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Using Form Focused Instruction on Teaching Formulaic Sequences Among EFL Undergraduates

Noor Farahhein Johari*, Masturah Sabri, Noriha Basir, Sri Kandy Putri Naru Abdul Hamid Naru, and Jasin Abd Halim

Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: farahhein@unimap.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

This research looks into the impact of explicit form-based instruction (FFI) on the understanding of English as a foreign language (EFL) student in written tasks. The research also explored the internalisation after treatment of formulaic sequences. Data were compiled from different L1 backgrounds among EFL students. A pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test were followed in the task design. The formulaic sequences were selected and taught through the intervention sessions. Learning gains have been assessed in three separate periods in the same written test set. The findings showed that students gain significant learning from pre-test to post-test of participants; recognition and internalisation of formulaic sequences also indicated that participants have internalised a large number of formulaic sequences in their long-term memory. Lastly, the findings indicate that focused instructions on formulation sequences lead to an efficient learning and internalisation of linguistic features.

Keywords: Formulaic sequences, Focused Instruction, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous attempts have been made in second language acquisition research to look into how students utilise formulaic sequences to assist fluent speaking and how formulaic sequences may be used for diverse goals. In longitudinal research on the link between the usage of formulaic sequences and second language (L2) fluency among L1 students, Wood (2006) argued that formulaic sequences played an essential role in promoting fluent usage of language over time. Furthermore, second language acquisition experts have suggested that the formulaic sequence is a key element of the linguistic repertoires of L2 learners and is therefore seen to be a crucial part of L2 learners' effective skills, such as speech fluency and pragmatism (Fitzpatrick, 2005).

They are multiplexed strings that serve as units for understanding a single purpose or function. Formulaic sequences are important language components and are fundamental to how languages, both first and second languages, are used, interpreted, and acquired (Meunier & Granger, 2008; Schmitt, 2010; Wray, 2002). These multiword or frames of several phrases are processed cognitively as if they are single words. Formulaic sequences represent a variety of discourse needs and functions and are a widely understood way of communicating ideas and connections that promote productive and efficient communication and particularly fluent communication.

On top of that, Collins (2012: 2187) identifies focused instruction as "any pedagogical practice undertaken by second language (L2) teachers with the goal of drawing their students' attention to language form". Ellis (2001) describes the phrase "form-focused instruction" as any expected or unintended teaching practice designed to draw the interest of linguistic learners. Moreover, Boers et al. (2006) tested the concepts of the noticing of formulaic sequences, found that students who were exposed to a variety of noticing tasks were deemed to be orally more capable and more fluent than a control group and showed more usage of formulaic sequences in the speech. This may indicate that the number of presentations of formulaic sequence on teaching and learning have strong effects for oral ability to attract students' attention to such formulaic sequences. Other than that, according to Kisselev et al. (2020), form-focused activities have also proven to increase structural accuracy for L2 learners of Russian. In other words, teaching targeted formulaic sequences will support the effective learning and internalisation of the language experiences in their linguistic vocabulary by supplying L2 students with exercises that concentrate on the concepts and functions of the formulaic sequences.

Interestingly, while the position of formulaic sequence in speech fluency and pragmatic competence has been intensively studied, the tendency to consider formulaic sequences as a key factor in the skill of L2 students in writing, especially in academic writing, is still to be explored in a very specific empirical context. There is very limited research that explores the relation between the written use of formulaic sequences and their effectiveness in the proficiency of users. This study is to examine the efficacy of the form focused instruction on account of formulaic sequences for the analytical writing skills of the L2 students by looking at the research question below:

1. What is the incorporation rate of formulaic sequences in learners' writing on account of focused instruction?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section two provides a review of the relevant literature. Section three discusses the methodology of this study. The analyses, results and findings are presented in the fourth section. Finally, conclusions, limitations, and future research are discussed in the fifth section.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Formulaic sequences are multiplexed strings that act as units for understanding a specific purpose or function in first and second languages (Meunier & Granger, 2008; Schmitt, 2010; Wray, 2002). It is as if these multiword or multiphrase frames are single words. To communicate concepts and relationships in a productive, efficient, and fluent manner, formulaic sequences are generally understood. Some research has examined how students can employ formulaic sequences to improve fluency and other discourse functions. With mixed L1 learners, Wood (2006) found that formulaic sequences were critical for promoting fluent speech over time. They used formulaic sequences to keep proficient in monologuing.

The speakers choose "standard ways" to represent specific concepts (i.e., automatically recognised in the current context as "preferred" language options and extracted as a whole), according to Beckner et al. (2009). These phrases can be utilised to represent messages, functions, social cohesiveness, and process information swiftly and clearly (Schmitt, 2004). Furthermore, native language speakers' use of lexicon-grammatical chunks is widely accepted (Pawley and Syder 1983; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992; Wray 2005). They are found in academic writing as well as spoken language (Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Li & Schmitt 2009). Using premade groups of words instead of generating phrases word by word makes the job of language users easier. Professional academic writing requires formulaic sequences, which many L2 students lack.

To be defined as a good writer or proficient language user in academic settings, L2 authors must adopt formulaic sequences (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012). Beyond formulaic sequences, this perspective of academic writing suggests that it is a sophisticated process that requires mastery of both grammar and lexicon, as well as an understanding of academic genres and specialised language (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007). An L2 student must correctly use formulaic sequences in order to achieve high proficiency and join the L2 society (Siyanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015). Formulaic sequences in academic writing are important because they help readers understand complex ideas and concepts.

Ellis (2001:2) defines form-focused instruction as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form". The rest has been reactive or proactive form focused instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Personalized curriculum is required to allow students to learn and use target language features that are not typically used or even noticed in classrooms. Reactive form focused instruction comprises positive input from the teacher and efforts to direct students' attention to the desired language.

Without specific emphasis, learners cannot recognize and take on new language forms, according to research (Ellis, 2001). Boers et al. (2006) found that learners treated to a range of formulaic sequence notification tasks were evaluated to have more oral competence, including fluency, than a control group, and that more formulaic sequences in speech were also displayed.

To engage students' attention to formulaic sequences, the number of presentations may have considerable effects on speaking ability. In other words, providing L2 students with exercises that focus on the concepts and functions of formulaic sequences will help them learn and internalise language phenomena in their linguistic lexicon. Paquot (2008) emphasises the importance of focused instruction that encourages L2 learners to rehearse and internalise formulaic sequences into their linguistic lexicon.

According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), L2 students can employ these formulaic sequences as a foundation for a cohesive and deliberately arranged academic paper. Using the same formulaic sequences regularly would also help subsequent acquisition, according to Conzett (2000). Formulaic sequences may operate as "buffer zones" or "frames" on which L2 users rely to reduce linguistic faults and successfully communicate their ideas (Boers et al., 2006). In other words, for fluent responses, students generally use standard sequences as sentence frames, providing slots for students to insert prompt sequences and their own creative material. Thus, the sequences act as matrices that allow them to incorporate difficult grammatical constructs into their speech before fully understanding how these grammatical structures work in the language, improving fluency and perceived proficiency (Yan, 2020).

A study by François and Albakry (2021) proved that the presence of FS was a significant predictor of fluency in speech samples, as measured by the mean length of fluent run. They also suggested that language learners may be able to use the additional processing time saved to think ahead and prepare an answer, so offering additional cognitive capacity to focus on other characteristics of academic speech, such as tone and cohesiveness of the speech output.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study take place over a span of 18 weeks. The research comprises of eleven (11) originated from diverse backgrounds of L1, Chinese and Afghanistan, while nine participants are native Arabic speakers. To preserve the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms were given to each participant (i.e., alphabet A until K). It is worth noting here that, all respondents participated on the basis of informed consent as sufficient information and assurances about taking part has been provided and they understood the implications of their participations in this research.

The researcher has constructed a data collection prompt with a line graph and a table. The same question will be given to obtain each participant's pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test result. First, the tasks based on similar visual prompt will involve students to use formulaic sequences in reporting the changes of trend in the visuals which can be practiced and used in an interchangeable way by L2 students. Such formulaic sequences include, but not constraint to, discourse organisers, sentence builders and collocations that can effectively compose a cohesive written discourse while describing the patterns set out in the visuals provided.

Targeted items were introduced, explicit instructions started by introducing target formulaic sequence items and the significance, functions and features were clarified to the participants as awareness raising activities. The participants from the study were then asked to perform other tasks during the practice stage such as drills for fill-in the blanks, translation exercises and cloze exercises. The answers of the assessments were analysed and discussed in the classrooms to provide a better understanding and comprehension of it. Upon fulfillment of all the instructions, the students were automatically asked to answer the same question as presented during the pre-test before any intervention or treatment.

The researcher developed several worksheets before the training session to help introduce the desired formulaic sequences to the participants and allow them to employ them in both contextualized tasks and decontextualized ones. Using a list of targeted language items (Čolović-Marković, 2012) and using bold letters to highlight and keep students conscious of formulaic sequence items (Bishop, 2004; Peters, 2012); cloze test practises (Jones & Haywood 2004) and the discussions to improve students' ability to proceed closely and practise their knowledge of formulaic sequence.

The first worksheets introduce participants to visuals and provide two examples of good titles, introductions, and overviews for specific writing tasks. After the examples, participants practice writing titles, introductions, and overviews for various graphic visuals. The second worksheet is similar to the first, but it focuses on relating two visuals instead. Similar to the first worksheet, it starts with visuals and then gives participants two different exercises to compose a title, introduction, and overview.

In this specialized academic writing, they make participants aware of the importance of title, introduction, and overview. In addition, it teaches participants how to modify and apply formulaic sequences. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), L2 students can utilise these formulaic sequences as a foundation for a cohesive and deliberately ordered academic writing. Perpetually repeating the same formulaic sequences might also aid further acquisition, according to Conzett (2000).

Third worksheet - for each visual in the task, a list of collocations is provided. To maximise L2 learners' grasp of lexical components as collocations rather than separate entities, it is critical to identify their shared underlying meaning. Thus, presenting these lexical elements in groups rather than individual words, according to Nation and Newton (1997), can help participants learn them more quickly.

The fourth worksheet has participants to compose collocations under various visuals. This worksheet was designed to assist participants better comprehend the meanings of the collocations. Finding lexical concepts with visual representations will help deepen processing and help lexical elements be learnt and assimilated in long-term memory (Boers et al., 2009).

The fifth worksheet provides participants with sentence builders, speech organisers, and formulaic sequences to help them avoid repetitive words and phrases when writing. The worksheet also illustrates each formulaic series' purpose in context. In certain cases, many examples of a type of sequence are presented.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This part deals with the areas of focus of this study: the tendency of students in incorporating different formulaic sequences through form focused instruction (FFI) and the possible correlation between the said method of teaching FFI and formulaic sequences knowledge internalization. The findings of the quantitative analysis of textual data elicited from the eleven participants are summarized in this section. To answer the research question of this study, the textual data were collected at three separate stages: before any intervention (pre-test), at the end of the training period (post-test), and two weeks after training (delayed post-test). This section outlines the findings of the manual coding process carried out on the basis of an analysis of quantitative to assess the frequency of the target formulaic sequences in text. This will also include a statistical measure measured on the raw data to illustrate any major variations caused by the FFI. Identification of the use of target formulaic language in the participants' written discourse was done manually by the researcher.

4.1 Paired-Samples T-Tests

Table 1 The Frequency of Formulaic Sequences Used in the Pre-test, Post-test and Delayed Post-Test

Participant	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Delayed Post-Test
A	5	12	13
B	6	17	18
C	7	19	18
D	4	15	17
E	6	19	20
F	9	20	22
G	6	18	13
H	5	15	16
I	11	28	27
J	8	19	19
K	4	11	9

Table 1 shows the frequency of formulaic sequences used in the pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test. To answer the first question research question (i.e. *"will the participants incorporate formulaic sequences in their writing on account of focused instruction?"* and "*will the participants able to retain formulaic sequences knowledge in the written discourse on account of formulaic sequences*?"), which addresses the extent to which FFI potentially affects participants' acquisition and retention of target formulaic sequences knowledge, the means and standard deviations of students' scores on the pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test were calculated according to the teaching method of FFI as shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 Paired Samples Statistics

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean		N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	6.4545	11	2.16165	.65176
	Post-test	17.5455	11	4.56867	1.37751
Pair 2	Post-Test	17.5455	11	4.56867	1.37751
	Delayed Post-test	17.4545	11	4.84487	1.46078

Table 3 Paired Samples Test (Paired Differences)

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pre-test – Post-test	-11.09091	2.73695	.82522	-12.92962	-9.25220	-13.440	10	.000
Pair 2 Post-test – Delayed Post-test	.09091	2.07145	.62457	-1.30071	1.48253	.146	10	.887

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the frequency of formulaic sequences appeared in writing test before (pre-test) and after the use of FFI (post-test). There was a significant difference in the scores for Pre-test (M=6.45, SD=2.16) and Post-test (M=17.55, SD=4.57); t (10) = -13.44, p = .000. These results suggest that the FFI does influence the number of formulaic sequences integrated into participants' answer. However, there was no significant difference in the frequency of formulaic sequence in post-test (M=17.55, SD=4.57) and the delayed post-test (M=17.45, SD=4.84); t (10) = .146, p = .887. In other words, the mean difference between the two variables and the direction of the t value showed that nearly all participants used roughly the same amount of the target formulaic sequences in post-test and delayed post-test.

In sum, t-tests were computed to highlight the statistically significant change in values for variables resulting from the frequency of formulaic sequences present in participants' written discourses in this study. In the case of repetitive measures intended to compare two variables within the same population to demonstrate any significant differences in group results before and after treatments, t-tests, also known as paired t-tests or matched t-tests, are computed.

5. DISCUSSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTION

The findings demonstrated that after the treatment, the overall targeted formulaic sequence frequency in the written discourses in the post-test by the study's participants increased significantly. Regarding the frequency of the targeted formulaic sequences, the results of the above-quantitative tests indicate that a statistically significant increase in target formulaic sequence in post-test compared with pre-test is due to a focused instruction given during the training period.

Furthermore, the ability of every student to use about the same amount of target formulaic sequences, both post-test and post-test after two weeks of training, indicates that oriented learning or form focused instruction helped them to learn and internalise the target type formulaic sequences in a productive way in the participants language repertoire. It also reflects the statistically significant disparity between the pre-test and delayed post-test, and the lack of any statistically significant difference between post-test and delayed post-test.

Indeed, these results can be directly linked to the hypothesis that the restricted use in writing of formulaic sequences by L2 leaners may be attributed to the fact that it was not specifically taught how to use this language term for a writing function and how to apply it. It is important to note that the explicit teaching of formulaic sequences through form focused instruction is effective in increasing the overall quality of writing, as participants earned higher scores for the general performance of the essays because they used more formulaic language items in each evaluation than their counterpart.

It was also suggested that the formulaic sequences can be used as "buffer zones" or "frames" to help L2 users to reduce their language mistakes in written or spoken discourses and to express their ideas efficiently (Boers et al., 2006). Paquot (2008) also points out the value of focused instruction, which allows learners in L2 to practice and thus internalise formulaic sequences in their linguistic vocabulary, to promote the proper use by L2 learners of this language phenomenon.

The results that more type of target formulaic language items was used by the participants after treatment showed that explicit instruction enabled them to make progressive use of formulation language items. In this research, delayed post-test was also carried out in order to look in the long term for the long-term effects of explicit teaching of target formulaic language items, if any. The findings showed that mean frequency of targeted formulaic sequence in the delayed post-test was decreased; however, the average frequencies were still higher than the pre-test frequencies. Statistically noticeable was the difference between the average formulaic sequences' frequencies in post-test and the delayed post-test. The decrease may have led to a lack of instruction or recommendation for participants to review the items between the post-test and the delayed post-test.

At this point, while there was no significant statistical difference in post-test and delayed post-test, it might be possible to conclude that form focused instruction and explicit teaching induces participants to use formulaic language items by raising awareness, and unintentionally experienced formulaic sequences items may be missed or overlooked in time with less gains without explicit teaching.

This result is consistent with Alhassan and Wood's (2015) findings, which taught formulaic sequences items to twelve participants spanning ten weeks. The participants successfully used different types of the targeted formulaic sequences items in the post-test after the treatment, as well as in delayed post-test instead of repeating them over and over. In addition, they did not find any significant difference between the post-test and the delayed post-test either.

Thus, comparison of the use of the target formulaic sequence items in pre-test and post-test supports successful form focused instruction and a strong opportunity for students to use formulaic sequences in writing. To demonstrate, participants of this study used more types of the target formulaic sequence items in post-test, rather than depending on the same items and more tokens from the target formulaic sequence items after the training compared to when they were not subject to explicit teaching.

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