulaic Sequences in Advanced Students' Written Production¹

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1. Introduction

One line of enquiry of our research project is advanced Argentinian EFL students' use of formulaic sequences. In this paper we analyse typical sequences learners resort to in their essays and characterise their use as compared to the one found in native corpora like the BNC and Davies' (2008) Corpus of American Contemporary English (COCA Academic Sub-corpus). First, the theoretical framework is presented. The study is then described in terms of its objectives, the corpus characteristics and its analysis and the sequences selected. The findings are detailed around the different sequences involving the three nouns (EFFECT, IMPACT and INFLUENCE) which lexically signal the effect in a reason-result semantic relation. Learner use is explored and characterised through concordance lines obtained from the learner corpus. On the basis of these results some pedagogical inferences are drawn that may contribute to the development of advanced learners' formulaic competence.

2. Formulaic sequences

Numerous corpus studies have shown that the lexicon is not only made up of a list of individual words, but also of sequences of words stored in our minds as a result of the high frequency they have in the input we are exposed to (Hoey, 2005; Wray, 2002, 2008). In the last ten years of linguistic research into the lexicon, increasing importance has been attached to formulaic sequences (FSs) – defined by Wray (2002) as “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (p. 9). They have thus become a central issue to applied linguistics and to the teaching and learning of a foreign language (Allen, 2010; Li & Schmitt, 2009; Granger & Meunier, 2008) due to the role they play in providing learners with discourse fluency and idiomaticity (Ellis, 2003; Lewis, 2009). Some corpus research has been conducted into the patterns of use of strings of words in large corpora, comparing EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners and educated native-speakers' written production. Other studies have been carried out to assess the effects of FS instruction (Ab Manan, 2014a, b; Alhassan and Wood, 2015; Colovic-Marković, 2012; Jones and Haywood, 2004; Peters and Pauwels, 2015). It is clear from their findings that even advanced students struggle with these sequences in their writings when attempting to give their essays native-like quality.

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3. Methodology

This section describes the objectives of this study, the participants and the corpus compiled, as well as the FSs selected and the procedures followed in the corpus analysis of learners' writings.

3.1. Objective

The aim of this study is to characterize advanced EFL university learners' use of FSs lexically expressing a cause-effect relation in the writing of essays. To this effect, we compare their frequency of occurrence and the differences in communicative use as evinced in the concordance lines extracted from a learner corpus. Furthermore, these results are compared to native-speaker corpora.

3.2. Context and participants

The learners participating in this study are Spanish-speaking students in either the EFL Teacher-Training or Translation courses taught at Facultad de Lenguas, Comahue University. Of all those who took the annual subject English IV between the years 2008 and 2014, 237 learners gave their written consent for their first written essay to be included in the corpus that will be described in the following section. The proficiency level of these fourth-year learners was C1-C2 in the CEFR (Common European Framework of References for Languages) and their ages ranged from 21-34. Each of the participants completed a profile where they offered information on their EFL experience, learner characteristics and the conditions under which the data were compiled (whether the essay was timed or untimed and written with or without recourse to reference tools and whether it was for practice or examination).

3.3. The corpus

The corpus compiled consists of written argumentative texts written by Argentinian Spanish-speaking advanced university learners of English between the years 2008 and 2014. Participants' first essay for each of the cohorts of the subject English IV was retrieved to build the learner corpus under study. A total of 237 essays were collected (114,514 words), following the requirements Louvain University stipulates for each sub-corpus to be part of *ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English)*.

Learners in this context write fortnightly essays in class of a minimum of 300-350 words. The topics dealt with are intimately connected to the thematic units taught each year. For each essay six to ten prompts are offered, from which learners choose one to discuss. Only one essay per student has been selected for the database to avoid individual preference bias. The topics discussed vary across cohorts.

3.4. Selected Formulaic sequences

In order to select those FSs to be analysed in this paper, first 3-8 word clusters were sought in the corpus through Wordsmith tools 6.0 (Scott, 2007). Clusters are recurrent strings of words which may or may not form a syntactic unit or be meaningful, appearing in succession both within one same text and across many. These strings differ from FSs in that they lack a holistic meaning. The cut-off frequency was set at three, which means that for a cluster made up of three to eight words to be included in the selection, it had to appear at least three times in the whole corpus. Because we were dealing with such long sequences (a maximum of eight words was admissible) and a considerably smaller corpus than usual, this criterion was set at a rather low point in comparison to other similar studies, like Ädel & Erman (2012), where the cut-off point is 25 times per million words. As regards the dispersion criterion, a sequence of words had to appear in a minimum of three texts to guarantee that no single participant had overused one sequence in particular, which would have affected the results. The list containing 5344 clusters was analysed to manually discard repetition of clusters (some eight-word clusters contained three-word strings, which could have misled researchers and biased frequency counts) and to discard those which were cue-induced, i.e. that contained sequences already provided in the essay prompt.



Previous analyses have been carried out on this same corpus to explore learners' use of FSs involving the noun 'fact' b) functioning as discourse organizers and c) indicating authorial stance (Zinkgraf, Rodeghiero & Pérez, 2015; Zinkgraf & Verdú, 2015; Zinkgraf, Rodríguez, Castro & Verdú, in press). The present study expands on these studies while it explores the use of lexical signals of the intra-sentential relation cause-effect. With this aim, out of the resulting cluster list, those containing the words EFFECT, INFLUENCE and IMPACT were extracted and the concordance lines of learners' productions were analysed in detail.

FSs involving nouns like EFFECT, INFLUENCE and IMPACT are typical of the opinion essays these learners are asked to write, where logical reasons are provided to support certain points of view. These words are also included in Coxhead (2000)'s Academic Wordlist (AWL) and have been found to be typical of the academic register as attested by Biber (2006)'s research. The following section describes the procedures for the learner corpus analysis.

3.5. Corpus Analysis

In their lexical bundle contrastive study between Swedish learners of English and native speakers, Ädel & Erman (2012) call for more contextual and descriptive analyses of differing FS usage patterns between native and non-native. The present study intends to explore precisely this aspect for FSs lexically expressing cause-effect by means of a qualitative research design.

The clusters obtained through the *Wordsmith Tools* procedure described in section 3.4 do not constitute FSs in themselves but have guided the search for the retrieval from the learner corpus of recurrent combinations including verbs which accompany them. The objects of study of our investigation are the FSs formed by verbs preceding the clusters obtained through the search described above.

Once the clusters were identified, a manual search was conducted for all the concordance lines in the learner corpus for each of the FSs involving the selected nouns. In order to establish a point of reference, their frequency counts and concordance lines in the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and the *COCA* (Davies, 2008) are analysed to describe canonical and non-canonical uses of these FSs, and where possible, in the academic sub-corpora of each of these databases.

4. Results

In this section a broad characterization will be presented as to the way in which these formulaic sequences have been used in the learner corpus. In Table 1 below results obtained through the learner corpus search are compared to those obtained from the *COCA* and the *BNC*. In the first column, the clusters detected in the learner corpus per key word (EFFECT, IMPACT and INFLUENCE) are presented together with the number of instances found according to the clusters chosen. In the following columns, a division can be observed between general and academic context for both native corpora. From the general number of occurrences found in the whole corpus, the number of clusters found specifically in academic contexts has been included since the purpose of this paper is to analyse the use students make of FSs in essays in an academic context.



		Learner Corpus 114,514 words	COCA 450 million words		BNC 100 million words	
			General	Academic (within general)	General	Academic (within general)
		N	N	N	N	N
EFFECT	negative effect on	7	407	266	27	8
IMPACT	a positive impact	5	488	302	12	2
	great impact on	5	133	68	13	4
	negative impact on	5	548	324	13	3
INFLUENCE	negative influence on	19	90	75	4	2
	influenced by the	5	1737	1122	533	207
	a bad influence	4	116	9	23	1
	a negative influence for	4	0	0	0	0
Total		54	3519	2166	625	227

Table 1 Clusters and their distribution in the learner corpus (LC), COCA and BNC

The important difference in corpus size between native and non-native corpora is responsible for the reduced number of occurrences of the selected clusters in the learner corpus. However, they are quite significant in the smaller corpus.

As can be observed, the most frequent FSs in our corpus (in dark grey in Table 1) are the 3-word clusters *negative effect on* and *negative influence on*. At plain sight, it can be noticed how this differs from the most frequent FSs in the native speakers' corpora (in bold type in Table 1): *negative impact on* and *influenced by the*. Both of these clusters strike us as useful sequences for the learners to adopt and use to a greater extent.

The sequences including *influence* are by far the most frequent in both native corpora among the clusters analysed in the table above. In both cases the passive use of the verb is even more recurrent than the NP with this noun. Learner usage seems to reflect this native preference as shown in the higher number of examples with this lexical item.

In the following sections the different formulaic sequences including the clusters in Table 1 are analysed descriptively in terms of the typical verbs co-occurring with them both in the native and learner corpora and in terms of other recurrent collocates (like modal verbs) and patterns/constructions/structure which usually accompany the cluster in expert writing.

4.1. Formulaic sequences with EFFECT

When used by native speakers in sentences, the noun *effect* as head of the noun phrase (hereinafter "NP"), is preceded by the verbs *have*, *be*, *exert*, *show*, *prove*, *produce* and *exercise*. Learners in this study have also resorted to *have* in more than half of the cases, and have creatively accompanied the cluster by two other infrequent verbs in the native corpora.

In the learner corpus, we have found the following examples (1-7):

1. d, many imported goods, which have entered our country, **have brought** about **a negative effect on** people and on society itself, since not everyone can afford to buy them an



2. ople consider that using super slim models for advertising purposes **causes a negative effect on** women especially. On the one hand, they believe so because there is a gene
3. s super thin models in order to promote the latest trends, and this **causes a negative effect on** women because they sacrificed themselves so as to achieve the standard of
4. s into consideration, I would say that the image of super slim models **has a negative effect on** people, especially on adolescents. If healthier models started being shown
5. for example, watching TV or sending messages. This lack of attention **has a negative effect on** children who feel abandoned and start showing behavioural problems, such as
6. ame music and having the same lifestyle. To conclude, imported goods **have a negative effect on** society because consumers do not realize that although labels are important
7. d it does not matter whether they are qualified or not. Not only **has this a negative effect on** professors' credibility but also on their corresponding subjects and course

Only a few of all the concordance lines obtained in the native corpora are presented here to illustrate the points made (8-10). However, the regularity with which these sequences appear can only be appreciated in the totality of concordance lines available on line.

8. such as mind-wandering -- mindfulness is a means of reducing that which **would be a negative effect on** performance. So we have a positive effect by reducing a negative influence (COCA)
9. out. Astin (1999) noted holding a full-time job off campus **had a negative effect on** retention. Nippert (2001) also found working for pay adversely impacted
10. 10. friends " (n = 21), " I felt it **would have a negative effect on** my participation in marching band "

According to both native speakers' corpora, neither *cause* nor *bring about*, used by learners, introduces the string *a negative effect on*, even if in the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English (OCDSE)*, *bring about* appears as one of the possible verbs accompanying the noun EFFECT. Another significant difference that can be perceived in learner use is the fact that, contrary to most of the examples in the native corpora (examples 8-10), the nouns occurring after the preposition are mainly groups of people suffering the consequences. Natives use the FS to refer to abstract nouns being affected, like *participation* and *retention*.

Learner use of the alternative verbs (*bring about* and *cause*) seems to trigger a non-canonical instance since they seem unaware of the fact that *cause* is redundant in the company of *effect*. In fact, it is included in the definition of the noun when referring to changes produced. In the concordance lines for this cluster found in the BNC only inflections of *have* precede this noun.

An interesting issue observed is that other sequences with this noun including the adjective *positive* have not been found in the learner corpus. The FS *have a positive effect on* is recurrent in COCA (321 instances) and quite frequent in the BNC (28 instances). Furthermore, native speakers have a broader repertoire of adjectives to modify the noun *effect* which include *significant*, *profound*, *greater*, *detrimental* and *powerful*, which are altogether absent in LC. This might point to areas worth devoting attention to during explicit instruction of these types of FSs.

4.2. Formulaic sequences with IMPACT

In Table 5 above, three clusters including *impact* have been detected in LC. These are *a great impact on*, *a positive impact on* and *a negative impact on*. In both native corpora, the FSs that include the noun *impact* as head of the NP tend to be preceded by one of three verbs: *be*, *have* and *cause*. Participants in this study seem to have acquired the FS in this way and reflect native speakers' choices. When skimming



through the concordances from the LC, 11-13 included below, a strong tendency to resort to the verb *have* can be observed for all three clusters and only one instance of an FS preceded by cause can be found. This might evince a tendency to overuse certain groups of recurrent word combinations.

11. cannot deny the fact that tunes involve emotions and that is why music **has a great impact on** people's lives.
12. ion super models. As it is already mentioned, it is clear that the media **has a great impact on** any addressed audience or readers to the extent of making them believe that
13. n legs and lean hips. This issue of the size of trousers and clothes **causes a great impact on** women's self-esteem because they feel that they cannot be as perfect as the

In the concordances below (14 and 15) from the LC, students' preference for the verb *have* can be observed in the company of the cluster a positive impact.

14. onclusion, nobody can take issue with the fact that music **has a positive impact** on people's lives. Besides, you can use your mp3 player ever
15. think now? Taking into account all these facts, do they **have a positive impact** on children? Of course they don't. They're showing our child

The few concordance lines from COCA (16 – 18 below), include *have* as part of the most frequent FSs but also show that the second most recurrent accompanying verb is *make* (19-21), appearing in one third of all COCA concordances for this cluster.

16. to the federal Highway Trust Fund. The claims that higher taxes **would have a positive impact on** the environment or oil security are also questionable. Even if the federal
17. said the speech might help Netanyahu at the polls. " **It will have a positive impact**, and challengers will have to work very hard to compensate for that incredible
18. electricity from renewables and from the new lower emission natural gas generators **will have a positive impact on** climate change and Colorado's air quality. In his comprehensive analysis of

What becomes obvious in the comparison is that native speakers express causality through different verb tenses, while learners do not. Expert use includes a few examples of the future, absent in LC. This might be accounted for by reference to the ideas linked through this FS. While learners resort to it to describe a present state of affairs, native speakers do so to convey ideas with respect to a variety of situations. Native use also involves the use of several different modal verbs.

Examples from the native corpora COCA, like those below, indicate future directions for the teaching of these FSs, where a future meaning or intention is expressed through the FS *make a positive impact on*. Learners may need to be exposed to these uses in order to perceive that a different meaning is expressed in this FS and that part of it is conveyed through expressions like *I plan to ...* and *I hope to....*

19. , pre-pharmacy. Goal o " **I plan to** become a pharmacist and **make a positive impact on** my community through helping to educate fellow citizens about the importance of health
20. biomedical engineering. Goal o " **In the future, I hope to make a positive impact on** those around me, pursuing my career, raising a family, and
21. Parents Improve Teaching Performances # Teaching performances are significant. Good teachers **can make a positive impact on** students' academic progress. Nonetheless, one must be aware of the



Learners have also produced four instances of the FS to have a negative impact on, illustrated below in 22 - 24, while there is one instance of the negative impact on, which does not reflect native use.

22. by creating a strong bond between buying and being, consumerism **has had a negative impact on** our construction of the self, shattering most of our dreams and selling una
23. ude, I strongly believe that the use of size zero models in the media **has a negative impact on** the audience. The reason, in my opinion, may be that these very skinny mode
24. Is showing what is on fashion nowadays. However, this model of beauty **has a negative impact on** viewers who tend to copy what is shown on TV. Celebrities such as Victoria

The analysis of examples from COCA and the BNC clearly point to have as part of the sequence and to the possible insertion of both adjectives, like significant, serious and potential, and adverbs, like profoundly and potentially, as pre-modifiers of negative. Learners in this corpus, however, do not seem to be aware of these recurrent uses.

4.3. Formulaic sequences with INFLUENCE

The comparison of occurrences between native and non-native use indicates that this is the most frequently used noun in LC clusters, while the least common in the native corpora, which might be evidence of a certain degree of learner unawareness as to native preferences in the use of this noun. Learners may have overgeneralized the possible usage patterns of FSs involving EFFECT and IMPACT, to apply them to this other noun infelicitously.

The most frequent FS involving INFLUENCE in LC is to *have/be a negative influence on*, which has been more widely used than any other sequence. Native choices are reflected both verbs, *have* and *be*, as evinced in examples 25 -27, which illustrate almost 85% of the instances produced of this cluster.

25. rfection, because nobody is perfect. To conclude, super thin models **have a negative influence on** fashion consumers because they do not reflect what an average person with
26. about the presence of super-thin models in advertisements that can **have a negative influence on** our attitudes. What"s more, we ought to be aware that the standard of clo
27. above serve to prove that super thin models that appear on The Media **are a negative influence on** women. But could it be possible that it is more important for women being
28. iety. They do not reflect the majority of women. As a result, they **exert a negative influence on** us. However, we can not put the blame on them. They are not responsible
29. *edia. As a consequence, these ultra-slim models have recently **originated a negative influence on** consumers. Furthermore, these undersized models can put at risk people's

Adequate perception of native preferences is also shown in 28, where the cluster is accompanied by another typical verb in the native corpora, *exert*. In the nineteen examples in LC there is one instance, however, of a non-target expression: *originate a negative influence on* in 29, probably produced in the belief that these combinations are creative and unrestricted.

In the case of the FS involving *be (adv) influenced by*, the difference in use between corpora is significant. In the COCA, it is usually preceded by adverbs such as *strongly*, *heavily* and *greatly*, but only one instance in the LC (30 below) includes *strongly*:

30. It is evident how people **are strongly influenced by** the media and how advertisements affect people"s behaviour. There exists a fixed

Furthermore, one of the concordances from the LC includes *dramatically* in the verb phrase (31), while, according to both native corpora, this is not a typical, recurrent sequence - only one case is registered in the COCA (32).



31. pressed. Moey is less productive (sic) each day, and young adults are dramatically influenced by the society's situation. To conclude, we can state that inflationary pressures (LC)
32. We need to read the Bible as a book written 2,000 to 4,000 years ago and dramatically influenced by the writers' cultures and limited knowledge of science and the world... (COCA)

These examples might seem to be the result of a certain degree of unreliable intuitions on the part of learners as regards target FSs involving this noun and verb.

Of the other two frequent attempted FSs involving INFLUENCE, it is noteworthy that there are five instances of *a negative influence for*, an infrequent construction in both native corpora. These appear only in two texts, which indicates that one same subject has repeated the SF three times and one other participant wrote the other two. Individual preferences here seem to affect the overall search results in LC.

With respect to *a bad influence*, only four instances can be found in both expert corpora, which again might evince little learner awareness as to these FSs. Once again, while individual preferences could have biased results, they have each been written by different learners, so it might be a more widespread deviation than the one above.

5. Discussion

This paper has sought to characterise FS learner use in relation to the nouns EFFECT, IMPACT and INFLUENCE as appearing in a corpus of written essays by advanced university learners of English. In accordance with the findings of Howarth (1998), Ädel & Erman (2012) and Biber (2006), learners in this study seem to be sensitive to native speaker preferences as shown in the relative frequency of the FSs involving these three nouns. However, a closer analysis of the concordance lines obtained sheds light on different degrees of unawareness as regards collocates (verbs accompanying the nouns) and the typical modality and aspect that modify these FSs.

Although the essays making up the database have been written by advanced learners, certain aspects related to language use around these nouns may evince a gradual developmental stage of their formulaic competence. In our study learners seem to have relied to a much larger extent than native speakers on adjectives such as *bad*, *positive* and *negative*. The fact that there are more instances of *positive* and *negative* implies a significant improvement on the typical *bad/good* dichotomy typically found in EFL Spanish-speaking learners. However, there is still a wide distance for learners to cover on their way towards native-like choices, where other adjectives like *significant*, *profound*, *dramatic* and *direct* participate in the FSs. Learners' attention may need to be drawn to this variation in the FSs for them to incorporate these other adjectives and the typical FSs involving these nouns.

In the same vein, the concordances studied here evince learner awareness of the typical verbs that accompany the nouns explored to form the FSs, while they have not yet acquired other frequent collocates that native speakers make use of. Instead, other less frequent and non-target uses appear in the learner corpus. In the belief that meaning is constructed on line, word by word, and assuming that language production is more reliant on open choices than on ready-made phrases, learners venture the use of possible synonyms or even transfers from their mother tongue, which render their combinations infelicitous. Similar deviations from target language result from the incorrect choice of verb tenses in which these combinations are used.

It is only through continuous, cyclical and recurrent exposure to target forms that foreign language learners can reach higher levels of proficiency in terms of formulaicity and naturalness in their expression of meanings.



6. Pedagogical implications

Learners' use of a number of formulaic expressions has been analysed in an attempt to describe similarities and differences native speakers'. Research into formulaic sequence instruction and acquisition (Ab Manan, 2014a y b; Alhassan and Wood, 2014; Colovic-Marković, 2012; Jones and Haywood, 2004; Lewis, 2009, and Peters and Pauwels, 2015) has proved that explicit instruction of these recurrent strings of words is essential and that numerous encounters with the FSs contribute to learners' gradual incorporation of the collocational and colligational features that restrict the use of these phrases in native language.

The distances between native and learner FS use could be covered through a number of pedagogical implications drawn from this study. Once teachers have identified the most frequent strings in native language use suitable to learners' needs and appropriate to students' level, their teaching would benefit from an FS-based approach, in this way breaking away from the habitual though unnatural word-based tendency. Words need to be presented in the natural linguistic context they typically occur in and, in order to do so, corpora play a central role in language teaching and EFL teachers could implement systematic steps to show how sequences are typically used in the target language through concordance lines obtained from them. If learners are provided with vast amounts of input on typical, target use of selected FSs, and their attention is drawn to the contexts they appear in, chances of FS acquisition are significantly increased (Hunston, 2002).

Likewise, since “recurrent word combinations do not only contribute to idiomaticity, but also contribute to demonstrating membership in a specific discourse community” (Ädel & Erman, 2012: 81), equipping learners with formulas and sequences specific to academic writing provides them with the linguistic tools to perform successfully in this register, allowing them to become efficient members of this community. By focussing on typical formulaic sequences found in native corpora, teachers could raise awareness of those other collocates that could be used in a FS to make it more native-like. A warning should be issued, however, as regards frequency of collocates and the different registers in the native corpora. When the digital search in COCA is narrowed down to the academic register, a number of collocates disappear from the general, typical list and others become more frequent and therefore more worth teaching. Offering learners different variations of the same sequence with a similar meaning furnishes them with more ready-made units to convey meanings in this context, while always pointing out the differences in collocation that these choices might carry with them.

The analysis of the learner corpus at FADeL in this article has thrown some light on the status quo of learners' formulaic competence with respect to the lexical signalling of cause-effect semantic relations. This, in turn, points to vocabulary areas in their learning process in need of development for them to become more efficient communicators in the academic world. Through different techniques of noticing and awareness-raising as regards FSs present in native-speaker academic discourse, learners' FS acquisition process is promoted and their formulaic competence further developed. Corpus analysis becomes essential both as feedback on the foreign language learning process and as a compass guiding further pedagogical decisions.



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