Occurrences of formulaic sequences in personal descriptions

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Abstract

Formulaic sequences are extremely necessary components of language production as they play a crucial role in building genres, not only in spoken discourse, but also in written production. Bearing in mind this consideration, the present article aims to investigate the frequency and occurrences of formulaic sequences in 27 personal descriptions written by 27 students of an English for medical purposes course from a university in the south of Chile. The procedure adopted two phases: first, the most common formulaic sequences used by the participants were identified and categorised, and, second, some examples of the inclusion of formulaic sequences in the genre of personal descriptions were made available. The findings reveal that the participants' selection of formulaic sequences is very similar among them, and their occurrences in personal descriptions are related to the number of words of the text. Furthermore, the investigation reasserts that each genre has its own phraseology; for this reason, 15 formulaic sequences identified in the study seem to be specific features of the genre of personal descriptions.

Keywords: EFL writing; formulaic sequences; genre; occurrences; personal descriptions.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the phenomenon of formulaic language received significant attention in second language learning research (Xu, 2016). Formulaic language refers to "sequences of words that are in some regard not entirely predictable" (Wray, 2013: 317), i.e. the parts of a formulaic sequence have to be seen as a unique item because, if the chunks of the sequence of words are isolated, the meaning is different, or not reached by the audience. Recently, authors stressed the notion that different genres have their own phraseology or formulae that are part of the characteristics of the different genres and primordial in text structure.

Authors like Alternberg (as cited in Wray & Perkins, 2000), Erman & Warren (2000), Liu (2014) and Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) claimed that most written and/or oral language is somehow formulaic. Therefore, formulaic language is present in everyday speech and seen as an umbrella term which covers an immense amount of expressions that include idioms, collocations, and multiword items like prayers, rhymes, and proverbs. It may be noticed in structured events like sport commentaries, or children' speech and the material used to teach in foreign language courses such as textbook and multimedia resources. In this respect, English for Specific Purposes courses offer a variety of terminology and phraseology related to the specific areas, such as engineering English, nursing English or medical English courses. For instance, in the genre of description these prefabricated sequences constitute an important part of discourse (Gómez Burgos, 2015).

Under the previous considerations, learning English as a second language tends to be a difficult process as fluency in writing or speaking is achieved if only learners show a good command of formulae. Therefore, foreign language learners are reported to have trouble with formulaic language and its learning process is a challenging experience for language learners (Chen et al., 2014). In spite of the amount of research in the area of formulaic language in different countries, and the importance of the inclusion of formulaic sequences (henceforth FSs) in language teaching, research in this field in Chilean contexts is limited (Gómez Burgos, 2015).

In this respect, the present study was undertaken to identify the frequency and occurrences of FSs in short descriptions. These compositions were written by second year students in a medical English course so as to report on how the learners of this class include these prefabricated sequences when they describe themselves. At the same time, this paper aims to provide examples of FSs used by the participants in their texts based on the previous identification of the most common categories and occurrences of the FSs in the genre of personal description.

2. Literature review
2.1. An overview of FSs

Different attempts to define FSs have been done by researchers in the area (see Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach & Maynard, 2008; Schmitt & Carter, 2004; Wei & Ying, 2011;

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Wood, 2002-2010; Wray, 2000-2009, and Wray & Perkins, 2000); however, a common agreement on a unique definition is not totally accepted. Nonetheless, it seems that there is consensus on defining FS as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (Wray, 2002: 9).

For the purpose of this research, we will define FSs as sets of words or items that form common single units, which are stored in long-term memory (Wood, 2002), and then retrieved to the working memory at the time speakers or writers need to use them (Gómez Burgos, 2015). According to Larner (2014), Schmitt, Grandage & Adolphs (2004) and Wray (2002), people have their stores of FSs in their mind and they are grouped concerning common experience; these storages are shared with a particular speech community since FSs are conveyed socially and accepted by all the participants of a common community. This amount of prefabricated chunks of language will be used in language production later as single items (Gómez Burgos, 2015; Wood, 2006).

Diverse studies in the area have been carried out. Wray (2013) classified studies in this field in six main themes: first, studies concentrated on theory (dealing with processing, lexis and grammar, i.e. form, meaning and function); second, studies in the clinical field (coping with language disorders such as aphasia or Alzheimer's Disease); third, studies about the development of formulaic language (i.e. first language acquisition); fourth, studies connected to learning and teaching formulaic language (studies conducted in SLA); fifth, studies linked to culture (research related to oral traditions, social roles and cultural variations); and sixth, studies associated to text (relation with corpora studies). The vast number of research in formulaic language highlights the role it plays in language acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Cadierno, 2009; O'Donnell, Römer & Ellis, 2013) and fluent use of the primordial role in language fluency (Wood, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010); therefore, they are important constituents in processing language, gaining fluency and language instruction in first and second language teaching settings in both oral and written discourse.

Ellis (2002, 2012) pointed out that FSs are acquired incidentally; therefore, these fixed combinations of words intervene in everyday communication. For instance, predictable phrases like "How are you?", "Will you marry me?" or "What is your current state of well-being?" (Wood, 2006: 15-16) are clear examples of FSs used in normal speech and communication. Prefabricated phrases like the previous ones are reflected on particular genres because every genre has its own phraseology and formulae (O'Donnell, Römer & Ellis, 2013; Swales, 1990; Wray, 2009); therefore, the genre of descriptions should have its own FSs.

2.2. FSs in the genre of descriptions

As it was stated previously, every genre has its own FSs which are part of the specific features of the different texts, i.e. these patterns will vary with regard to the genre (Wray, 2009),

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because they are essential in language use. Furthermore, using the appropriate formula of texts means that writers are effective in the particular genre as genres are "more or less formulaic, depending upon the degree to which they have been institutionalized in the society" (Flowerdew, 2004: 583). Based on that, the community which writers are part of plays an important role in order to select the patterns of discourse to include in the text. For this reason, writers choose specific patterns of discourse that are instantiated in texts (Flowerdew, 2004); therefore, genres are social processes, which reflect how the information is unfolded in the text through the precise features of discourse. These processes differ according to the characteristics of the speech community that participants belong to or are immersed in. As a consequence, all genres contain different FSs that are woven in the texts and selected from the infinite options writers have in order to perform different social activities, known by Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) as meaning potentials.

In the particular case of the genre of description, it is said to have a fundamental role in any language system and the teaching-learning cycle (Callaghan, Knapp & Noble, 2012; Knapp & Watkins, 2005) because describing is a central part in more elaborated and complex genres such as narration and argumentation. At the same time, Feez (2002) claimed that in English elementary classes the genre of description is an appropriate text to use in its different senses, e.g. description of people, description of things or animals or description of places (Fadhly & Nurendah, 2014; Gerot & Wignell, 1994). This genre is also one of the first texts used in education because of "the way it uses language to represent concretely what students know and observe in their environments" (Callaghan, Knapp & Noble, 2012: 194). Based on the previous characterization, the genre of description is primordial in language teaching; for this reason, this genre is included widely in education (Knapp & Watkins, 2005).

Rose & Martin (2012) proposed the schematic structure of the genre of description, being considered two main stages, namely orientation and description. On the one hand, in the orientation part the writer presents the subject matter being described in the text in order to introduce the topic. On the second hand, in the description part the current description of the person, place or thing takes place. According to Gomez Burgos (2015: 28), "sensory details of sight, sound, taste, texture, emotion, and smell" are part of descriptions, just like figurative language, e.g. simile, metaphor, comparisons or alliteration (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Similarly, descriptions can include the writer's feelings and the use of first-person narrator (Rose & Martin, 2012). These features of the genre of description are interwoven with the choice of FSs the writer makes in order to describe the person, object or place.

With regard to examples of specific FSs in the genre of description, there is little research in the area. To our knowledge, apart from Knapp & Watkins (2005) and Gómez Burgos (2015) there is no other research in the field to report. First, Knapp & Watkins (2005) mentioned that in descriptions the present and past tense are predominantly used, for instance the use of

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relational verbs like *is, are, has, have*; actions verbs as *live*; or mental verbs like *feel* or *like*. Similarly, adjectives and adverbs are included to add more information about the participants and the actions in the description. Second, in Gómez Burgos' study (2015) the participants included stance expressions in present tense, e.g. verbs like *choose, know, has, think*; and some discourse organizers and referential expressions.

3. Method
3.1. Context and participants

The present research is a case study which aims to identify the most common FSs in the genre of description. The participants in this study were 27 students of Nursing and Kinesiology from a university in the south of Chile. The participants were 21 female students (78%) and 6 male students (22%) (age range was 19-22 years old) who had Spanish as their first language. These students were taking one of the two elementary medical English courses in an EFL context offered in the institution and which has the genre of description as one of the genres to be worked. All participants were elementary users of English who had 210 points (Beginner 2) as TOEIC average.

3.2. Instruments and procedures

A writing task was designed, monitored and revised by two experts on English language assessment, and applied to the participants in April 2015. The written task was simple and students were required to describe themselves using less than 100 words in English; no more details were given in order to prevent students from writing about a specific topic and allow them to choose their topics and expressions spontaneously. The students were given 30 minutes to complete the written task in the normal classroom where they had their English lesson. The teacher in charge of the class conducted the test. After that, the researcher collected the texts, and data was comprised of 27 written compositions.

The procedure to analyse data followed a qualitative content analysis method where the categories "are not predetermined but are derived inductively from the data analysed" (Dornyëi, 2007: 245). First, the pre-coding was conducted manually; the researcher kept a research journal by himself so as to note down the categories based on his reading of the compositions. This stage was based on the working definition adapted from Wood (2002) and Gómez Burgos (2015), who negotiate FSs as collections of words or chunks seen as particular items, kept in long-term memory, and recovered to the working memory when speakers or writers need to utilise them. Second, the coding per se involved grouping the previous data segments into similar content categories in order to identify the most common FSs used by the participants in their descriptions.

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4. Analysis and results

The first data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the compositions and noting down the FSs in a research journal. Based on this procedure, 291 tokens were identified in the texts; many of them where the same prefabricated sequences in the written compositions or they were related to the content categories. Table 1 below illustrates the information about the compositions. As it can be observed, texts 7 and 16 had only 6 FSs each, which represent the shortest texts, while text 6 was the longest one with 17 FSs identified. The basic descriptive statistics showed that the mean observed in the written texts was 11 FSs, the median was 10 FSs, and the mode was 9 FSs.

TABLE 1
Distribution of texts

TEXT	NO. OF WORDS	NO. OF FSS IDENTIFIED	%	TEXT	NO. OF WORDS	NO. OF FSS IDENTIFIED	%
1	30	9	30	16	28	6	21
2	60	16	27	17	33	9	27
3	53	12	23	18	22	6	27
4	46	10	22	19	54	14	26
5	20	7	35	20	46	10	22
6	65	17	26	21	65	14	22
7	20	6	30	22	43	10	23
8	65	16	25	23	27	7	26
9	37	8	22	24	46	11	24
10	68	15	22	25	36	9	25
11	29	8	28	26	63	13	21
12	50	13	26	27	37	11	30
13	49	12	24	MEAN	43	11	-
14	39	13	33	MEDIAN	43	10	-
15	32	9	28	MODE	46	9	-
				TOKEN	291		

In the same respect, table 1 above shows the total number of words in the compositions. The descriptive statistics analysis indicates that the mean and median were 43 words, and the mode was 46. There is a tendency in the corresponding increase in the number of FSs when the number of words increases because there is a relation between the extension of the texts

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and the FSs used by the participants, assuming that the number of FSs used by the students correlates to the total number of words in the texts.

The second analysis with the 27 texts was conducted in order to group the FSs into categories according to how they were used by students. By means of a manual coding process, the previous FSs were grouped into 8 content categories due to their frequency and occurrence in the texts. These content categories were used as the categories to name the FSs in the descriptions. Table 2 below displays the information about the categories arisen from the general analysis of the texts and the total number of occurrences in the descriptions. Results illustrate that there is a common pattern among the participants of this study when choosing what sub-topics to include in their description, but, at the same time, the selection of FSs is similar among all the participants.

TABLE 2
Number and percentage of content categories and FSs identified

TOPIC CATEGORY	NO.	FSS IDENTIFIED PER CATEGORY	NO. OF OCCURRENCES	% OF OCCURRENCES
1. Name	23	My name is (*name*)	20	85%
		I am (*name*)	3	
2. Age	10	I am (No.) years old	10	37%
3. Program enrolled	10	I study (*program*)	10	37%
4. Where sb lives	23	I am from (*city or country*)	7	85%
		My address is (*address*)	3	
		I live in (*city*)	13	
5. Who sb lives with	9	I live with (*sb*)	9	33%
6. Likes	17	I like to (*verb*)	1	63%
		I like (*verb + ing*)	4	
		My favorite (*color, sport*) is...	4	
		I like (*noun*)	5	
		I love (*noun*)	3	
7. Dislikes	1	I don't like (*noun*)	1	4%
8. Possession	6	I have (*noun*)	6	22%

The results show that 15 FSs where identified after the participants' compositions were analysed, and they were grouped into 7 content categories, i.e. content category 1 "name" (composed of 2 FSs), content category 2 "age" (consisted of 1 FS), content category 3 "program

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enrolled" (included 1 FS), content category 4 "where sb lives" (had 3 FSs), content category 5 "who sb lives with" (made of 1 FS), content category 6 "likes" (comprised of 5 FSs), content category 7 "dislikes" (had 1 FS), and content category 8 "possessions" (consisted of 1 FS).

In light of the 8 content categories shown previously, 15 FSs were identified which arose from the analysis carried out per each category. Table 2 above illustrates the different FSs of each category, which were identified in the descriptions according to the number of occurrences of the FSs in the compositions and the percentage of frequency in the texts. The results express that there are some FSs that are preferred more by the participants in the selection of the topics presented in their compositions, but the majority of topics are selected more than 3 times.

Given the major occurrences of the FSs in the descriptions, the topic category 1 "name", the content category 5 "where sb lives", the content category 6 "likes", the content category 2 "age", and the content category 3 "program enrolled" were the most used by the participants. Figure 1 below represents the number and percentage of occurrences of these prefabricated sequences in the texts. The content category 1 "name" as the content category 4 "where sb lives" obtained 85% of occurrence, i.e. the majority of the students included one of the two FSs of the category. The content category 6 "likes" reached 67% of occurrences, i.e. more than half of the students wrote a clause related to that category. Finally, the content category 2 "age" and the content category 3 "program enrolled" obtained 37% of preferences each.

FIGURE 1

Highest occurrences of the categories
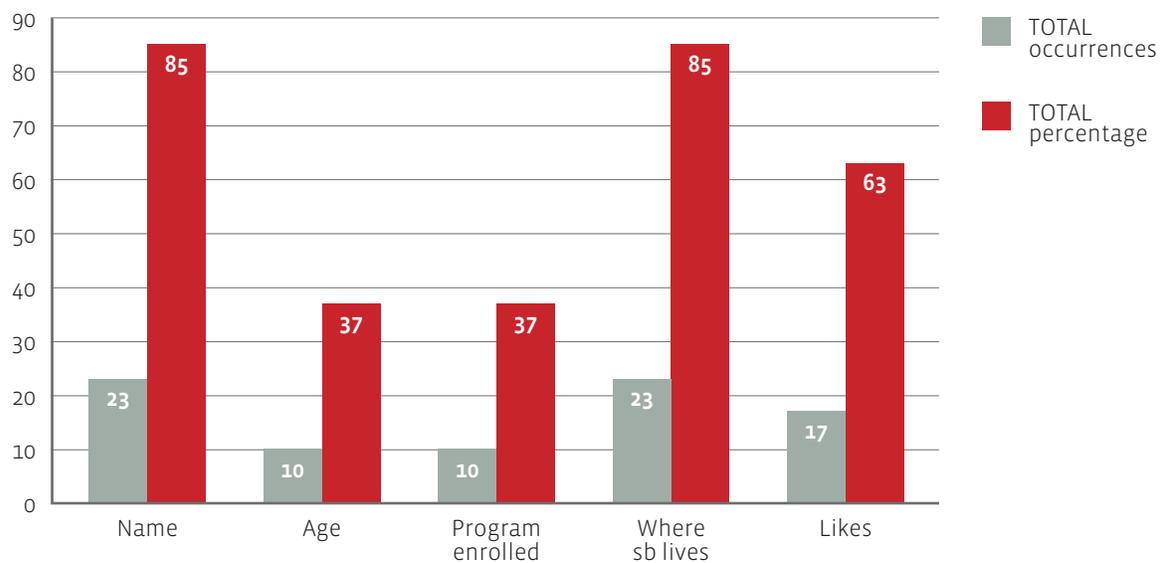
On the other hand, the least FSs used by the participants were the content category 7 "dislike" (4%) and the content category 8 "possessions" (22%). Even when the content category

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6 "likes" obtained one of the highest preferences, the isolated FS "I like to (*verb*)" ranked the lowest preference by the participants with only 1 choice (4%), similar to the content category 7 "dislikes", where its unique FS "I don't like (*noun*)" was mentioned by one participant in his description. The FS "I have (*noun*)" obtained 6 instances in the text (22%). Figure 2 below illustrates this analysis.
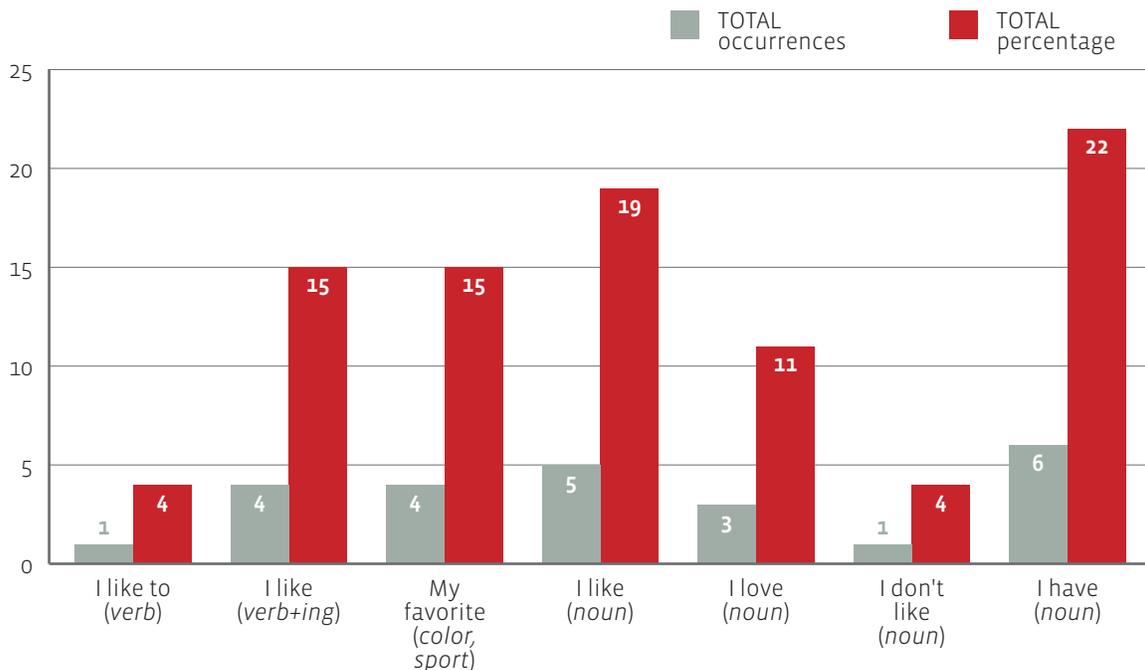
FIGURE 2

Lowest occurrences of the FSs

Figure 1 and 2 above represent the participants' selection of the use of the FSs. Based on this information some FSs were more used by the students in their written descriptions while others were only mentioned by a minimal number of participants. Similarly, the content categories arisen from the FSs include some with low use by the participants since some FSs such as "I like to (*verb*)" and "I don't like (*noun*)" are barely included in the compositions.

Another finding of this study illustrates the grammatical features of the genre of description regarding the use of the FSs. Data showed that 100% of the participants used all their FSs in present tense, and the majority of the FSs (93%) were written in affirmative form while only 1 case (7%) was in negative form (as shown in table 2). With regards to the use of adjectives in the descriptions, table 3 below shows that they are a relevant characteristic of the compositions because 17 participants (63%) included one or more adjectives in their texts, but they are not broadly included in the compositions. The most common adjectives used in the compositions were *beautiful*, *happy*, *black* and *favourite*.

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TABLE 3
Adjectives included in the descriptions

NO. OF ADJECTIVES	NO. OF OCCURRENCES	% OF OCCURRENCES
0	12	43
1	8	30
2	5	19
3	1	4
4	1	4
TOTAL	27	100

5. Discussion

Concerning the coding of FSs into content categories, results showed above illustrate that students chose similar topics in their texts. Assuming that the students had to write personal descriptions and nobody encouraged participants to write on a specific aspect inside the descriptions, the selection of topics and ideas was very similar among the participants, and the content categories were very clear at the moment of identifying them.

Since the content categories in the texts analysed are very similar among the participants, it seems that the compositions written by these participants, who were taking an elementary medical English course, are a proof of the content categories that compose a description, i.e. the genre of personal description written by students with an elementary level of English consists of giving details about the writer's name, age, program enrolled, where he or she lives, likes, and dislikes, and possessions as reported by the 8 content categories identified from the written compositions.

Similar to the selection of topics, the use of the FSs in the participants' texts is comparable. As presented above, there is a tendency in the occurrence of the FSs in their texts because, as Gómez Burgos (2015: 29) reported, "there is a close relation between extension of the text and number of FSs identified in the descriptions"; consequently, the more words a text has, the more FSs it includes, and they are closely related. Then, FSs are important components of written discourse (Schmitt & Carter, 2004) and they vary with regard to the genre (O'Donnell, Römer & Ellis, 2013; Swales, 1990; Wray, 2009). In the case of the genre of description, data showed that students chose very similar content categories and FSs to write about themselves; thus, the study suggests that these FSs can be particular constituents of the target genre.

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On the basis that FSs are prefabricated units of language stored in memory (Wood, 2002), it seems that this storage is effective in the production of written descriptions, and similar among the participants. As presented earlier, the analysis showed that students retrieved from long-term memory analogous FSs when they described themselves; therefore, the study indicates that there is a connection among the participants in using the FSs and they are linked to the way language operates in their speech communities (Wray, 2002); that is to say, the participants of this study share a discourse community as they are in the same language course, and they convey and use similar prefabricated expressions when they refer to similar themes. Based on that, the study shows that the majority of the participants made use of similar FSs in their compositions, and it suggests that the community plays a relevant role when writers have to retrieve FSs in order to write personal descriptions.

Given that studies reporting on the use of FSs in descriptions are not very varied, or excessive, the present study showed that the compositions are predominantly written in present and past tense, having examples of verb forms such as *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were*), *has / have*, action verbs (*live*), and mental verbs (*feel, like*), similar to the grammatical features of the genre of description provided by Knapp & Watkins (2005). At the same time, the use of adjectives is present in the compositions in order to complement the information in the texts, but they are not varied because only four adjectives—namely *beautiful*, *happy*, *black*, and *favourite*—were commonly used by the participants. Usual examples were *it's so beautiful*, *I have black hair*, *my city is beautiful*, among others. From this point, the use of present tense and adjectives are clear features of the genre of personal descriptions. Avenues for future research are suggested since research contextualised to the formulaicity of the particular genres is a non-explored, rich area.

An important element to mention is that this study reasserts the notion that every genre has its own phraseology and formulae (O'Donnell, Römer & Ellis, 2013) and that the speech community has an effect on the selection of the FSs (Wray, 2002). As shown in the present study, the content categories and FSs are similar among the participants who shared the same discourse community, but different personal stories; however, they were described similarly in content and selection of FSs. Therefore, the FSs identified in this study seem to be particular items of the genre of description.

In the same line, the compositions do not include the richness of the language regarding adverbial phrases (time, place), or literary figures such as metaphors, simile or alliteration, which, according to Knapp & Watkins (2005), are usual in descriptions. The inexistence of these features in the texts may be the result of the participants' basic management of the language; as reported above, the participants' level of language was beginner 2, which is an A1 level of English. This level, according to international standards, is elementary and the use of more elaborate sentences (such as adverbial clauses) or the inclusion of figurative language is not a feature of the international band, and learners require more exposure to these expressions.

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By the same token, the analysis of number of words shows that texts are short in extension. Even when there is a relation among the number of words and the number of FSs identified in the texts, the shortage of words of the written descriptions seems to be due to the same factor, that is to say the students' elementary level of English.

6. Conclusions

In view of these results I can conclude that FSs are primordial in English language learning and fluency, not only in spoken discourse but also in written language production. It is especially required in the first stages or levels of English learning, where meaningful input is necessary. These prefabricated items are an important constituent of language production as they are stored in long-term memory as chunks of words and their retrieval at the moment of use facilitates the composition process. In English as a foreign language contexts, the management and use of FSs may facilitate language learning and production since they are connected to how members of a particular community use them and how they unfold particular genres.

Based on the evidence presented in this study, I conclude that 15 FSs emerged from the analysis of the 27 personal descriptions written by nursing and kinesiology students; therefore, these expressions are elements of the phraseology of the target genre as they were used by the majority of the participants of this research. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the topics included by the participants were the same, and the inclusion of such content categories is in relation to the number of words in the text and FSs used. Consequently, the genre of personal descriptions includes analogous topics and it is evident that these topics form the genre.

On account of the limitations of the study, the shortage of number of corpus and number of words of the descriptions is an issue to consider because results and analysis might have a bias; nonetheless, the findings obtained from the corpora are very similar among the participants and they seem to be very representative of the sample. These results can be used as evidence to start new directions in research in this specific field, since the findings of the study also illustrate that, even when the genre of description has a fundamental role in the language system and education (Knapp & Watkins, 2005), there is limited research in the specific area of this genre. Consequently, future research needs to consider an extensive analysis of the genre in order to establish new FSs in regard to the inclusion of descriptions in language teaching, and common FSs of the genre based on the analysis of interventions or students' compositions. In my opinion, there is a necessity to conduct more research in the field in both spoken and written language in order to provide more evidence of the role of formulaic language in teaching English as a foreign language in Chilean settings.

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