

## **Formulaic Writing: A Novel Approach to Writing Instruction**

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### **Abstract**

The present study seeks to introduce and investigate an approach to teaching writing in the EFL classroom which draws heavily on the use of formulaic expressions. In contrast to its predecessors, this approach includes both the application of process writing techniques and the teaching of grammar and vocabulary into its syllabus. Two groups of 30 EFL learners participated in this study. One group was taught writing through the proposed method, while the other group received instruction of a grammatical and structural nature. Following the courses, learners of both groups were asked to write an argumentative essay. A comparison of the essays written by the participants of the two groups revealed that those who were taught with the formulaic approach were more successful in fulfilling the purpose of the task, as well as creating more coherent and structurally accurate texts. The authors of this study argue for the use of formulaic expressions in teaching writing, especially in proficiency test preparation courses, due to its usefulness in fulfilling the communicative requirements of such examinations.

**Key Words:** Formulaic Expressions, Formulaic Writing, Process Writing, Argumentative Essay.

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### 1. Introduction

Researchers and teachers increasingly acknowledge the need of eliciting samples of language use which are representative of learners' performances in real-world communications \_when accuracy is not the main focus. Such samples, it is believed, provide evidence of learners' abilities to use their second language knowledge in real-life contexts of meaning negotiation. Believing in the importance of such samples for documenting how learners structure and restructure their *interlanguages* over time, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers recognized that unless learners are given opportunities to experience such samples they may not succeed in developing the required language proficiency they need to communicate fluently.

Having this at the back of their minds, researchers/teachers tried to embody their aims through using task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT) techniques mainly for two reasons; one was their commitments to a form of teaching that treats language primarily as a tool of communication rather than an object for study or manipulation. Clearly, if learners are to develop the competence they need to use a foreign language easily and effectively in unexpected situations they encounter outside the classroom, they need to experience how language is used as a tool for negotiating meaning and the second, was their wishes to see how second language acquisition develops not just as an autonomous discipline (it seems that it clearly has moved in this direction during the last decade) but also as an applied area of study. According to Ellis (2003), usage of *formulaic expressions* in writing instruction is one of the significant factors which revolutionize current methods of teaching writing and change them into more real-life trends.

The present study seeks to investigate the effect of an approach to teaching writing in EFL classes which draws heavily on the use of formulaic expressions by comparing the final results of learners who were taught under formulaic approach (they were provided with eight formulaic structures and were made aware of the purposes they serve) with those who were taught writing by traditional approach of writing instruction (instruction of language features and structural elements) and

tries to answer the following questions:

- Does usage of formulaic expressions in writing instruction have any positive effects on writing proficiency improvement of language learners?
- Which aspects of learners' writing proficiency would be improved under formulaic instruction?

## **2- Literature review**

### **2-1 Writing tasks classification**

It seems imperative to have a brief look at writing tasks typology prior to referring to the type of writing instruction developed through the paper. Here, some world-wildly accepted categorizations toward various writing task types have been presented. Broadly speaking, each writing task can be put into one of these proposed categories;

#### **Rod Ellis (2003)**

According to Ellis, the survey of the research literature on writing tasks reveals a bewildering variously-labeled array of task types. There are different 'gap' tasks, for example, information-gap and opinion-tasks, which are also sometimes referred to in terms of how the information has been organized in the task, i.e. split versus shared information tasks. There are also reciprocal and non-reciprocal writing tasks, i.e. tasks that require or do not require interaction to achieve the outcome. Writing tasks can be labeled according to the kind of activity they require of the learner or according to the language skills they focus on. They can be named according to the type of discourse they are intended to elicit, for example narrative or descriptive tasks.

#### **Bley-Vroman (1993)**

He believes in *structure-based writing tasks* and in key article discusses what he calls 'structure-based communication task'. He distinguishes three ways in which

a task can be designed to incorporate specific target language feature. The first is *task-naturalness*. In this case, the target structure may not be necessary for completion of task but nevertheless can be expected to arise naturally and frequently in performing the task. The example Bley-Vroman gives is of a task that involves the exchange of information about a travel itinerary. He suggests that this will lead naturally to the use of the present tense. He refers to research on interlanguage variation, which has shown that different types of tasks result in different uses of grammatical features.

The second way of incorporating a linguistic focus is in terms of *task-utility*. By this Bley-Vroman means that even though a targeted feature is not essential for completing the task it is very useful in performing other tasks. Of course, as he acknowledges, the utility of a structure is relative to the learner's existing stage of acquisition. He points out that students who have already achieved full mastery of a specific structure will not benefit acquisitionally from producing the structure.

The third way of designing a focused task is to try to ensure the *task-essentialness* of the targeted task. This requires that learners must use the feature in order to complete the task successfully. In this respect, the targeted feature becomes the essence of the task. However, the examples Bley-Vroman gives are all comprehension rather production tasks. He acknowledges that it may be impossible to design writing tasks that make the production of the target feature essential and, in fact, task-essentialness can only be achieved by receptive tasks.

#### **Barbara Kroll (1996)**

Kroll mentions that advanced writing activities shift their goal from the focus on the mechanics of writing to basis *process-oriented* tasks which need to incorporate some language work at the morphological and discourse level. Thus, these activities will enable focus on both accuracy and content of the message. She continues, in order to develop and use these more demanding writing activities in the ESL/EFL classroom, we need to develop a detailed set of specifications which will enable both teachers and students to cope successfully with these tasks. Such a set of

specifications should include the following:

- *Task description*: to present students with the goal of the task and its importance. *Content description*: to present students with possible content areas that might be relevant to the task.
- *Audience description*: to guide students in developing an understanding of the intended audience, their background, needs, and expectations.
- *Format cues*: to help students in planning the overall organizational structure of the written product.
- *Linguistic cues*: to help students make use of certain grammatical structures and vocabulary choices.
- *Spelling and punctuation cues*: to help students focus their attention on spelling rules which they have learned and eventually on the need to use the dictionary for checking accuracy of spelling, and to guide students to use acceptable punctuations and capitalization conventions.

#### **Elite Olshtain (1991)**

He divides writing tasks into three categories:

**Practical writing tasks:** These are writing tasks which are procedural in nature and have a predictable format. This makes them particularly suitable for writing activities that focus primarily on spelling and morphology. Lists of various types, notes, short messages, simple instructions, and other such writing tasks are particularly useful in reinforcing classroom work. Lists can be of many types; “things to do” lists, and “things to complete” lists, or shopping lists. Each of these list types provides us with an opportunity to combine some spelling rules with morphological rules and with the logical creation of a meaningful message.

**Emotive writing tasks:** Emotive writing tasks are concerned with personal writing. Such personal writing primarily includes letters to friends and narratives describing personal experiences, as well as personal journals and diaries. When dealing with letter writing, emphasis can be placed on format, punctuation, and spelling of appropriate phrases and expressions. When writing about personal

experiences\_ usually done in a narrative format\_ spelling of past-tense forms can be reviewed and practiced. It seems that emotive writing, to serve the personal needs of the learners, has to be quite fluent. The different types of emotive writing activities are, of course, suitable for the more advanced courses, but they can be carried out, in a more limited manner, even at the initial stages. Thus, personal letters can be limited to the level of structural and vocabulary knowledge of the students at each point of time. Similarly, journal and personal writing activities can reflect the learner's proficiency level.

**School-oriented tasks:** One of the most important functions of writing in a student's life is the function it plays at school or university. It is still the case that much individual learning goes on while students are writing assignments, summaries, answers to questions, or a variety of essay-type passages.

In most case, the audience for these writing tasks is the teacher, but gradually students must learn to write to an unknown reader who needs to get information being imparted exclusively via writing. It is the combination of the content and organization with accepted formal features that will lead learners to better utilization of the writing skill in their future use of English.

## 2-2 Approaches to instruct writing

Nold (1982) proposed four general approaches for preparing students to meet their writing needs. To him, intermediate- and advanced-level ESL/EFL writing courses generally have one of four orientations, depending on which element of composing is taken as the basis for course organization;

*Rhetorical approaches* ask students to analyze and practice a variety of rhetorical or organizational patterns commonly found in academic discourse: process analysis, partition and classification, comparison/contrast, cause-and-effect analysis, pro-and-con argument, and so on. Kaplan (1966) and others point out that rhetorical patterns vary among cultures and suggest that nonnative students need to learn certain principles for developing and organizing ideas in American academic discourse, such as supporting generalizations by presenting evidence in inductive

and deductive patterns of arrangement.

*Functional approaches* recognize that in real writing, purpose, content, and audience determine rhetorical patterns. Starting from given patterns and asking students to find topics and produce essays to fit them is thus a reversal of the normal writing process. Instead of having students write a comparison/contrast essay, a functional approach would ask students to start with a specified purpose and audience, for example, "Persuade one of your friends who is planning to move that City X is a better place to live than City Y." Typically, in a functionally oriented writing program, writers assume a variety of roles; academic writing is only one context and usually not the sole focus. Contexts for writing tasks are carefully defined; purpose and audience are always specified. If the writer is placed in unfamiliar roles in which background knowledge about the topic may be lacking, data may be supplied in the form of facts, notes, tables or figures, quotations, documents, and so on.

*Process-centered approaches* help student writers to understand their own composing process and to build their repertoires of strategies for prewriting (gathering, exploring, and organizing raw material), drafting (structuring ideas into a piece of linear discourse), and rewriting (revising, editing, and proofreading). Tasks may be defined around rhetorical patterns or rhetorical problems (purpose), but the central focus of instruction is the *process* leading to the final written product. Students are given sufficient time to write and rewrite, to discover what they want to say, and to consider intervening feedback from instructor and peers as they attempt to bring expression closer and closer to intention in successive drafts.

*Content-based approaches* differ from traditional approaches to teaching academic writing in at least four major ways:

1. Writing from personal experience and observation of immediate surroundings is de-emphasized; instead, the emphasis is on writing from sources (readings, lectures, discussions, etc.), on synthesis and interpretation of information currently being studied in depth. Writing is linked to ongoing study of specific subject matter in one or more academic disciplines and is viewed as a means to stimulate students

to think and learn.

2. The focus is on *what* is said more than on *how* it is said (Krashen, 1982) in preparing students for writing and in responding to writing. The instructor who guides and responds to writing must know the subject matter well enough to explain it, field questions, and respond to content and reasoning in papers. Treatment of matters of form (organization, grammar, and mechanics) and style do not dictate the composition course syllabus, but rather follow from writers' needs.

3. Skills are integrated as in university course work: Students listen, discuss, and read about a topic before writing about it—as contrasted to the traditional belief that in a writing course, students should only write.

4. Extended study of a topic (some class treatment of core material and some independent and/or collaborative study/research) precedes writing, so that there is “active control of ideas” and “extensive processing of new information” (Anthony, 1985) before students begin to write. A longer incubation period is permitted, with more input from external sources, than in traditional composition classes, in which students rely solely or primarily on self-generated ideas and write on a new topic for each composition.

### 2-3 Formulaic expressions

There are certain pre-coded (formulaic) utterances conventionally triggered by certain communication situations, and their use is expected and deemed appropriate because they are seen as part of everyday politeness formulas (they are also called *phatic* structures in the literature). Some routines are taught explicitly and their use is prompted by adults in socializing children. These expressions are part of every competent speaker's repertoire, and include proverbs, idioms, greetings, apologies, thanks, and leave-taking. Human language is distinguished by its creative potential. New sentences, never spoken or heard before, can easily be formulated given the set of rules for combining a large set of vocabulary items (Chomsky, 1965). As linguists have explained for many years, this system allows for the generation of an infinite set of context-free sentences from a finite grammar. The standard view in linguistic



textbooks is stated by Pinker (1995);

...virtually every sentence that a person utters or understands is a brand-new combination of words, appearing for the first time in the history of the universe (p.22).

This statement, however, is seriously misleading. Many utterances in everyday language are conventional expressions that must be used in a certain way. Conventional or formulaic expressions (FEs) are distinguished from novel utterances in a number of ways. They often contain lexical items with non-literal or nonstandard meanings. Unlike novel sentences, which can be strictly neutral in affective content, FEs are generally laced with attitudinal or emotional innuendoes. FEs are “familiar” in the sense that a native speaker will recognize them as having a special status. As stated by Jackendoff (1995), a very large number of a broad range of formulaic expressions “are familiar to American speakers of English; that is, an American speaker must have them stored in memory”. It follows that a survey using recall and recognition tasks adapted for the study of FEs can provide objective and quantifiable data to support the claim that native speakers “know” FEs. In English speaking cultures, not only are FEs often subsumed under the opprobrious label of “cliches”, but also current linguistic models emphasize combinatorial creativity as the central property of human language (Van Lancker, 2001).

#### **2-4 The importance of language chunks in writing proficiency**

Several publications in the past 15 years have highlighted the importance of formulaic language chunks (i.e., multiword phrases and routines treated as single lexical units) in both L1 and L2 use. Although these chunks are variously referred to by different authors as *gambits* (Emig 1977), *conventionalized language forms* (Murray 1985), *lexical phrases* (Newell 1984), *conversational routines*, *pre-patterned speech* (Wilkinson 1985), *lexicalized sentence stems* (Zamel 1983), *partially pre-assembled patterns* (Widdowson, 1990), or *formulaic constructions* (Pawley, 1992), all these authors agree that such chunks play a more significant role

in language production than is normally acknowledged.

Native speakers of a language are in command of thousands of language chunks and use them as building blocks in their writings. The retrieval of these chunks is cognitively relatively undemanding, which allows the writer to attend to other aspects of communication and to plan larger pieces of discourse. L2 learners, on the other hand, often put sentences together from scratch, that is, word by word, which takes up their cognitive capacity and does not let them achieve native-like fluency. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) discuss in detail how lexical phrases can serve as an effective basis for a new, increasingly lexis-oriented teaching of writing, and, indeed, there have been indications in L2 methodology that such a development is more than a mere theoretical possibility.

Given the assumed importance of formulaic language chunks, it is surprising that, until the recent publication of Nattinger and DeCarrico's *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, no comprehensive study had been written offering a systematic and empirically based analysis of the issue. Nattinger and DeCarrico's high-quality work in *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, coupled with the fact that it has filled such a noticeable and long-existing gap in applied linguistics, led to the books being awarded the Duke of Edinburgh Prize in 1992, the foremost British award in TESOL and applied linguistics. *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching* is a classic applied linguistic work as it contains a thorough linguistic introduction to and analysis of the issue as well as a detailed discussion of how the teaching of foreign/second languages can benefit from the theoretical insights. The authors base their arguments on a review of the existing literature, analysis of a broad corpus of spoken and written English, and their own experience in the teaching of lexis.

### 3- Method

The participants of this study consisted of 60 (36F, 24M) learners of English as a foreign language studying at *Gaame Andisheh Shargh* language institute in the city of Mashhad, Iran. The students included in this study were all taking part in General English and IELTS preparation courses and trying to improve their writing skills to

satisfy their academic future needs at the time of selection . The mean age for the participants was 23, with the youngest and oldest participants being 19 and 42, respectively.

Participants were divided into two groups of 30, based on their results on a language proficiency test. The language proficiency test used for this purpose was the paper-based version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). This test was comprised of listening, grammar and reading sub-sections. Despite being regarded as a stand-alone sub-test, the Test of Written English (TWE) was also included in the pre-test. The paper-based TOEFL consists of 140 multiple choice items and the TWE is scored on a scale of 6 points. The results obtained by the two groups on the listening, grammar and reading sections of the pretest can be seen in figure 1.

	GROUPS	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TOEFL	1.00	30	116.76	10.77	1.96
	2.00	30	115.36	11.90	2.17

Figure1. Descriptive statistics for the TOEFL

In order to determine whether there was a significant difference between the means obtained by the two groups on the TOEFL, the independent samples t-test was used. The results of this test revealed that the two groups did not significantly differ from each other in terms of their performance on the TOEFL. Figure 2 shows the results of the independent t-test.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
TOEFL	Equal variances assumed	.54	.46	.47	58	.63	1.40	2.93	-4.46	7.26
	Equal variances not assumed			.47	57.43	.63	1.40	2.93	-4.46	7.26

Figure2. Independent samples t-test for the TOEFL

The TWE was also of great relevance to the division of learners into two groups. That is, it was of particular importance to ensure the equality of the two groups in terms of their writing proficiency in English. Each writing performance was independently marked by two raters, each of whom underwent a program of rater training (i.e., a norming session), consisting of an orientation to the writing test and a tutorial involving a number of sample responses.

Both raters were graduate students of TEFL and were experienced teachers of English as a foreign language. It is worth mentioning that the same raters also cooperated in the scoring of the post-test. The independent t-test was also used to determine whether the two groups exhibited any significant difference with regards to their writing proficiency in English. The descriptive statistics and the results of the independent t-test can be seen in figures 3 and 4, respectively.

	GROUPS	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TWE	1.00	30	3.50	.93	.17
	2.00	30	3.43	.89	.16

Figure3. Descriptive statistics for TWE

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.12	.72	.28	58	.77	.06	.23	-.40	.54
Equal variances not assumed			.28	57.89	.77	.06	.23	-.40	.54

Figure4. Independent samples t-test for TWE

As can be seen in figure 4, there was no significant difference in the mean scores obtained by the participants of the two groups on the TWE. Considering the results of the pre-tests, it could be claimed that the participants of the two groups were equal with regards to their overall language ability, as well as their writing proficiency in the English language.

The learners of each group participated in an EFL writing course intended to learn how to write an argumentative essay. Both groups underwent 18 hours of instruction. The classes were held twice a week at *Gaame Andisheh Shargh* language institute, with each session lasting for about 90 minutes. Both classes were taught by one of the researchers who was an experienced EFL instructor and a regular teacher at the institute. The learners were informed that the course was carried out as part of a research project and were charged a nominal fee to take part in the course. However, learners were kept unaware of the aims of the research.

The first group participated in a course, in which the focus was chiefly on the instruction of language features and structural elements of the English language. The learners were familiarized with various types of phrases and clauses of the English

language, and were provided with relevant activities and exercises to the structures being taught each session. In the final session of the course, learners were given the chance to use the materials covered in the previous sessions to practice writing an argumentative essay. All essays were corrected by the teacher, who also provided comments on the learners' use of language. The syllabus for the first course has been summarized in table 1.

Session	Topic
1	Introduction to sentences
2	Introduction to clauses, phrases and conjunctions
3	Adverbial clauses
4	Adjective clauses
5	Noun clauses
6	Participle phrases
7	Gerund phrases
8	Infinitive phrases
9	Absolute constructions
10	Abstract noun phrases
11	Appositive phrases
12	Writing Practice and feedback

**Table1. Syllabus for the course delivered to the first group of participants**

The second group of participants underwent treatment in the form of a 12-session course which focused on teaching writing proficiency through the presentation of fixed formulaic expressions. This course differed from the first course in that it did not attend to language features of the English language, except for brief explanations on the difference between phrases and clauses, various conjunctions and also the use of present participle phrases. Contrary to the first course, learners of the second group were taught how to organize and prepare their

ideas for use in the formulaic structures which were later presented to them.

In the second course, learners were provided with eight formulaic structures and were made aware of the purposes they serve. Two structures were used in the introductory paragraph. Three structures were introduced to serve as the topic sentence of each body paragraph. Two structures served the purpose of providing context for supporting ideas and finally, one structure was taught to be used in the concluding paragraph. The syllabus for the treatment course has been presented in table 2 below.

Session	Topic
1	Introduction to the aims and features of argumentative writing
2	Brainstorming
3	Introduction to main ideas and supporting ideas
4	Organizing and planning paragraphs
5	First structure for the introductory paragraph
6	Second structure for the introductory paragraph
7	Structures for topic sentences 1
8	Structures for topic sentences 2
9	Structures for supporting ideas 1
10	Structures for supporting ideas 2
11	Structures for the concluding paragraph
12	Writing practice and feedback

**Table2. Syllabus for the course delivered to the second group of participants**

Each structure was comprised of a series of fixed phrases, from which the learners could choose to create variety in their writing. The structures also had some blank spaces, which had to be filled by either a phrase or a simple clause by the learners. The formulaic structure for the first sentence of the introduction paragraph has been shown in figure 5.

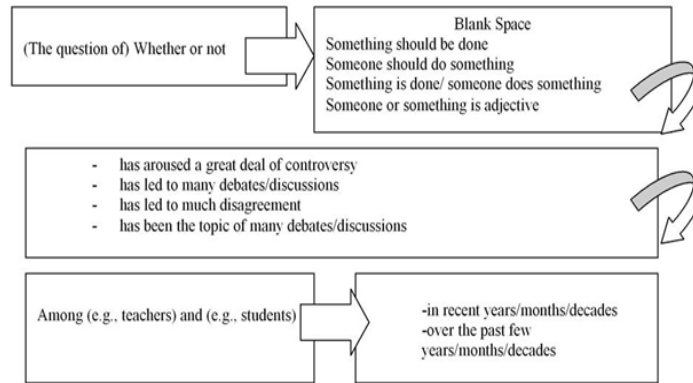


Figure5. Formulaic structure for the first sentence of the introduction paragraph

At the end of each course, learners were given the second task of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to complete. For this task, participants were given an argument, for which they had to write a 250 word essay, supporting their position and refuting the opposing side. The time allocated to the completion of this task was 40 minutes. The same task was presented for both groups. The participants of both groups took part in the post-test on the same time and date.

#### 4- Data analysis

The post-tests were scored by the same raters who rated the pretests. The essays were marked on a scale of 1-9 for their coherence, cohesion, fulfillment of purpose, structural variation and lexical variation (the most needed writing elements for their future academic ventures). The results of the independent sample t-test for each of the criteria were computed. Figures 6 to 10 reveal the results of the t-test for different criteria in the writing of the two groups.



		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Coherence	Equal variances assumed	.55	.45	4.58	58	.00	1.10	.23	.61	1.58
	Equal variances not assumed			4.58	55.89	.00	1.10	.23	.61	1.58

Figure6. Independent samples t-test for coherence on the post-test essay

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Cohesion	Equal variances assumed	.04	.82	.40	58	.68	.10	.24	-.38	.58
	Equal variances not assumed			.40	57.96	.68	.10	.24	-.38	.58

Figure7. Independent samples t-test for cohesion on the post-test essay

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Fulfillment of purpose	Equal variances assumed	.38	.53	4.46	58	.00	.96	.21	.53	
	Equal variances not assumed			4.46	55.25	.00	.96	.21	.53	

Figure8. Independent samples t-test for fulfilling the purpose of task on the post-test essay

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Structural Variation	Equal variances assumed	.42	.51	4.53	58	.00	.93	.20	.52	1.34
	Equal variances not assumed			4.53	57.49	.00	.93	.20	.52	1.34

Figure9. Independent samples t-test for structural variation on the post-test essay

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Lexical Variation	Equal variances assumed	.45	.50	-.72	58	.47	-.23	.32	-.87	.41
	Equal variances not assumed			-.72	57.70	.47	-.23	.32	-.87	.41

Figure9. Independent samples t-test for lexical variation on the post-test essay

The figures reveal that the essays written by the participants of the two groups were significantly different in terms of coherence, fulfillment of purpose and structural accuracy. Nevertheless, no meaningful difference was observed in the cohesion and lexical variation of the essays written by the two groups. In all cases in which significant differences were reported, essays written by the participants who had undergone treatment (i.e., participants of the experimental group) were rated as being better than those of their counterparts. In other words, the essays by learners in the second group were more coherent, better fulfilled the purpose of the task and exhibited more structural variation. The sample introductory paragraphs below illustrate the differences discussed. The first and second paragraphs were written by advanced participants of the first and second groups, respectively.

People use their personal cars for transportation. They use it even for short distances. This causes many problems including air pollution, high traffic and etc. Governments should introduce laws to restrict the use of personal cars. This can be done in many ways. Some of these ways have been discussed in this essay.

The question of whether or not international laws should be introduced to control car ownership has aroused many debates in recent decades. While some

believe that car use should be controlled, due to social, environmental and political reasons; many hold the belief that the use of public transportation is not always possible, especially in developing countries.

The two paragraphs are approximately of the same length. Neither the first nor the second paragraph suffers from severe grammatical errors. However, the most evident difference between the two lies in their coherence, and more importantly, the extent to which they serve their purpose as introduction paragraphs.

The first writer starts by exploring the current situation and then goes on to explain his point of view and provide some suggestions. The paragraph written by the first writer does not appear to belong to an argumentative essay. The second writer's paragraph, on the other hand, begins by introducing the argument and briefly stating the beliefs postulated by both sides. She then indirectly reveals her own standpoint through reviewing her reasons for supporting one of the two sides.

### **5- Discussion**

Writing has perhaps been one of the most difficult skills to teach in the foreign language classroom especially when academic preparation is questioned. Some view writing as a support system for teaching grammar and vocabulary, while others believe that writing deserves to be treated as an independent skill (Harmer, 2004). However, if writing were to be seen as an independent skill such as reading, listening and speaking, one would have to pinpoint the classroom practices and measures leading to the strengthening of this skill within learners.

Many textbooks adopting the skill-based approach tend to focus on teaching meta-linguistic strategies for writing (Byrne, 1988; Hedge, 2000; Hess, 2001). These strategies include the mechanics of writing, spelling, punctuation, generating ideas, and paragraph development. It appears that such an approach teaches learners how to organize their writing process but fails to sufficiently address the writing process itself.

The present paper introduces an approach to teaching writing which also considers writing as a stand-alone skill. However, it attends more to the linguistic

variables involved in teaching rather than the meta-linguistic ones which are currently in vogue. This approach makes extensive use of formulaic expressions and language chunks. The results of this paper revealed that such a formulaic approach results in greater coherence, grammatical variation and fulfillment of purpose by learners and accordingly greater academic accomplishments. Nonetheless, there was no significant difference between essays written by learners taught using this method and those who were taught through structures and grammar. Given the great importance ascribed to communicative competence in modern language proficiency tests, the authors of this article propose the use of the formulaic approach for teaching writing courses particularly in preparation programs of writing proficiency tests.

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