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EFL Learners' Formulaic Language Use in Writing: an Action Research Account

Uso del lenguaje formulaico en la escritura de estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Resultados de una investigación acción

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Abstract: The present study exemplifies an action research-based approach for addressing the extent to which a process of explicit instruction of formulaic language supports the use of this type of vocabulary in middle school students' short narrative written texts. The study was conducted at a private school in Chile, as a plan to help learners use different forms of expression in a written format. Data were obtained from a group of 23 Spanish-speaking learners of English before and after the intervention period. The action research methodology was implemented in order to collect and analyse written compositions as well as a survey for evaluating the treatment from the students' perspective. The observation and reflection process led to positive outcomes in relation to the use of formulaic expressions in writing, and students' opinion about the process also proved favourable. The pedagogical innovation is reflected upon theoretical and pedagogical perspectives. Implications applicable to teachers working in this and other contexts are also considered.

Keywords: formulaic language - action research - explicit instruction - multiword units

Resumen: El presente estudio muestra cómo un enfoque de investigación acción aborda la enseñanza explícita de lenguaje formulaico en estudiantes de 8vo básico y su efecto en el uso de éste en la escritura de textos narrativos en Inglés. El proceso de intervención fue realizado en un colegio privado en Chile. Los datos fueron obtenidos a partir de un grupo de 23 participantes siguiendo una metodología de investigación-acción que permitió recolectar y analizar información obtenida a través de textos escritos por los participantes en inglés y, a su vez, conocer su percepción sobre las diferentes estrategias implementadas y sobre su propia habilidad para usar estas expresiones. La innovación pedagógica, a partir de la cual se reflexionó tomando en cuenta perspectivas teóricas y pedagógicas, indicaron un efecto favorable en relación al uso de expresiones formulaicas en la habilidad de escritura. De igual manera, la opinión de los estudiantes muestra percepciones favorables sobre las estrategias implementadas en clases.

Palabras clave: lenguaje formulaico - investigación-acción - enseñanza deliberada - unidades multipalabras

1. Introduction

In Chilean schools, English is taught as a foreign language. In spite of the fact that in some institutions with an intensive English curriculum learners are exposed to the target language for longer periods, as they go out of school every day, the language they hear is Spanish and most of the forms of input and output are performed in their mother tongue. Despite the fact that in the setting of an international school learners are more prone to use English as the means of communication, their lack of vocabulary in general and, in particular, their lack of formulaic language represents a barrier for them to communicate their ideas more effectively in both spoken and written language. This action research project was developed at an International Baccalaureate School, which, through a Language and Literature program, pursues the philosophy and teaching standards imposed by that international institution in all areas of the curriculum. For 8th graders, the subject of English aims at developing learning outcomes related to analysis, organization and production of different kinds of texts. For these main goals, one of the requirements is the use of a wide range of vocabulary and different forms of expression (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). Within that area, formulaic language is found to be one of the problems learners encounter at the moment of making sense of its meaning and when trying to use it in context. This eventually leads to the avoidance of those units of vocabulary.

As some researchers have claimed, together with the teacher/researcher experience, mere exposure to formulaic expressions may not be enough for learners, since they need to notice these expressions to be able to learn them and, eventually, use them appropriately (Üstünbas & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Ortaçtepe, 2012). Having considered this learning problem, a period of explicit instruction was planned and implemented within

the English lessons with a twofold purpose. The first one was to determine the use of formulaic language in students' pieces of writing after a process of explicit instruction, and the second one was to know the students' perception of the different teaching strategies implemented and their own ability to use formulaic language. This was accomplished by means of a collaborative small-scaled action research project conducted with 23 8th-grade students in 3 phases: diagnosis and planning, implementation of the intervention (action) and observation and reflections. Finally, some implications for teachers working in EFL contexts are discussed.

2. Literature review

Throughout the years, there has been an abundance of research investigating the field of vocabulary and the way second language learners acquire it. Within this area, special attention has been given to formulaic language as it plays an important role in the language repertoire of learners of a foreign or second language (Schmidtt & Carter, 2004). Formulaic language has been commonly referred to as multiword units (MWUs), which can be defined as prefabricated chunks that represent single choices for the speaker, such as *run out of, on the one hand, up to date or once again* (Alali & Schmidtt, 2012; Moreno Jaén & Pérez Basanta, 2010). These multiword units have been claimed to be important productive resources in foreign language learners' speech fluency and language proficiency (Peters & Pauwels, 2015; Rafieyan, 2018); the control of an appropriate range of them has been said to be crucial for a learner to perform at an advanced level in writing or speaking (Cowie, 1992). However, the use of MWUs has been a challenge for foreign language learners at different levels of proficiency (Levitzky-Aviad & Laufer, 2013), and it has also been a challenge for teachers who train learners of English as a foreign or second language. Multiword units are an excellent source of corpora for in-class activities and assignments. According to Mugford (2017), they foster language use development and contribute to a more autonomous interlanguage evolution as they can be applied to all speech acts, complaining, disagreeing, and making excuses, for example. These communicative functions will be more appropriately conveyed by means of these language chunks.

A large number of studies on MWUs have been conducted, largely, in the tertiary level, under the traditional research approach, as opposed to the action research approach (AR) used in this study. Rajeswaran (2019), for instance, used a quantitative research approach to analyse the effect of role-playing and conversation activities with two groups of 60 first-year university students. The main language learning strategies used in the study were role-play communicative assessment and writing assessment. The results showed a close relation between MWUs form and function when used in specific contexts and a better performance in written assignments than in role-play tasks. The study's main conclusion was that teaching MWUs motivated the students to perform better when using this type of lexical items to write their texts.

Explicit teaching of MWUs could be highly effective when giving more specific instructions. This was studied by Le-Thi et al. (2017), who showed that learning through explicit instruction and incidental encounters was significantly more effective than the vocabulary teaching approach used traditionally in their context. The participants, 60 university students taking part of the last level of a general English course, were divided into three groups, *control*, *no-context* and *sentence-context*. The results showed that MWUs explicit teaching proved to be more effective than using only the traditional coursebook instructions, with stable gains throughout testing. They also

showed that complementing meaning-focused tasks with explicit teaching in the treatment group resulted in significantly more learning. Masoni (2020), on the other hand, examined the effects of training pre-service teachers to use children's picture books as a source of language learning using MWUs in an Italian University. The study consisted of identifying MWUs that could be effective to create daily classroom talk. The main finding of the study was that the participants' concept of classroom language changed; carefully chosen language could act on the classroom atmosphere and favour its acquisition in early stages. The participants asserted that using MWUs was effective to better communicate in the classroom.

Knowledge of MWUs is a strong predictor of language proficiency (Rafieyan, 2018). However, Martinez (2013), suggests that while MWUs are crucial for ESL/EFL learners, guidance for teachers is lacking when it comes to making more informed decisions as to which items might be more useful to students. His study suggests three important criteria to be included in any teaching plan: MWUs should be included in language pedagogy; frequency should be considered when identifying MWUs for explicit instruction; and transparency should also be considered as an important variable since it may hinder comprehension.

Studies on MWUs using the AR approach are not as abundant as the ones using the traditional scientific approach. The AR approach is similar to the traditional scientific approach in many ways. In its essence, as Nunan asserts, any research has three core components "1) a question, problem or hypothesis; 2) data; and 3) analysis and interpretation of data" (1992, p. 3). However, the main aspects in which AR differs from other research approaches have to do mainly with four issues (Burns, 2010). The first one is related to the manipulation of the variables, in applied research a more 'objective' stance is adopted, where a cause-and-effect relationship between the variables is attempted, as opposed to the AR approach in which a more 'subjective' view is used by exploring the best possible ways to tackle the research problem. The second difference lies in the applicability of the findings, applied research seeks to contribute to an existing body of scientific evidence, whereas in the AR approach the main goal is to address a problem of immediate and practical concern. The third difference is related to the method, applied research uses controlled and structured methods to safeguard the validity of the research to be able to generalize the findings, while the AR approach uses a more flexible and open-ended approach, selecting and changing methods as needed to resolve the specific research or teaching issue at hand. Finally, the fourth difference between applied research and AR research is related to theory, the former is usually concerned to link and prove well-known theory from the field, whereas the latter is interested in discerning what the explorations show to tackle the problem at hand, personal knowledge that would lead to a theory *for* practice rather than a theory *of* practice (Burns, 1996).

Thus, according to two prominent writers in the field, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), AR roughly involves four stages in a cycle of research. The first cycle may repeat itself continuously, until the desired outcome is achieved by the action researcher. The stages are *planning*, in which a problem is identified an action plan is devised to tackle the problem; *action*, in which the planned intervention is implemented and examined over an agreed period of time; *observation*, where data is collected by means of different tools; and *reflection*, in which the action researcher evaluates and describes the effects of the intervention to properly understand the problem explored, deciding at this point whether or not another research cycle is needed.

One rather recent and relevant study on MWUs under the AR approach is the one done by Antle (2018). He approaches vocabulary instruction for low-proficiency university students in a different way: instead of targeting individual words from the general service list (West, 1953), frequent verb + noun collocations are targeted. In four research cycles, the study addresses three main issues. First, it examined the participants beliefs in relation to the effectiveness of studying collocations over individual lexical items. Second, it analyses the potential effects of collocations on spoken fluency. Third, the study explored various methods for teaching collocations in a university classroom context. The reflection process for the three analysed issues indicated that the participants favoured the learning of collocations over individual vocabulary items; the productive learning tasks on collocations, over receptive ones, were more effective for fluency development; and that collocation type was problematic for low-proficiency language learners.

In this manner, AR is the method by which MWUs are approached in the present study that takes place at a bilingual school, in one research cycle, with eighth graders, through the productive skill of writing.

3. Planning

This action research project was developed at an International Baccalaureate School, which, through a Language and Literature program, pursues the philosophy and teaching standards imposed by that international institution in all areas of the curriculum. The students are required to use the target language at all times during the English lessons and encouraged to use it as much as they can outside the classroom while they are at school. However, they struggle when it comes to expressing their ideas with the structure, meaning and essence of the English language vocabulary. In the context of written language, learners are allowed to use monolingual dictionaries to look up the words they need in English; nevertheless, looking up isolated words, instead of the lexicalized expressions they needed, led them to a serious problem of misinterpretation of their message. In order to address that problem, the participants completed a 200-word writing task, whose purpose was to diagnose their use of MWUs. As it had been anticipated by the teacher/researcher, the participants were able to complete the task in terms of the number of words required and the topic given, but they demonstrated a limited use of MWUs and a constant repetition of a number of them. The situation characterized by this initial written task highlighted the idea that even though focusing on communication is important, leaving vocabulary for incidental learning can limit the learners' potential to use the target language effectively. That is why explicit instruction was considered, not only for students to learn what MWUs are but also for them to become aware of the possible favourable effects their use may have on their productive skills.

Keeping in mind the importance of reflective learning and its potential to enhance the participants' ability to use MWUs in writing, the present AR study set out to explore the research problem through the following questions:

1. To what extent does a process of explicit instruction on multiword units support the use of those expressions in students' short narrative written texts?

2. What are the students' perceptions about the strategies implemented during the intervention and about their own ability to use multiword units?

These questions guided the project through the 4 research phases: planning, action, observation and reflections. This protocol was implemented with the purpose of improving the future actions in our teaching practice (Sagor, 2011).

4. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of a group of 23 8th grade students, who study at a British School in Chile under the International Baccalaureate (IB) study programme. Since it is a bilingual school, students are taught all the subjects in English from Infant school up to 5th grade, after which they have some subjects in their mother tongue and take English as a 6-hour course up to 12th grade. Therefore, by the time students are in 8th grade, they are supposed to show language proficiency at an upper intermediate level, being encouraged to use English inside and outside the classroom.

The criteria for selecting this group for the study was the opportunity the teacher/researcher had to work with them, the positive rapport established between the teacher and the students, and the convenience of the schedule for a process of intervention. This group of participants consisted of 12 girls and 11 boys. They have different learning preferences and abilities to use English as a foreign language. According to a Quick Placement Test (UCLES, 2001) and considering the categories established by the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), their levels of proficiency in English vary from Intermediate to Advanced as it is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' proficiency levels

Level of proficiency	Number of participants	%
Advanced	1	6
Upper intermediate	8	50
Intermediate	7	44

Since the study was conducted in the English language class at the school, the teacher/researcher did not have control over the attendance of the students. This aspect affected the size of the sample towards the end of the study. Some participants had to be taken out from the sample due to their constant unattendance and incomplete learning tasks for the study. The data collected only considered those students that completed all the elements of the action plan. Thus, the sample reduced from 23 participants to 16.

5. Materials

The materials used for data collection in this study consisted of two writing tasks and a survey.

5.1 Writing tasks 1 and 2

Throughout the study, the participants were asked to write 2 pieces of text, one before the period of explicit instruction (WT1) and another afterwards (WT2). These texts were planned considering what the school's curriculum demands from the learners, which is to produce different kinds of texts. For the purpose of this study, students wrote narrative texts whose length was determined by the standards of the IB program:

200 words for year 5 of the Middle Years Programme, which is 8th grade (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). The prompts for these 2 writing tasks were related to the context of the novel they were reading, *Counting by 7s* (Goldberg, 2013) during the lessons in their English language class. The prompt for the first text was "My life without my parents", while the prompt for the second writing assignment was "My alternative ending for Willow's story". The pieces of text produced by the students in both occasions were digitised by the teacher/researcher and examined using the ADELEX vocabulary profiler in order to observe the students' use of MWUs before and after the strategies were implemented in the classroom.

5.2 Survey

Once students produced their second piece of writing, they were asked to complete a survey about their perception in relation to the strategies used and about their own ability to use MWUs in their written texts. The survey, in this case, is an instrument in the form of a 5-level Likert Scale consisting of 11 statements. The asseverations for this instrument were designed taking into consideration the two aspects stated in the second research question of this study. The statements were designed by the researcher and later submitted to a process of validation by means of expert judgement[1]. The reliability of the survey was assessed by Cronbach's alpha. The value obtained was α ,841, which can be considered acceptable for a test with relatively few items (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cronbach's alpha for the perception survey

Cronbach's Alpha	N of elements
,841	11

For the participants to answer the survey, a special session was planned. It took place in a classroom with a different sitting arrangement and where the students were asked about what they could remember from the lessons when the study was implemented. They were eager to express their opinion and personal reflections in front of the group. After doing this orally, students were asked to complete the online survey in situ. They were encouraged to do this metacognitive exercise being as honest as possible.

6. Action

This study consisted of one research cycle which was developed in different stages. After a 3-month period of observation and diagnosis, an action plan was developed. This plan consisted of a sequence of different strategies implemented in 7 sessions. The first sessions were aimed at understanding what MWUs were, and how they are ever present once we interact with others in the target language. Then, some sessions were dedicated to practicing their use through games and dialogues. Finally, some sessions were devoted to the production of oral and written texts using MWUs through collaborative activities.

Different MWUs were taught throughout these sessions. Special attention was paid to the ones present in the novel students had to read as part of their Language and Literature reading plan, and then, some other frequent phrases were presented to them. Participants reflected on the importance of distinguishing them, first in the

material they used in class and then in the teacher's and classmates' everyday language. Learners were asked to record these expressions in their vocabulary log. At the same time, they were encouraged to use them in class while they performed the different activities of each lesson and also as they communicated their ideas in each session.

The lessons contained activities of different kinds. Some of those activities included matching pair exercises, dictionary use, vocabulary log registration, expression-finding in literary texts, partner-finding games, charades, card games, dialogue creation, role-play, guessing games of different kinds, among others. Some of these activities were planned for students to work individually and some others were intended for them to work in pairs or in groups. All of these activities were organized according to the purpose of each lesson. A brief description of each lesson focus is presented below.

Table 3.

• Session 1: (40 minutes)	Recognition of the existence of MWUs while reading (MWUs matching exercises, sentence completion, vocabulary log, recognition of MWUs in the novel being read).
• Session 2: (80 minutes)	Identification of MWUs and their meaning in an extensive written text (Collaborative reading and recognition of MWUs from the novel, matching games, charades, vocabulary log).
• Session 3: (40 minutes)	Use of MWUs in context through receptive practice exercises (MWUs hangman, sentence completion, collaborative definition game).
• Session 4: (40 minutes)	Use of MWUs present in their reading text through production exercises (Human matching pair game, sentence creation in groups, vocabulary log, group reflection).
• Session 5: (80 minutes)	Transference of knowledge of MWUs into their writing ability (MWUs card game, MWUs pair competition, vocabulary log, dialogue creation with MWUs, role play).
• Session 6: (40 minutes)	Transference of knowledge of MWUs into their writing ability (Definition guessing game, sentence creation game, paragraph creation game in groups).
•Session 7: (80 minutes)	Use of MWUs to communicate their predictions about a reading text (Card game in groups, new ending of novel with MWUs, acting out in groups, vocabulary log).

At the end of each lesson, learners took some time to reflect. Students were given some time to think about what they had been doing in class. At the beginning, this reflection was elicited by the teacher through different questions. However, as the learners became used to this procedure at the end of each session, the elicitation questions stopped being necessary. This was a good opportunity for the teacher/researcher to understand how the intervention plan could be improved, or modified. This exercise was a valuable source of feedback for the AR process.

At the end of the 7 sessions, data were collected once more. A second writing task was completed by the students. They were asked to write a 200-word narrative text again, in order to explore the possible benefits of the intervention over the students' use of MWUs. Once the intervention phase was done, the survey to know the students' perceptions was applied.

7. Data analysis

With the purpose of exploring the use of MWUs in students' pieces of writing after the intervention, the writing tasks were analysed using the online vocabulary profiler ADELEX (ADA) (Moreno Jaén & Pérez Basanta, 2010) in order to identify the use of MWUs across seven frequency bands. As compositionality (i.e., transparency in meaning) is one of the criteria used in the analysis performed by the ADA on the participants' texts, the list contains all types of MWUs, that is to say, phrasal verbs, collocations and multiword adjectives, determiners, prepositions and adverbs; except for idioms. The numerical variables were represented through their mean and standard deviation, while the categorical ones were represented by their frequency and percentage. The Wilcoxon test was used to compare the results before (WT1) and after the intervention (WT2). A significance level of 0,05 (*p* value) was used.

8. Observation

8.1 Multiword units

After the first writing task was completed, the texts produced by the participants were carefully read, digitalised and analysed using the vocabulary profiler. As it had been anticipated by the teacher/researcher, the participants demonstrated a limited and repetitive use of MWUs. These were band 1 phrases like "have to" and "a lot" which, as stated by Paquot (2014), can be attributed to the learner's mother tongue specific patterns of use as their translational equivalent is frequent in Chilean Spanish oral performance. Considering the texts of the 16 participants together, a total of 33 different MWUs were used 79 times.

After the participants completed WT2, the use of MWUs was higher and broader. The students that used them the least, included only 3 different MWUs, while the ones that used them the most included up to 14 expressions when writing their 200-word texts. In this task, the phrases "a lot" and "have to" were also used by the learners, but not as much as in their first piece. Apparently, learners did not have to rely on those phrases as recurrently as in WT1, probably because after the period of instruction a wider range of multiword units was accessible to them. In this second writing task, learners altogether used 63 different expressions, which is almost twice as many as the ones used in WT1; the most commonly used MWUs were "*going to*" and "*there is*" (band 1); "*even though*", "*look for*" and "*no one*" (band 2); and "*take care of*" (band 6), among others. The number of times they used them also increased to 112.

After examining the changes and having observed the benefits of the intervention in WT2, the active knowledge of MWUs was noticeable. In general, as it is shown in Table 4, there was an increase in the number of phrases used, and also in the number of times students repeated some of those phrases. Additionally, ADELEX helped to distinguish the frequency band of each of the MWUs used by the students in both pieces of writing. This table also shows that in WT2 students used MWUs that are not included as part of the formulaic profile offered by ADELEX (idioms). These expressions were idioms like "spill the beans", "call it a day" and "on the tip of my tongue". Even though ADELEX does not include idioms in the analysis, their use demonstrated a language control that contributes to a higher sophistication of the participants' texts.

Table 4. MWUs per frequency band in the writing tasks 1 and 2

Bands of Frequency	WT1	WT2
Band 1	24	24
Band 2	15	34
Band 3	8	19
Band 4	4	5
Band 5	4	9
Band 6	5	3
Band 7	2	4
Not found in database		9

Interestingly, the categorization revealed that in the WT1 a high percentage of the MWUs used belonged to the frequency bands 1 and 2, while in the WT2, there was an increased tendency of the bands 3, 4, 5 and 7, and a statistically significant increase of band 2 (see Table 5). At the same time, a slight decrease in band 6 was observed in WT2. A possible explanation for this is that the MWUs were not taught in terms of the bands, nor targeted as individual lexical items. The criteria for the selection of the MWUs to be introduced in class was their appearance in the novel students were reading and also their high frequency (Martínez, 2013). In spite of that, the increase of the other bands could mean that the intervention not only helped learners use a wider range of MWUs, but also that the expressions they used in WT2 were more sophisticated and so less frequent.

Table 5. Use of MWUs before and after the intervention

| Variable	WT1 (n 16)		WT2 (n16)		Statistic	P value	η^2
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Used Phrases*	3,88	1,26	6,50	3,58	-2,52	0,010	0,16
Times	5,00	2,00	7,38	3,77	-1,89	0,059	0,12
Band 1	1,50	1,10	1,50	1,46	-0,20	0,864	0,01
Band 2*	0,94	0,68	2,13	1,26	-2,74	0,005	0,17
Band 3	0,50	0,89	1,19	0,98	-1,68	0,109	0,10
Band 4	0,25	0,45	0,31	0,48	-0,58	1,000	0,04
Band 5	0,25	0,45	0,56	0,63	-1,51	0,234	0,09
Band 6	0,31	0,48	0,19	0,40	-0,82	0,688	0,05
Band 7	0,13	0,34	0,25	0,58	-0,71	0,750	0,04

Note. * significance at the level of 0,05.

8.2 Students' perceptions

With the purpose of describing the students' perception of the different strategies implemented and their own ability to use MWUs, the survey administered was carefully examined and reflected upon by the teacher/researcher. The instrument included a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 5 being 'strongly agree', and 1 multiple choice question.

Figure 1 reveals that the students' opinion about the implementation of different strategies was generally positive. After the intervention, most of the students felt that they had a certain ability to recognize, use and understand MWUs appropriately, as shown in asseverations 1, 2 and 3. In relation to the use of dictionaries in statement 4, most of the participants felt positive about it, while some others chose to be neutral. This may be attributed to the fact that students are used to using the monolingual dictionary in the classroom, and even though all of them were taught how to look up MWUs, and could actually do the activities related to that during the intervention, not all of them considered this as something important. Also, most of the participants felt that using MWUs could help them improve the quality of their written pieces and their marks in the English subject, which can be observed in statements 7 and 8. Students believed that using MWUs would help them improve their productive skills. These perceptions are in line with what the participants in the AR study conducted by Antle (2018) expressed. They also considered MWUs to be beneficial for their productive skills and favoured their learning over individual lexical items.

Figure 1. Likert scale survey on learners' perception
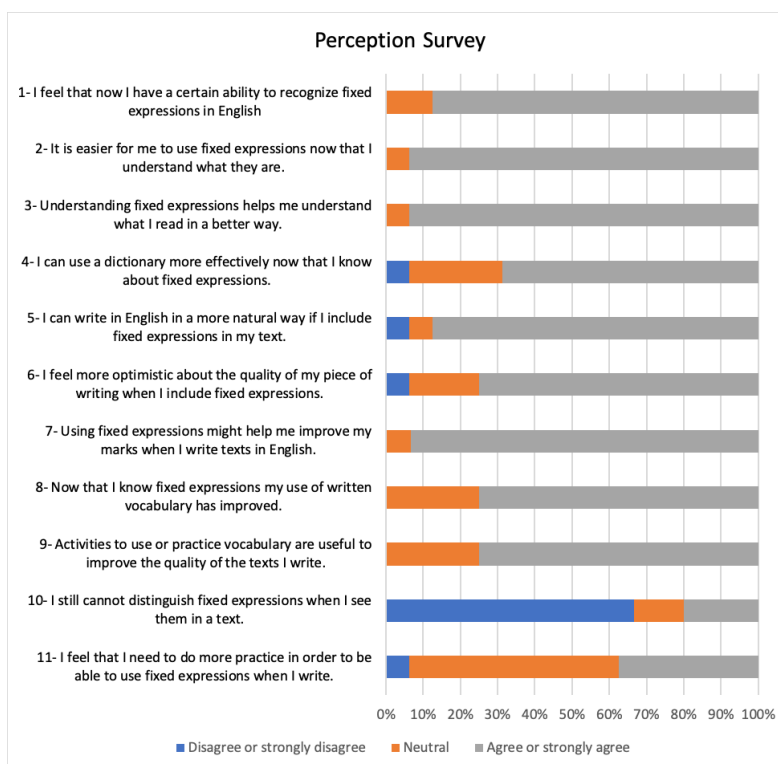
The students also expressed a positive opinion about the activities implemented throughout the process of instruction, stating that they were useful to improve the quality of the texts they produced, as indicated in statement 6. Their preferences in relation to the activities of the lessons varied, as shown in Figure 2, even though most of them referred to the dialogue creation activities as the most useful or interesting ones. Some participants also considered that completing worksheets was useful, while others selected role-play activities as the ones they had liked the most.

Figure 2. Students' preferences on vocabulary learning activities.
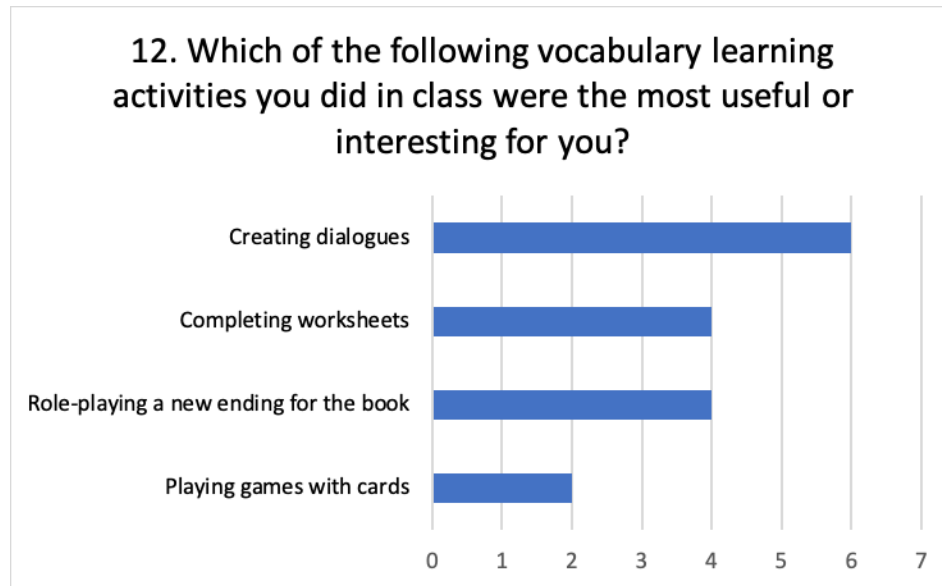
At the same time, as shown in Figure 1, students considered that knowledge about MWUs and their use is beneficial for them when producing written texts (statement 5). In fact, students said that now that they know MWUs exist in English, they can identify them and also remember them when they are doing a learning task whether written or spoken (statement 10). This is consistent with the view that the noticing of phrases is a useful way of directing learners' attention to MWUs, and that for teachers to do so, authentic texts offer exposure to contextualized use constituting a potential source for incidental MWUs acquisition (Boers et al., 2017). Boers et al. (2017) encourage teachers to guide learners to identify MWUs in the texts they are reading in the classroom, but also invite them to consider stimulating the students' intake from texts read independently, outside the language classroom.

As for asseveration 11, opinions are varied. Some students considered they needed to continue practicing in order to use MWUs. However, most of them had a neutral perception about it. This might be due to the fact that, for many teenage learners, the act of practicing something in order to develop a skill is effortful, and at their age, they tend to avoid being asked to do extra.

9. Reflection

This action research study can give room to different reflections. As explored in the action and observation stages, deliberate manipulation of the new knowledge led to an increase of MWUs use, as well as to the presence of a wider range of frequency bands. Students' vocabulary repertoire and sophistication in writing improved. At the same time, the results might be considered as positive indicators of the effects of a process of innovation in the EFL classroom. In this way, an experience like this is worth the effort in order to address areas that need improvement in the teaching/learning process. In such cases, the AR approach comes across as a suitable match for strengthening weak aspects encountered in the teaching process and as a powerful tool for addressing the productive skills through vocabulary learning.

The strategies and activities implemented as part of the intervention plan can be applicable in other IB schools or in schools having a similar curriculum for the English subject. At the same time, this kind of instructional procedure, to treat formal aspects of the language through conscious or explicit learning, can benefit students from other contexts as well. This could mean that learners from schools following the common national curriculum for the English subject in Chile could also be favoured by the explicit instruction of MWUs. Giving them the opportunity to communicate full ideas by using these expressions could not only help them communicate better, but could also give them a sense of achievement that might boost their motivation and confidence to learn more of this kind of vocabulary.

A reflection must also be made with regard to the student's opinion about the whole project. Such reflection should be done not only in relation to their responses to the survey, but also considering their comments during the survey application session. First of all, they were able to do the metacognitive exercise of speaking about what they had done with the language. Also, they said it was somewhat unusual that such reflection was required from them. They seemed not to be used to answering questions about the way they learnt and the way they liked to learn. They realised that their opinion about this teaching/learning process was being inquired about, showing a positive attitude towards that. As school teachers, we must admit that we do not commonly consider the students' opinion about our pedagogical decisions; we do not encourage them to judge the usefulness of the strategies we implement in class and, in many cases, we do not consider how they prefer to learn, even though we believe we do so. Probably, this is due to our fear to receive criticism or to our confidence in our teaching skills. However, if we consider the power of students' feedback over our own teaching practice and promote it as a constant exercise, the results could help us enrich their learning outcomes and our work as teachers.

10. Final remarks

The exploration of the possible solutions to the problem addressed in this AR project led to the successful achievement of its goals. The first aim was to examine the use of MWUs in students' pieces of writing after a process of explicit instruction. The structure of the step-by-step research cycle and the instruments for data collection made this a reachable goal and provided us with valuable insight of the effects of explicitly teaching MWUs to learners of English as a foreign language. Similarly, this action research contributed to fulfil the second aim of this study which was to describe the students' perception of the different strategies implemented. The reflection

process showed the learners' positive reaction towards the process and its effects on their ability to use MWUs in writing. The explicit instruction of MWUs significantly supports the students' usage of those expressions when they write narrative pieces of texts. It provides them with a safe ground for them to express ideas in a more natural and effective way. In the same line, the students' perception about the process was generally positive, as well as their opinion about the improvement they could make in their writing skills.

In addition, this study has helped this teacher/researcher consider the possibilities available to implement this kind of methodological process to address other areas of language knowledge. Some other weak aspects of the teaching and learning reality of the English Language and Literature curriculum could receive a similarly positive effect if we decide to explore them through the application of different strategies to treat them explicitly in the classroom. The same kind of intervention could benefit students struggling with grammar or syntax, for example.

Finally, through each of the phases of the study, teachers may develop into more reflective and creative agents. The desire to improve through implementing something out of the ordinary practice of a teacher forced this teacher/researcher to take the risk of being innovative. But being innovative, basing the whole experience on constant reflection, before, during and after working with the students.

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Notes

1 This instrument was submitted to the expert judgement of 4 PhD professors at Universidad de Concepcion and an English teacher at the school where the action research study took place.