

Phrase level intertextuality: the views of tutors from different disciplines

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Context of academic phrases

- Essential role of academic phrases in academic writing (Hyland, 2008; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992)
- Requirement for novice writers to learn to use academic phrases (Flowerdew and Li, 2007)
- Accepted need for EAP to teach academic phrases (eg for communication 'moves', Swales, 1990)
- Research beginning into responses to intertextuality (including re-use of academic phrases) in different disciplines (Pecorari and Shaw, 2012)

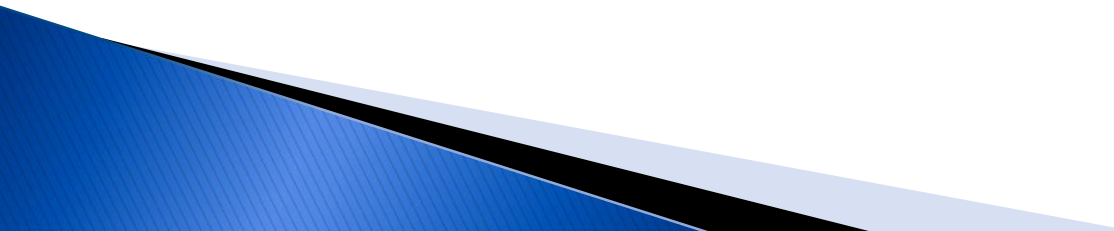
Pecorari and Shaw (2012)

- ‘Several participants raised the potential value of copying phraseology, where it was appropriate to do so’ (p.154)
- ‘[Participant name] suggests that mastery of the target register comes from actively copying strings that inevitably recur in the source material’ (p.155)
- ‘Participants do not agree on the boundaries of the information or on the length or type of strings that fall into this category. Several point to the value of re-use of strings in raising the quality of students’ textual output, and in their efforts to acquire the register of the discipline’ (p.155)

Davis and Morley (2013)

- 45 academics from two universities surveyed
- what kind of phrases they felt could be reused legitimately
- - *the main weakness of this study was the lack of (80% - 94%)*
- characteristics for acceptability
 - I. not containing content words bound to a specific domain;
 - II. not having a unique or original construction;
 - III. not expressing a clear point of view of another writer;
 - IV. depending on the phrase, up to nine words in length
 - V. containing up to four generic content words.

Method

- Interviews with 8 tutors at 2 UK universities, as a follow-up to survey
 - Disciplines: business, media and culture, health, engineering, sports science, religion, pharmacy, education
 - Questions about acceptability and usefulness of phrases, teaching and learning of phrases, use of Turnitin to check phrase use
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Acceptability: Widely used

- *'it has been demonstrated that'*

It's such a widely used phrase, I don't think I would quibble with it, it's just used so much (Economics)

- *'the findings of the current study are consistent with'*

That's fine, we all use that phrase (Engineering)

We'd typically say that was OK...it's the sort of phrase that you will see in scientific journal papers (Sports Science)

Acceptability: Membership

- Because it's the way economists communicate with each other, and therefore if they are listening to anything that is about economics, if they are reading anything about economics, they will find these phrases used and re-used and re-used, it's the lingua franca of that particular subject, what might be normal language used in very specific ways.
(Economics)

Acceptability: Systematic and effective

- Well the first 3

(it has been demonstrated that; the findings of the current study are consistent with; the research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y)

I think are entirely legitimate and I would be very pleased to find them in an essay, because I think that they demonstrate that a systematic and legitimate approach is being taken. As a signal to that kind of approach, I think that they're effective, they work well (Religion)

Acceptability: Understanding of phrases

- The main problem that I have come across is that students re-use phrases without understanding what they mean, in other words they see the tool as being something that they fill in (Engineering)
- It's understanding the meaning of the language which is the really, really important thing... I can see whether they are just reproducing, or whether they understand what they are saying... I keep trying to bash it into them, 'I want to be sure you understand it' (Economics)

Acceptability: Phrases and paragraphs

- Some students think it's OK, as long as they put together well-constructed individual sentences but they often miss the bigger picture which is the paragraph structure, that's *the* most important thing, so sometimes the focus on the re-using of phrases distracts students from what is more important in writing and that's the cohesiveness of the paragraph structure (Sports Science)

Acceptability: Not containing judgement

- *'Deliberately and incisively debunks this myth'*
- I would say its not acceptable because it is somebody's pronounced opinion on the lexical choice of the writer, it's not the student's opinion..... that's a value judgement that's perhaps not the student's own (Media and Culture)
- It's not [an acceptable phrase] because it's making a specific judgement (Engineering)

Acceptability: Not individual

- *It has become a catchword used to label and delegitimize political movements; Dawkins is deaf to theology*
- [Some] knock over into that area of expressions which appear to be individually idiosyncratic, they are not the bland formulaic signals (Education)
- [Some are not acceptable] because they're adding something of the person who wrote them. There are opinions in there that are owned by the person who wrote the particular phrase, somebody has gone to some trouble to use those particular words, and they have got a precise meaning that they want to put across (Pharmacy)

Learning and teaching: Exposure

- Most people pick it up loosely, on the fly, as they read journal papers. That's the way students are really going to pick this up, if they do the reading, because it's much easier for them to pick up subject-specific phrases, you're doing the sort of subconscious, almost by osmosis you start to learn appropriate phrase structures (Sports Science)
- I think again it's that academic literacies thing, isn't it? It's exposure and use. A lot of them are learned through formal exposure and practice, and some students need more formal exposure and practice, and I think that's what things like Academic Phrasebank do (Media and Culture)

Learning and teaching: De-construction

- One of the things I did was I brought in a range of research publications, from sort of minor practitioner journals, but some more major, and I got them to, for example, highlight all the adjectives that we use to refer to other people's works, and to identify whether they implied agreement, disagreement, or merely neutral, and to switch them around to see what difference it made, and to try to de-construct that phrase, get them to unpick it (Media and Culture)

Learning and teaching: Range

- These phrases are useful because they give you a range of options, because generally students do not have the experience of using a range of phrases (Engineering)

Learning and teaching: Helping students think

- I wouldn't discourage them from taking the kind of approach where they should try and look at a problem and break it down into *3 main reasons for* it occurring, for example, so the activity that's denoted by those phrases is one which I would want to encourage students to get into (Religion)
- One of the problems we find is that students have difficulty in being able to either see or articulate what they have seen...so research like this, phrases like this, that 'focus on x rather than y', is a very pertinent phrase, it's one we would like to see (Engineering)
- They are good phrases to introduce a student to an understanding of research (Health)

Learning and teaching: Helping students write - scaffold

- In cultural studies, a lot of writing is very dense, it's very sociological or philosophical, I think it can be really off-putting for students and really quite intimidating to think that they can offer a judgement on this stuff, so I think giving them a kind of scaffold of academic phrases gives them an entry into that world, and that's a very supportive thing to do (Media and Culture)

Learning and teaching: Helping students write - text organisers

- Formulaic signals of text structure and text organisation ... I would say that is the main purpose of them, that's how they should be taught, the same way as you teach your 'however' and your 'whereas' (Education)

Learning and teaching: Helping students write - clearer style

- What I like about AP is that it does move students towards a clearer writing style, a writing style that has punctuation and syntax in the appropriate place and order, ...a sort of half-way house, that these phrases are good ...to teach students to deal with complexity and not to see things as either/or, it's much more of a continuum (Sports Science)

Learning and teaching: Avoiding crossing the line

- AP tends to be an easier way to teach how to use those kinds of phrases appropriately because it doesn't put any detail in it for them, and without websites like AP, I think students are often tempted to include the elements of the phrase they are borrowing which would make it plagiarism...without recognising that's how they cross the line between acceptable use and plagiarism (Sports Science)

Learning and teaching: Responses to Turnitin matches to phrases

- If the student copies the generic phrase structure and it's beyond the 6 word elimination, 6 words is the number I have settled on, if it's more than 6 words, and importantly it has to have some context-specific information in it, that's when I say to the students that there's a problem (Sports Science)
- I exclude the less than 5 word match. When you get those small matches, you know, to words that are so common in usage, I don't think that is turning up plagiarism, because there are so many phrases that we use frequently anyway. I don't think the very small matches are useful, what is useful is when Turnitin picks up a chunk. (Business)

Learning and teaching: Responses to Turnitin matches to phrases

- I just don't think small matches are significant. I would expect actually to have that because we have a shared vocabulary of academic phrases, it would be odd to have an essay that didn't have that level of match (Media and Culture)
- If it's going to tick a naughty box on Turnitin, then I think we would advise them to be very careful about using phrases (Health)

Conclusion

Acceptable =

Widely used
Systematic
Effective
Understood
No judgement
Not original

Useful

Expanding range
Help thinking
Help writing –
scaffold,
organisation,
style
Help avoid
plagiarism

Responses to Turnitin small matches

Ignore up to 5/6
words
Accept as normal
Caution students

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