

Developing Phraseological Competence at University: Limitations of Current Teaching Practices in Algeria, Evidence from the Department of French at the University of El Oued

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Abstract

Mastery of academic and scientific writing depends, among other factors, on phraseological competence, which is fundamental to discourse organisation, scientific reasoning, and academic argumentation. This study examines the implications of the lack of explicit phraseology instruction in Algerian university curricula through a qualitative analysis of the training programmes offered by the Department of French at the University of El Oued and a corpus of Algerian scientific articles published on the Algerian Scientific Journals Platform (ASJP). The findings reveal limited integration of phraseology into academic programmes despite its widespread occurrence in the scientific texts examined. The study thus highlights a gap between the demands of scientific writing and the content addressed in university teaching, underscoring the need to incorporate academic phraseology into higher education curricula to enhance students' writing abilities and the quality of scientific output.

Keywords: academic phraseology, Algerian higher education, scientific writing, phraseological competence, academic literacy, scientific discourse

Introduction

Improving scientific output is a major priority in higher education, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, where writing contributes to the construction of scientific thought. In Algeria, university reforms have strengthened the teaching of research methodology and academic writing to develop students' writing skills. Despite these efforts, difficulties persist in academic writing. These difficulties are not limited to grammatical, lexical, or methodological aspects; they also concern the organisation of scientific discourse, particularly the formulation of ideas, expression of logical relationships, structuring of argumentation, integration of sources, and construction of

reasoning. Such difficulties may therefore be associated with insufficient mastery of the phraseological resources specific to academic writing.

Over the past several decades, phraseology has occupied an increasingly important position in research in linguistics, language teaching, and the analysis of specialised discourses. Defined as the study of preferred lexical associations, prefabricated sequences, collocations, and discourse routines specific to a language or a specialised field (Gross, 1996; Tutin & Grossmann, 2002; Mejri, 2018), it has become an essential field for understanding the mechanisms underlying the production of academic and scientific texts. Indeed, researchers do not produce their writings through isolated lexical units alone; rather, they draw upon a range of conventional phraseological structures that enable the expression of causal, comparative, contrastive, concessive, and justificatory relationships, while ensuring the coherence and credibility of scientific discourse.

Despite its importance in scientific communication, phraseology remains marginally represented in Algerian university curricula and is generally acquired implicitly. Analysis of scientific articles published on the ASJP reveals several difficulties, including limited diversity of formulations, repetition of certain structures, difficulties in expressing causal relationships, and inaccurate use of scientific discourse routines. This study therefore examines the role of phraseology in university education, identifies phraseological limitations in scientific writing, and considers the relevance of explicit instruction in phraseology for improving the quality of scientific writing.

This study is guided by the following research question: To what extent might the absence of explicit instruction in phraseology in Algerian higher education be associated with the quality of academic and scientific writing?

We hypothesise that the phraseological difficulties observed in Algerian academic and scientific writing do not result solely from individual linguistic factors but may also stem from the absence of explicit, progressive, and structured training in academic phraseology. Consequently, integrating this component into university programmes could help improve writing skills and the quality of national scientific output.

The objective of this study is to show that the writing difficulties observed in Algerian academic and scientific texts cannot be attributed solely to grammatical, conceptual, or methodological issues. It proposes that the absence of explicit instruction in phraseology may contribute to insufficient mastery of discourse conventions and to difficulties in constructing scientific reasoning. Drawing on research on phraseology, academic writing, and academic literacies, as well as an analysis of a corpus of Algerian scientific articles, the study highlights the role of phraseological competence in writing development and the need to integrate it into Algerian university curricula.

1. Phraseology as a Component of University Writing Competence

The acquisition of writing skills, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, relies on the mastery of discourse conventions and appropriate linguistic resources, extending beyond mere grammatical and lexical knowledge. Recent research has therefore highlighted the essential role

of lexical associations and conventional discourse sequences, making phraseology a fundamental component of academic writing competence.

Phraseology refers to the study of multi-word units characterised by their stability and recurrence in usage. According to Mejri (2018), it encompasses phenomena of lexical fixation, collocations, and recurrent lexical combinations, including semi-preconstructed structures frequently used in specialised and academic discourses.

Within the university context, phraseology is particularly manifested through discourse routines that enable the organisation of scientific reasoning and meet the expectations of the academic community. Expressions such as “the results show that”, “it should be emphasised that”, “this study falls within”, “our results confirm those of”, and “the collected data reveal that” represent recurrent units that contribute to the construction of scientific discourse. As emphasised by Tutin and Grossmann (2002), these sequences are not merely stylistic choices but constitute genuine discourse tools that contribute to the development and transmission of scientific knowledge.

Research on academic writing further demonstrates that expert writers differ from novices not only through the extent of their disciplinary knowledge but also through their mastery of the phraseological routines specific to their scientific community. According to Grossmann and Tutin (2003), academic writing relies on a set of conventional formulations that ensure discourse coherence, structure argumentation, and enable researchers to position themselves in relation to previous studies. These units therefore play a central role in the acquisition of academic literacy and in students’ gradual integration into the discourse practices of research.

Mastery of phraseology is particularly important for expressing the logical relationships underlying scientific reasoning, such as causality, consequence, contrast, concession, and justification. Students’ difficulties often concern less the understanding of concepts than the formulation of concepts through appropriate linguistic structures. Therefore, writing deficiencies may partly be explained by an insufficiently developed phraseological competence (Pecman, 2004; Tutin, 2007).

Scientific writing does not rely solely on the mastery of grammatical and methodological rules but also on the acquisition of phraseological structures that enable the organisation and communication of scientific thought. Phraseology thus constitutes an essential component of writing expertise. According to Cavalla (2018), mastery of academic phraseological units facilitates access to university discourse practices and promotes writing that is more fluent, precise, and aligned with institutional requirements.

The scientific literature indicates that university writing competence is closely related to phraseological competence. Mastery of discourse routines, specialised collocations, and recurrent structures contributes to the production of high-quality scientific texts. This importance, in turn, raises questions about how phraseology is acquired and the place it occupies in university education.

2. Explicit Phraseology Instruction: A Means of Developing Writing Competence

The gradual recognition of the role of phraseology in university writing practices has led many researchers to examine how it is acquired. Although phraseological sequences are pervasive in academic and scientific discourse, their acquisition does not appear to result automatically from exposure to specialised texts. This issue has become central to research on language teaching and the pedagogy of academic writing. Traditional approaches to language teaching have long prioritised vocabulary and grammar as fundamental components of linguistic competence. However, several studies have shown that expert language users frequently rely on prefabricated lexical sequences that facilitate discourse production and contribute to fluency. Lewis (1993) characterises language as primarily grammaticalised lexis rather than lexicalised grammar, thereby emphasising lexical combinations as a central element of linguistic communication. This perspective has contributed substantially to pedagogical approaches that assign a prominent role to the explicit teaching of phraseological units.

In academic writing, several researchers argue that repeated exposure to university texts is insufficient to ensure acquisition of the discourse routines specific to this form of writing. Students may encounter scientific articles, dissertations, or specialised works regularly without necessarily identifying the linguistic mechanisms that structure them. Nation (2001) stresses the importance of directing learners' conscious attention to linguistic features. This position highlights the need for explicit pedagogical intervention to enable learners to recognise the linguistic regularities that characterise academic discourse.

Research on the learning of collocations and prefabricated expressions supports the same conclusion. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) show that explicitly taught lexical sequences are generally retained more effectively and reused more readily in written texts. According to these authors, attention to phraseological units promotes not only memorisation but also integration into learners' language practices. Explicit instruction may therefore help reduce the gap between novice and experienced writers.

This orientation is particularly relevant in the university context, where students must gradually appropriate the discourse conventions of scientific communication. Tuten's (2007) research shows that academic writing relies on recurrent formulations that fulfil various discourse functions: introducing a research problem, presenting a methodological approach, reporting results, interpreting data, and discussing previous studies. These structures constitute genuine writing resources whose mastery contributes to effective scientific discourse. Similarly, Cavalla (2018) argues that collocations and discourse routines should no longer be considered peripheral elements of language teaching because instruction in collocations can foster lexical competence that more closely reflects authentic language use. This observation is particularly significant in university contexts, where writing requires precise and conventional language use.

Research on academic literacies highlights the importance of explicit instruction in phraseology to help students master the discourse mechanisms of scientific writing. Its acquisition does not result solely from exposure to academic texts; it also requires activities that involve the identification,

analysis, and reuse of phraseological units. Such instruction would make experts' implicit writing practices more visible, enhance academic skills, and facilitate the appropriation of scientific discourse conventions. Despite these advantages, its integration remains limited in many curricula, raising questions about the consequences of its absence in university education.

3. A Blind Spot in University Education: The Marginal Place of Phraseology in Algerian Curricula

Despite the growing interest in phraseology in academic writing and language teaching, its integration into university curricula remains limited. Educational programmes generally prioritise grammar, vocabulary, methodology, and writing techniques, whereas phraseology is rarely taught explicitly (Tutin, 2007; Cavalla, 2018). This situation leaves several essential linguistic competences required for the production of academic and scientific texts implicit.

In the Algerian context, university programmes in languages, humanities, and social sciences place particular emphasis on developing writing skills. Students are introduced to research methodology, academic writing, and techniques for written expression throughout their academic trajectories (Bouhadiba, 2016). However, an examination of training content reveals that academic phraseology rarely appears as an explicitly identified component in teaching programmes. Concepts such as collocation, discourse routine, phraseological pattern, or prefabricated sequence are seldom included among the pedagogical objectives and training content offered to students. According to Narjes and Ghernout (2020), Algerian university teachers themselves demonstrate limited awareness of phraseology as a didactic object, contributing to its persistent absence from classroom practice.

This absence is particularly noticeable given that academic productions require mastery of the discourse conventions specific to academic genres. Dissertations, theses, and scientific articles require specialised formulations to articulate research problems, present theoretical frameworks, describe methodologies, interpret findings, and construct arguments. However, these competences are often assumed to be acquired implicitly through reading and writing practice. According to Bouguebs (2019), Algerian postgraduate students, in particular, experience difficulties with emphasis, reformulation, and logical connection expressions, thereby revealing a lack of explicit modelling in their training.

Nevertheless, research on academic literacies demonstrates that exposure to academic writings does not necessarily guarantee the acquisition of the linguistic resources that characterise them. As Boch (2013) points out, academic writing relies on specific discourse conventions whose mastery requires gradual and supported learning. In the Algerian context, Bensekat (2018) highlights that such support remains largely insufficient, as teachers tend to focus primarily on language correction at the expense of systematic work on phraseological forms specific to scientific discourse. From this perspective, academic phraseology emerges as an essential element in the socialisation process into scientific writing practices.

Observations from research on Algerian scientific production appear to confirm this reality. The analysis of numerous scientific articles published in national academic journals reveals certain recurring linguistic features, including limited academic formulations, excessive repetition of certain structures, difficulties in expressing logical relationships, and the sometimes inaccurate use of discourse routines characteristic of scientific writing (Kara, 2021). These phenomena do not merely reflect lexical or grammatical deficiencies; they also indicate uneven mastery of the phraseological resources employed in scientific communication. In this regard, Hadjarab and Tiziri (2017) note that Algerian students frequently resort to formulations literally translated from Arabic or colloquial French due to the absence of a stable academic phraseological repertoire.

This situation raises questions about the place assigned to phraseological competence within Algerian university education. Despite its recognised role in the development of writing expertise, its teaching remains largely implicit. This study therefore examines the hypothesis that certain difficulties observed in academic and scientific writing may be related to the absence of explicit instruction in phraseology and seeks to analyse its consequences for the quality of university writing in the Algerian context.

4. Methodology

4.1 Nature of the Research

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive approach based on a dual analysis of university training programmes and scientific texts. It is grounded in the assumption that the quality of scientific writing depends not only on disciplinary and methodological knowledge but also on mastery of phraseological resources in academic discourse. The research therefore draws on two complementary corpora: an institutional corpus consisting of university training documents and a scientific corpus comprising articles published in Algerian journals indexed on the ASJP.

4.2 Corpus Construction

The study corpus consists of two complementary datasets. The first includes the training programmes offered by the Department of French at the University of El Oued, particularly the Licence and master's programme frameworks and module descriptions related to language, methodology, writing, and scientific research. The second consists of scientific articles published in Algerian journals indexed on the ASJP and covering several disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. This combination makes it possible to compare the place of phraseology in university programmes with its use in scientific writing.

4.3 Curricular Analysis of University Programmes

The first phase involved a documentary analysis of the training programmes. The analysis focused primarily on courses related to language proficiency, written comprehension and production, academic work methodology, scientific research, didactics, and linguistics. The programmes examined included courses such as “Written Comprehension and Expression,” “University Work

Techniques,” “Research Techniques,” “Linguistics,” and “Research Methodology.” The purpose was to determine the visibility of phraseology within the training content. An analytical framework was developed to identify the explicit or implicit presence of elements related to academic phraseological competence.

This framework is based on the following indicators:

- presence of the concept of phraseology in the programmes;
- teaching of academic collocations;
- teaching of university discourse routines;
- teaching of recurrent argumentative structures;
- teaching of logical relations (cause, consequence, contrast, concession, justification);
- teaching of formulations specific to scientific writing;
- instructional practices promoting the reuse of phraseological sequences in written productions.

This analysis sought to determine whether phraseological competence was taught explicitly or left primarily to implicit learning.

4.4 Analysis of the Scientific Corpus

The second phase focused on the analysis of scientific texts. It drew on findings from our doctoral research and on a corpus of scientific articles retrieved from the ASJP.

The objective was to identify manifestations of phraseological competence in scientific writing and highlight patterns or limitations that could provide insight into researchers’ training needs.

The analysis is based on several phraseological categories recurrent in scientific discourse:

- problematisation routines;
- definition routines;
- methodological routines;
- argumentative routines;
- routines for discussing results;
- academic collocations;
- research verbs;
- markers of logical relations;
- transdisciplinary phraseological structures frequently used in scientific writing.

Particular attention was given to the diversity of formulations, the frequency of repetition, the range of phraseological constructions, and the mastery of the discourse mechanisms needed to organise scientific reasoning.

4.5 Data Processing Procedure

Data processing was conducted in three stages: (a) analysis of university programmes to assess the place of phraseology, (b) examination of scientific articles to identify recurrent phraseological structures and difficulties in their use, and (c) comparison of the two corpora to explore the

relationship between the limited presence of phraseology in curricula and the characteristics of scientific writing. This approach integrated institutional and discursive dimensions and provided a basis for considering explicit instruction in phraseology in Algerian university education.

5. Results

5.1 Limited Visibility of Phraseology in University Training Programmes

The analysis of the training programmes offered by the Department of French at the University of El Oued shows that the Licence and master's curricula place considerable emphasis on linguistic, methodological, and writing competences, particularly through courses in linguistics, didactics, research methodology, and academic writing. However, phraseology is not explicitly identified as an object of instruction. Concepts such as collocation, discourse routine, prefabricated sequence, and phraseological competence, as well as structures related to problematisation, methodology, presentation of results, and argumentation, are not specifically taught. University programmes therefore prioritise the methodological and structural aspects of scientific writing, whereas the linguistic resources required to implement them remain implicit and are not addressed through a specific pedagogical progression.

5.2 Significant Presence of Phraseological Units in Scientific Productions

Analysis of the scientific corpus compiled for the doctoral research highlights the substantial presence of phraseological units in scientific articles across the humanities and social sciences.

The corpus analysis reveals that authors recurrently employ relatively stable linguistic sequences to fulfil the various discourse functions associated with scientific communication. These units appear throughout all sections of the analysed articles and contribute to the overall organisation of discourse.

The results particularly demonstrate a set of discourse routines used to present the research problem. These formulations enable authors to introduce their topic, justify the relevance of their research, or situate their work within a specific scientific field. The observed structures include the following:

- “this study aims to”;
- “our research falls within”;
- “the present contribution seeks to”;
- “it is worth questioning”;
- “this issue raises”.

These sequences occur regularly in the corpus and fulfil comparable discourse functions across different articles.

The analysis also reveals recurrent methodological routines. Researchers frequently use similar formulations to present their approach, describe their corpus, or explain their analytical methods. The observed expressions relate particularly to the following:

- corpus construction;

- data collection procedures;
- analytical methods;
- data processing tools.

These phraseological units contribute to standardising methodological descriptions and provide consistency in the presentation of research.

The results also indicate the presence of numerous structures used in the analysis and interpretation of data. These sequences enable authors to comment on the findings obtained, establish relationships between observations and formulated hypotheses, or highlight certain phenomena identified in the analysed corpus.

The most frequent formulations include the following:

- “the results show that”;
- “the data reveal that”;
- “this observation confirms”;
- “the analysis highlights”;
- “it appears that”.

The use of these structures across various contexts highlights their recurrent nature in scientific writing practices.

5.3 Diversity of Phraseological Categories Identified in the Corpus

The analysis of the doctoral corpus made it possible to identify several categories of phraseological units that are essential to the construction of scientific discourse. These include definition routines, used to introduce and clarify concepts; problematisation routines, employed to formulate research questions and justify the study; methodological routines, which enable the description of research procedures and choices; and argumentative routines, which structure reasoning and express logical relationships such as cause, consequence, contrast, concession, and justification.

The corpus also highlights numerous academic collocations, including the following:

- conducting an analysis;
- formulating a hypothesis;
- collecting data;
- presenting results;
- constructing a corpus;
- testing a hypothesis;
- interpreting results.

These collocations occur across several disciplines and appear to constitute widely shared transdisciplinary resources within the scientific community.

Finally, the analysis reveals the importance of research verbs in structuring scientific discourse. Authors frequently use the following verbs:

- analyse;
- examine;

- identify;
- observe;
- show;
- demonstrate;
- emphasise;
- highlight.

These verbs contribute to the construction of the author's scientific positioning and the organisation of the argument.

5.4 Functional Distribution of Phraseological Units in Scientific Articles

The corpus analysis shows that phraseological units fulfil several essential functions in scientific texts: organising discourse and ensuring textual coherence, structuring argumentation, presenting and interpreting results, and facilitating researchers' integration into the scientific community through adherence to its discourse conventions. The results also reveal the presence of certain phraseological units across several disciplines, supporting the existence of a common phraseological core in scientific writing in the humanities and social sciences.

5.5 Convergence of Findings From the Two Corpora

Comparison of the data highlights a substantial gap between training programmes and scientific writing practices. On the one hand, phraseology is scarcely visible in university curricula, with no specific instruction or explicit progression. On the other hand, the scientific articles analysed make extensive use of discourse routines, academic collocations, research verbs, and argumentative structures. The findings therefore indicate that scientific texts rely heavily on phraseological resources that remain insufficiently addressed in university training frameworks.

6. Discussion

6.1 A Contradiction Between the Requirements of Scientific Writing and Training Content

The results reveal a paradox: although university curricula aim to develop writing and scientific competences, phraseology remains largely absent from the content taught, even though it is essential to academic communication. Scientific writing relies on discourse routines and collocations that enable researchers to formulate problems, present methodologies, interpret results, and construct arguments (Tutin & Grossmann, 2002). This situation reflects training that remains focused on grammar, vocabulary, and methodology at the expense of phraseological mechanisms. The findings are consistent with Cavalla (2018), who emphasises that writing competence also involves acquiring lexical and discourse sequences specific to academic genres. Phraseology thus appears to be an insufficiently addressed component of Algerian university curricula.

6.2 Phraseological Competence: An Invisible but Essential Component of Academic Literacy

The corpus analysis shows that phraseological units play a structuring role in scientific writing, particularly through problematisation routines, collocations, research verbs, and argumentative structures. These findings are consistent with Pecman (2004), who considers mastery of these units an important marker of writing expertise, and with Boch (2013), who highlights the importance of acquiring discourse conventions within academic literacies. Phraseology therefore emerges as an essential element of academic socialisation, enabling students to appropriate the conventions of their scientific community. Its presence across several disciplines also supports its transdisciplinary nature and its role in developing expert writing competence.

6.3 Toward the Explicit Integration of Phraseology Into Algerian University Curricula

The findings invite a reconsideration of the place of phraseology within university training frameworks. If scientific writing relies on an identifiable set of discourse routines and academic collocations, their acquisition cannot be left solely to exposure to texts or students' individual experience.

This interpretation is consistent with Lewis (1993), who considers the acquisition of lexical sequences essential to the development of language competence. It also aligns with Nation (2001) and Boers and Lindstromberg (2009), whose work indicates that explicit instruction can support the acquisition and reuse of phraseological units.

In the Algerian university context, academic phraseology could be integrated into writing and methodology modules through activities involving the identification, analysis, and reuse of discourse routines and through the use of disciplinary corpora. The aim would not be to introduce an additional subject but to make explicit a component already present in scientific practices. Such an approach could help reduce the gap between the demands of academic writing and the content taught by treating phraseological competence as an essential element of academic literacy and scientific writing expertise.

Conclusion

This study examined the implications of the absence of explicit phraseology instruction in Algerian higher education through an analysis of programmes offered by the Department of French at the University of El Oued and a corpus of scientific articles retrieved from the ASJP. The findings reveal limited visibility of phraseology in training programmes despite its central role in scientific writing, where discourse routines, collocations, argumentative structures, and methodological formulations are extensively employed.

Comparison of the two corpora reveals a gap between the demands of scientific writing and the content addressed in university education. This gap suggests that the absence of explicit phraseology instruction may contribute to writing difficulties among students and early-career researchers. The study therefore emphasises that mastery of scientific writing extends beyond

grammatical, lexical, and methodological competences and requires an appropriate phraseological repertoire.

Consequently, explicitly integrating phraseology into university training programmes could improve the quality of scientific writing and facilitate the appropriation of research discourse practices. Future research should extend the analysis to other Algerian universities, examine teachers' and students' perceptions, and evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches based on explicit phraseology instruction.

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