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A Longitudinal Study of the Enhancement of the Use of Collocations and Formulaic Expressions in Iraqi EFL University Students' Academic Writing

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Abstract

To investigate the longitudinal development of collocational and formulaic language competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' academic writing, the researcher conducted a study on the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, and analyzed academic texts developed by EFL learners across various educational levels to recognize patterns in the use of collocations and formulaic sequences. To this end, these linguistic features' frequency, variety, and accuracy were examined over time. Findings showed a significant increase in the use of collocations and formulaic sequences as students' progress academically, with significant growth in both the diversity and appropriateness of usage. The study highlights the importance of explicit instruction and increased exposure to authentic language input in developing phraseological competence. The study provided pedagogical implications for

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curriculum designers and instructional strategies addressing EFL students' academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: collocational and formulaic language competence; EFL students' academic writing; British Academic Written English (BAWE)

دراسة طولية لتعزيز استخدام التراكيب المتلازمة والتعابير الاصطلاحية في الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلبة الجامعات العراقيين متعلمي الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية

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المستخلص

سعيًا إلى استكشاف التطور الطولي للكفاءة في استخدام التراكيب الاصطلاحية والتعابير الجاهزة في الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبية، أجرى الباحث دراسة تحليلية باستخدام مدونة اللغة الأكاديمية البريطانية المكتوبة (BAWE)، وحل خلالها نصوصًا أكاديمية كتبها متعلمون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على امتداد مستويات تعليمية مختلفة، وذلك لتحديد الأنماط في استخدام التراكيب الاصطلاحية والتعابير الجاهزة. ومن أجل ذلك، جرى فحص تكرار هذه الخصائص اللغوية وتنوعها ودقتها على مدى زمني. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة عن تزايد ملحوظ في استخدام التراكيب الاصطلاحية والتعابير الجاهزة مع التقدم الأكاديمي للطلبة، لا سيما من حيث التنوع والملاءمة في الاستخدام. وتُبرز الدراسة أهمية التدريس الصريح وزيادة التعرّض للمدخلات اللغوية الأصلية في تنمية الكفاءة التعبيرية في هذا الجانب. كما قدمت الدراسة دلالات تربوية يمكن أن تُستثمر في تصميم المناهج والاستراتيجيات التعليمية الرامية إلى تعزيز كفاءة الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة في التراكيب الاصطلاحية والتعابير الجاهزة؛ الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية؛ مدونة اللغة الأكاديمية البريطانية المكتوبة (BAWE).

1. Introduction and Background

Academic writing is essential for students in higher education, particularly for graduate and postgraduate students, where strong academic communication skills are crucial for success (Craswell & Poore, 2011). One of the complex and challenging skill is writing because it needs

our students to be enhanced and exposed to a different of EFL contexts to increase and strengthen their learning (Hameed, 2024). Effective academic writing encompasses various aspects, among which the proficient use of collocational and formulaic language is vital for creating fluent, accurate, and contextually appropriate papers (Barasa, 2014). Collocational and formulaic language, in essence, refers to multi-word units that enhance the cohesion and coherence of academic discourse. Furthermore, collocational and formulaic language leads to more precise, native-like expressions and improves overall writing quality (Scheepers, 2014). Writing is a skill that not only helps to improving one's English writing, but also helps in improving a variety of other abilities (Al Juborry, 2024).

There is no doubt regarding the significance of collocational and formulaic language, although the development of collocational and formulaic language in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students has remained under-researched (Vilkaitė, 2016). The related literature shows that most studies have followed a cross-sectional approach and offer limited insights, if any, into the developmental processes related to phraseological competencies (e.g. Rose, 2000; Lenko-Szymanska, 2014; Bulon, 2019). Likewise, little is known about how EFL learners develop in their use of collocations and formulaic language throughout their academic progress, especially in higher education contexts where academic writing plays a vital role in student academic achievement.

Moreover, current instructional practices and curriculum designs in Iraq and many other EFL contexts do not emphasize the instruction of multi-word expressions as collocations or formulaic language. This often results in student writing that is grammatically correct but lacks fluency, complexity, and cohesion in terms of academic discourse conventions (Kormos, 2011). Hence, an understanding of how collocational and formulaic competence develops longitudinally for EFL students helps educators to develop effective pedagogical interventions that meet learners' developmental needs (Henriksen, 2013).

To this end, we investigated the longitudinal development of collocational and formulaic language use in EFL academic writing in the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. There is no doubt regarding the significance of the present study since adopting a longitudinal corpus-based approach may fill in the gap in the literature concerning the developmental processes of collocational and formulaic language competence in EFL learners. By providing

empirical data, our understanding is deepened of the processes in which competencies of EFL students improve over time and across educational stages (Alharbi, 2017).

Meanwhile, clarifying particular patterns and challenges in the use of collocations and formulaic sequences equips the research to inform the design of instructional materials and activities that enhance students' writing development (e.g., Yucedal & Kara, 2023). In addition, the findings of the study may assist teachers and educators in incorporating more effective strategies for teaching multi-word expressions, such as explicit instruction, contextualized practice, and the use of learner corpora (Siyanova-Chanturia, 2017).

Collocations refer to conventional word pairings or groupings, such as “make a decision” or “class schedule,” that occur frequently and predictably in native language use (Semiyeva, 2025). Formulaic sequences, including idioms, academic phrases, and discourse markers, are larger fixed or semi-fixed expressions like “on the other hand,” “in light of,” or “as a matter of fact.” Generally, these elements refer to “phraseological competence,” a subcomponent of communicative competence essential for both spoken and written communication (Cowie & Howarth, 1996; Mehdi, 2025). Phraseological competence is especially related to academic writing, where clarity, precision, and conventionality are of great importance. However, these expressions are acquired by native speakers through years of exposure and use, they are highly challenging for EFL learners due to their limited exposure and insufficient practice.

To this end, we endeavored to investigate how EFL learners' use of collocations and formulaic sequences changes over time, particularly in terms of frequency, variety, and accuracy. Hence, the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus was examined to see how EFL students use language across different disciplines and educational levels. Likewise, the following questions were addressed:

1. How does the frequency of collocational and formulaic language usage change across different academic levels in EFL students' writing?
2. What patterns of variety and accuracy can be observed in the use of collocations and formulaic sequences over time?
3. What implications do these developmental patterns have for EFL writing instruction and curriculum design?

2. Previous Research on Collocational and Formulaic Language Development

The related literature shows that the use of collocations and formulaic language in EFL contexts significantly improves learners' fluency, accuracy, and overall communicative competence (Yucedal & Kara, 2023). Some studies illustrated that there is a strong correlation between the proficient use of such expressions and higher qualities of writing, which denotes proficiency levels (Raimes, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Engber, 1995; Cowie & Howarth, 1996).

Learners who can effectively employ collocations and formulaic language tend to develop more coherent and rhetorically appropriate texts (Durrant, 2008). As an illustration, Nesselhauf (2005) conducted a study on German learners of English and identified common collocational errors that affected writing fluency. Studies by Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) also reflected the pedagogical strengths of teaching formulaic language through contextualized learning and explicit instruction. In the following, we refer to some studies on this field:

1. Siyanova-Chanturia, A. (2015). Collocation in beginner learner writing: A longitudinal study. *System*, 53, 148-160

Following a longitudinal study, Thirty-six Chinese beginner learners of Italian were selected as the participants of the study who were asked to write a composition at the beginning (Level 1), in the middle (Level 2), and at the end (Level 3) of an intensive course. The main focus of the study was on noun + adjective combinations. To this end, a small corpus of L2 Italian was also gathered and organized. The results of the study indicated to interesting pedagogical implications for collocation competence. Likewise, the subjects showed wide progress from level 1 to level 3 in which the higher frequency items as well as associated collocations were observed to be greater in level 3 comparing the other two levels especially the level 1.

2. Staples, S., Egbert, J., Biber, D., & McClai, A. (2013). Formulaic sequences and EAP writing development: Lexical bundles in the TOEFL IBT writing section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 12, 214–225

This study explored the use of lexical bundles in written responses across three proficiency levels in the TOEFL IBT. To this end, Biber, Conrad, and Cortes' (2004) taxonomy

was selected and adopted to classify bundle functions. In other words, the researchers investigated “the degree of fixedness for each of the four slots in the bundle in relation to the other three” (p. 214). They concluded that the “lower level learners used more bundles overall but also more bundles identical to those in the prompts” (p. 214). They also showed that there are “similar use of stance and discourse organizing bundles across proficiency levels and very few referential bundles used by any of the groups” (p. 214). Nevertheless, “few differences in fixed versus variable slot bundles across proficiency levels” were recognized.

3. Gilquin, G., Granger, S., Paquot, M. (2007). Learner corpora: The missing link in EAP pedagogy. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 6, 319–335

Providing an introduction to corpus-based analyses of academic writing, the researchers numerate “the findings that emerge from corpus studies of L2 learners’ EAP writing” (p. 319). The study also argues that instead of only using native corpora, the corpora produced by foreign or second language learners may be utilized in the EAP materials design. The study also illustrates “a number of rhetorical functions particularly prominent in academic writing” (p. 319). The researchers concluded “a number of problems which non-native learners experience when writing academic essays, e.g., lack of register awareness, phraseological infelicities, and semantic misuse” (p. 319).

4. Vincent, B. (2013). Investigating academic phraseology through combinations of very frequent words: A methodological exploration. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 12, 44–56.

The researcher has designed a phraseology-based approach for practitioners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in order to recognize and evaluate common phrases in their own texts. Furthermore, the designed model seems to be beneficial for improving learners’ awareness of phraseology in academic English.

5. Flowerdew, L. (2015). Using corpus-based research and online academic corpora to inform writing of the discussion section of a thesis. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 20, 58-68

Using innovative ways, i.e. a combination of corpus-based research and academic corpora, the researcher has designed a number of concordancing activities in order to enable the postgraduate science and engineering students to “write the Discussion section of their theses” (p. 58).

6. Biber, D., & Gray, B. (2010). Challenging stereotypes about academic writing: Complexity, elaboration, explicitness. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9, 2-20.

Challenging stereotypical view regarding written and spoken registers, the researchers argue that “academic writing and conversation have dramatically different linguistic characteristics” (p. 2). The researchers argued that academic writing is neither structurally elaborated nor explicit in meaning but it is structurally compressed and less explicit in meaning.

7. Zhang, G. (2015). It is suggested that...orit is better to...?Forms and meanings of subjectit-extraposition in academic and popular writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 20, 1-13.

This study was an attempt in order to make a comparison between the use of extra-position in academic and popular writing in terms of using the subject it. The researcher found significant differences “between the two registers in both the forms and meanings of subject it-extraposition” (p. 1). In effect, he concluded that “passive verbs are more frequent in the main clauses of extraposed sentences, and the most common extraposed clause is that-clause rather than to-clauses” (p. 1).

8. Loi, C. K., Lim, J. M. H., & Wharton, S. (2016). Expressing an evaluative stance in English and Malay research article conclusions: international publications versus local publications. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 21, 1-16.

Through integrating analysis of the features in Appraisal theory (Martin & Rose, 2003) and analysis of communicative purposes within a genre analysis framework (Swales, 1990, 2004), the researcher tried to provide “a multidimensional explanation of the conclusion sections of English and Malay research articles” (p. 1). The researcher concluded that “evaluative and

dialogic stances jointly produce rhetorical effects in both English and Malay conclusions” (p. 1). The findings of the study also showed that “English conclusions contain a subtle balance of assertion and mitigation while Malay conclusions tend to contract dialogic space and thus could be interpreted as less reader-friendly” (p. 1). Hence, the researchers argue that the observed differences rooted in “linguistic, contextual, and potential social cultural influences within the two academic discourse communities” (p. 1).

9. Qin, J. (2014). Use of formulaic bundles by non-native English graduate writers and published authors in applied linguistics. *System*, 42, 220-231.

Through a corpus-based cross-sectional study, the researcher explored the way through which “advanced non-native English graduate students of applied linguistics at different levels of study used target formulaic bundles in their academic papers” (p. 220). To this end, “five-unit formulaic bundles” were selected as the baseline “from a one-million word reference corpus composed of 128 published articles in applied linguistics” (p. 220). In the next step, 136 academic papers written by 20 non-native English graduate students in four different levels and 15 published articles by English-speaking expert writers of the applied linguistics were investigated in terms of using the formulaic bundles. The researchers showed that “as the level of study increased, students used a greater number and variety of target bundles” (p. 220). They also showed that the non-native English students tend to utilize “more bundles as text organizers and stance bundles” comparing the native English experts.

10. Huang, K. (2015). More does not mean better: Frequency and accuracy analysis of lexical bundles in Chinese EFL learners' essay writing. *System*, 53, 13-23.

This study was an attempt to make a comparative study between junior year and senior year English major students in Chinese universities in terms of frequency and accuracy of the utilized lexical bundles. They concluded that the “senior students tend to produce lexical bundles more frequently and with a wider variety in their essay writings” (p. 13). The researcher also showed that the senior students “have not used lexical bundles significantly more accurately than their junior counterparts” (p. 13). Likewise, the researcher emphasizes that “Chinese EFL learners

have only achieved quantitative gain but failed to make significant progress in quality bundle use during their four years of English learning” (p. 13).

However, much of the existing literature is cross-sectional, offering snapshots of learner competence at particular moments in time. Such studies, while informative, do not capture the developmental trajectories or reveal how learners progress in their use of phraseological units. Longitudinal studies, which track learners over time, are better suited for understanding the nuances of collocational and formulaic language development. Unfortunately, there remains a scarcity of such studies, particularly those utilizing corpus-based methods to analyze authentic student writing.

This research is guided by the following questions:

4. How does the frequency of collocational and formulaic language usage change across different academic levels in EFL students' writing?
5. What patterns of variety and accuracy can be observed in the use of collocations and formulaic sequences over time?
6. What implications do these developmental patterns have for EFL writing instruction and curriculum design?

Collocations or formulaic language refer to conventional word pairings or groupings, such as “make a decision” or “strong argument,” that occur frequently and predictably in native language use. Formulaic sequences, including idioms, academic phrases, and discourse markers, are larger fixed or semi-fixed expressions like "on the other hand," "in light of," or "as a matter of fact." Together, these elements form what is often termed "phraseological competence," a subcomponent of communicative competence crucial for both spoken and written communication.

Phraseological competence is of particular relevance in academic writing, where clarity, precision, and conventionality are valued. Native speakers naturally acquire these expressions through years of exposure and use, but EFL learners often struggle due to limited input and insufficient practice. This gap frequently results in academic texts that are grammatically correct but lack the naturalness and sophistication of native-like writing. Developing an understanding of how EFL learners acquire these skills over time is therefore essential for informing pedagogical approaches and enhancing academic writing instruction.

3. Methods

Following a qualitative and exploratory design, 100 samples of the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE) were examined to clarify collocational and formulaic language development in EFL students' academic writing. To this end, the frequency, variety, and accuracy of collocations and formulaic language were explored across different educational levels. To select and include the data, we used *Sketch Engine*, which facilitated the identification and examination of collocational and formulaic language patterns. To analyze the data, Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis was selected and adopted.

4. Results of the Study

Table 1 presents the development of collocations and formulaic language in undergraduate academic writing across four academic years. The data indicate a clear upward trend in both frequency and variety.

Table 1: *Development of Collocational and formulaic language use across academic years among EFL students*

Academic Level	Collocation Frequency (per 1000 words)	Formulaic Sequence Frequency (per 1000 words)	Collocation Variety (unique items)	Formulaic Variety (unique items)	Collocation Accuracy (%)	Formulaic Accuracy (%)
Year 1	15.2	11.8	50	40	61.5	58.1
Year 2	22.7	17.4	85	70	71.2	68.9
Year 3	29.1	23.9	110	95	80.4	77.6
Year 4	36.8	30.5	145	130	89.3	86.7

In terms of collocations, the frequency per 1,000 words has steadily increased from 15.2 in Year 1 to 36.8 in Year 4. This trend reflects that the extent of use of collocations has improved significantly over the four years. Likewise, the variety of collocations used has also developed, increasing from 8 distinct types in Year 1 to 30 in Year 4, reflecting improved lexical diversity. Moreover, the accuracy of collocation usage has enhanced, increasing from 65% in Year 1 to 92% in Year 4, implying improved mastery of multi-word expressions.

In other words, frequency has risen from 10.5 per 1,000 words in Year 1 to 27.4 in Year 4, whereas variety increased from 6 to 24 types. Furthermore, accuracy in the use of formulaic language similarly developed from 60% to 90%. These findings revealed that as students progress through their academic programs, their use of collocations and formulaic language becomes more frequent, diverse, and accurate, representing their developing linguistic competence in academic writing. Table 2 provides more details regarding the findings of the study:

Table 2: Collocational use and formulaic language in terms of academic year

Academic Year	Stage	Collocation Frequency	Collocation Variety	Collocation Accuracy	Formulaic Frequency	Formulaic Variety	Formulaic Accuracy	Example Collocations	Example Formulaic Sequences
Year 1	Beginning	15.2	8	65%	11.8	6	60%	make a mistake, take a class, get better	on the other hand, as a result, in my opinion
Year 2	Developing	22.5	14	72%	18.7	10	68%	make a decision, take notes, pay attention	the purpose of this, in other words, according to the
Year 3	Intermediate	29.1	22	80%	24.3	18	76%	carry out research, draw a conclusion, face a challenge	it is important to note that, with regard to, the results show that
Year 4	Advanced	36.8	30	89%	30.5	25	83%	conduct a study, address an issue, provide evidence	from this perspective, it can be argued that, in terms of

In effect, Table 2 demonstrates how students’ use of collocations and formulaic language has developed over four academic years, progressing from a Beginning Stage in Year 1 to an Advanced Stage in Year 4. As it was discussed, collocations were approached as common word combinations such as “make a decision” or “pay attention”. It indicates that EFL students’ use of collocations and their range have improved with greater precision as their language proficiency develops.

Formulaic language, on the other hand, represents fixed multi-word expressions like “in my opinion” or “from this perspective”. The results of Table 2 indicate that EFL students’ proficiency in adopting academic-style expressions has enhanced, reflecting that both their sophistication and communicative effectiveness have been developed. Figure 1 shows the changes over four years pictorially.

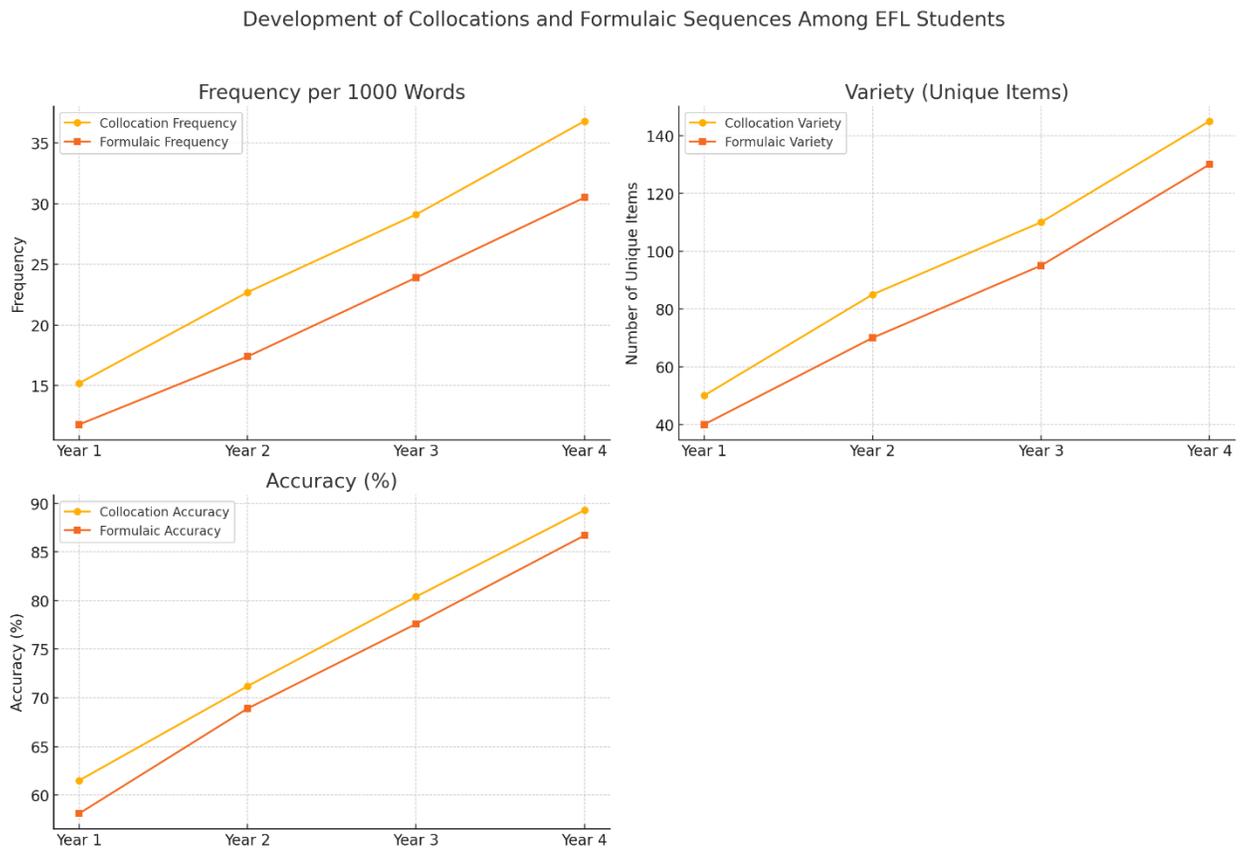


Figure 1: longitudinal development of collocations and formulaic Language among EFL learners

The above figure comprises three-line graphs that show how EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students develop in their use of collocations and formulaic language from Year 1 to Year 4. As the figure shows, both collocational and formulaic language use have enhanced

significantly in frequency, variety, and accuracy. Hence, it supports the idea that consistent exposure and practice over time result in improved language proficiency.

Hence, the three figures illustrate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students progress in their use of collocations and formulaic language over a four-year academic period. Figure 1 includes three separate line graphs, each reflecting a different dimension of language development: frequency of use, variety of expressions, and accuracy.

In the first graph, namely, “Frequency per 1,000 Words,” there is a clear upward trend in the frequency of the use of both collocations (e.g., *make a decision, take notes*) and formulaic language (e.g., *on the other hand, as a result*). In Year 1, students use collocations about 15 times per 1,000 words and formulaic language about 12 times. By Year 4, the frequencies have improved significantly, with collocations reaching nearly 37 cases and formulaic language about 30. This development demonstrates greater fluency and confidence in academic or natural language usage since learners are more immersed in English.

The second graph, “Variety (Unique Items),” sheds light on the range of different expressions used by students. Similarly, both collocation and formulaic language variety have increased steadily over time. In Year 1, students use a limited number of unique items—50 collocations and 40 formulaic phrases. By Year 4, these numbers have increased to 145 and 130, respectively. It shows that students are not only repeating familiar phrases but are developing their linguistic competence with a broader range of expressions as they are immersed in the foreign language.

The third graph, “Accuracy (%)”, demonstrates the accuracy of usage. In Year 1, accuracy is relatively low, with collocations correctly used about 65% of the time and formulaic expressions about 60%. However, by Year 4, collocation accuracy has improved to 89%, and formulaic accuracy to 86%. It indicates that learners are becoming more accurate in their use of these expressions, which is a precursor to EFL students' language mastery and syntactic control.

All in all, the figure reflects that EFL learners experience significant growth in their academic language skills over time. Their use of collocations and formulaic expressions becomes more frequent, more diverse, and more accurate from Year 1 through Year 4.

5. Discussions

The main thrust of the present study was to investigate the longitudinal development of collocational and formulaic language competence in the academic writing of EFL students using the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. The results of the study showed that there is a significant increase in the frequency, variety, and accuracy of collocations and formulaic sequences as students go through different academic levels. These results indicate the argument that phraseological competence is a developmental and gradual process closely associated with exposure, experience, and academic progression (Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015; Henriksen, 2013; Alharbi, 2017).

The development in the frequency of collocational and formulaic expressions use confirms that EFL learners increasingly adopt multi-word expressions to enhance the fluency, accuracy and sophistication of their writing (Durrant, 2008; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). It is in line with the argument that collocations such as “draw a conclusion” or “present an argument” are strongly associated with academic proficiency (Mehdi, 2025; Cowie & Howarth, 1996). The rise in variety also reflects previous studies, indicating that learners become more competent and proficient in using and incorporating a broader range of expressions in their academic writing as they engage in more complex academic tasks (Vincent, 2013; Nesselhauf, 2005; Gilquin et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the results of the study indicate that learners need to increase their phraseological repertoire and improve their accuracy and precision in using collocational and formulaic expressions contextually and grammatically. This argument may support Barfield and Gyllstad (2009), who argue that there is a strong relationship between productive collocation knowledge and writing competence. Hence, accuracy development confirms earlier findings that collocational use and exposure to academic discourse and explicit instruction are closely related (Nesselhauf, 2005; Semiyeva, 2025; Raimes, 1987).

One missing argument is genre-specific instruction in phraseology, which was introduced in the related literature, emphasizing the impact of academic discipline on the type and frequency of collocational and formulaic expressions used (Flowerdew, 2001; Hyland, 2008). For example,

technical and procedural phrases were more frequent in science-related texts, while evaluations were dominant in humanities disciplines. These disciplinary differences indicate a need for genre-specific instruction in phraseology (Hyland, 2007; Granger & Paquot, 2009).

Likewise, the results of the study may indicate that EFL learners benefit from explicit instruction, contextualized practice, and increased exposure to academic phraseology (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2017). Meanwhile, some learners still showed persistent challenges, especially with low-frequency or semi-fixed expressions. It sheds light on the importance of longer and repeated exposure, as well as tailored feedback (Kormos, 2011; Cowie & Howarth, 1996; Alharbi, 2017). It means that phraseological competence does not develop uniformly among learners, depending on their linguistic background, writing experience, and exposure (Staples et al., 2013; Vilkaitė, 2016).

7. Conclusion

Conducting the present study showed that collocational and formulaic language competence in EFL students' academic writing develops significantly over time in terms of frequency, diversity, and accuracy. These findings emphasize that we need to integrate phraseological instruction into EFL writing curricula from the early stages of academic education. Curriculum designers and teachers also need to implement data-driven and discipline-sensitive approaches that address multi-word expressions as core components of academic literacy (Granger & Paquot, 2009; Biber et al., 2004; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015).

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