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Teaching formulaic sequences in an advanced EFL university setting: a case for variation

Panel: Teaching Formulaic Language to L2 Learners

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Introduction

- A **shift** towards teaching strings of words → Formulaic sequences –FSs – (Wray, 2002)
- Their **pervasiveness** in native language, and
- **Difficulties** for NNSs → the case for instruction
- Research on the **effects** of FS Instruction
 - Ab Manan (2014a y b),
 - Alhassan and Wood (2015),
 - Čolović-Marković (2012),
 - Jones and Haywood (2004),
 - Lewis (2009), and
 - Peters and Pauwels (2015).

Objectives:

- To assess the effects of a) different **types** of instruction on FS acquisition in b) gap-completion tasks and c) spontaneous written production
- To **analyse** the **variations produced by learners** of a set of formulaic sequences (FSs) in search of evidence of FS acquisition process

The context & the Study

Participants

- 3 cohorts of **advanced (C2)** university students
- taking Lengua Inglesa III
- at the **Teacher-training** programme at FADEL, Universidad del Comahue
- N= 39
- All learners lent their **consent** to the study and signed their written permissions to be part of the experience

Research questions

1. Does **vocabulary form-focused instruction** of FSs have an effect on a) **number** of FSs **recalled** and b) number of FSs **used spontaneously**?
2. Does the **type** of focused instruction of FSs have an effect on a) number of FSs recalled and b) number of FSs used spontaneously?
3. How **similar /different** are learners' **versions** to the **target** FSs?

For 1 and 2 above, a fourth research question applies,

4. If so, **how long after** the intervention does the effect

Methods

- Treatment conditions
 - **EG1** (2015): focus on form (input flood and enhancement) + data analysis + gap-filling tasks + dictogloss (Waynryb, 1990) - 7 hours; N: 13
 - **EG2** (2017): focus on form (awareness-raising + 2 dictogloss tasks) – 6 hours; N:19
 - **Control group** (no instruction): text + tasks in coursebook; N: 7
- Data collection instruments:
 - Pretest
 - 3 Posttests (1 immediate and 2 Delayed)
 - Essay writing task

Selecting the nine TFSs

PRE TEST:

- Whole sentences extracted from **native** databases and used as contexts to trigger learners' use of the TFSs (Target Formulaic Sequences)

E.g.: I'm not sure to what extent _____ you agree with Qian's theory.

- FSs worth teaching:
 - their **relative frequency** in native language
 - their **novelty** for this particular learning environment
- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. the prospect of | 6. cloud (my) appreciation |
| 2. outside the constraints of | 7. (be) at once obvious |
| 3. without the inconvenience(s) of | and surprising |
| 4. ignore at (someone's) peril | 8. be subject to |
| 5. (be) oblivious to sth | 9. for all the good [...] (do) (them) |
-

Data collection instruments

- **C-test tasks** in three delayed **post-tests**

Example:

The water crisis has revealed that groundwater is part of a system of powerful hydrological interactions that **we ignore at our peril**. We should reconsider and work for a better future.
(COCA)

- CORRECT
- NO ANSWERS
- ATTEMPTED FSs
- **spontaneous production** of the TFSs in written practical assignments.
 - Record of instances per learner across tasks
 - felicitous/infelicitous productions (Lewis, 2009)

Findings: Revisiting our research questions

RQ1: Does **vocabulary form-focused instruction** of FSs have an effect on a) **number** of FSs **recalled** and b) number of FSs **used spontaneously**?

a) CORRECT ANSWERS	EG1 (%)	CG (%)	EG2 (%)
PT1	76,05	0	19,0
PT2	69,9	0	42
PT3	63,63	5,6	---
b) SPONTANEOUS PRODUCTIONS	29 instances of 7 FSs	0 instances	50 instances of 9 FSs
	11/13 participants	0/7 participants	15 /19 participants
	3 practical assignments	3 practical assignments	5 practical assignments

RQ2 Does the type of focused instruction of FSs have an effect on a) number of FSs recalled and b) number of FSs used spontaneously?

a) Posttests

- ✓ Both types of instruction have yielded **gains** in comparison to CG
- ✓ EG2 had an initially poor performance in test completion (PT1) (instruction type-effect)

EG1 → FONF

gap-filling tasks,
transformations & dictogloss

training for Posttests

Better performance in c-tests

EG2 →
DICTOGLOSS

Text

reconstructions:
use of TFSs in

context

Use of TFSs in
meaning-form
mappings

Better performance
in spontaneous
production

RQ2 Does **the type of focused instruction** of FSs have an effect on a) number of FSs recalled and b) number of FSs used spontaneously?

Variations	EG1 (%)	EG2 (%)	CG (%)
Pt1	12,83	22,6	57,1
Pt2	21,38	30,2	27,8
Pt3	27,26	--	24,1

- Variations (attempted FSs) increase in number with time (except for CG – more ‘No Answers’)
- Much higher rates of variation for EG2 (similar rates across time?)
- EG1 loss of correct answers affects percentage of variations (higher): less accurate retrieval of SFs but still towards formulaicity (morpho-syntax)
- Missing final prepositions (test-effect?)

RQ2 Does the **type of focused instruction** of FSs have an effect on a) number of FSs recalled and b) number of FSs used spontaneously?

b) Spontaneous use

- **EG1: 29 instances of 7 TFSs**

- *X The prospect of*
- *X For all the good it did*

- **Most used TFS:**

- *Be oblivious to*

- **Least used TFS:**

- *Outside the constraints*
- *Within the inconvenience of*

- **EG2: 50 instances of 9 TFSs**

- **Most used TFS:**

- *Be oblivious to*
- *Cloud our appreciation of*

- **Least used TFS:**

- *For all the good it did*
- *Ignore at our (own) peril*

Findings: Attempted FSs

RQ3. How similar /different are learners' versions to the TFSs?

Variations: a) Posttests

TFS	LEXICAL REPLACEMENTS
1. The prospect of	the surprise of (EG1 Lliii11) / the idea of (PT1 & 2 EG1 Lliii22) & (EG2 Lliii33) / the feeling of (EG1 Lliii11) thinking of (EG1 Lliii19) /through (EG1 Lliii9)
1. Without the inconvenience of	without the PROBLEM OF (PT2) (EG1 Lliii22);
1. Be at once adj and adj	at the same time (pt1,2,&3 (EG1 Lliii3)); *at BOTH (EG1 Lliii4); APPARENTLY (EG1 Lliii19)
1. Be subject to	sued (2) (EG1 Lliii19); SUGGESTED IN (PT1) (EG1 Lliii11); SUBJECTED TO (PT2) (EG1 Lliii4)

- **Difficulties in complying with the grammatical and lexical requirements of TFS → consequences to (EG1 Lliii4), contributed to (EG1 Lliii19), and considered (EG1 Lliii10).**
- **Grammatically and lexically appropriate modification: conditioned**

Variations: a) Posttests

- Grammatical analysis + initial letter (Be at once+adj+and+adj → *apparently* (EG1 Liii19)
- Use of a single preposition instead of the whole sequence: condensation of meaning of TFS (e.g.: *outside the constraints of* → *outside*; (EG2 Liii37); *over* (EG1 Liii9)

without the inconvenience of → *without* (EG2 Liii26)

- CG variations: less related in meaning and form to TFSs (attention/awareness) (E.g.: *implemented and **thinking** about* (LiiiC1);, *submitting* (LiiiC8)
- Individual choices which are repeated as answers across tests

MORPHO-SYNTACTIC VARIATIONS

- ✓ Alteration of the **number marking** of the noun (E.g.: *inconveniences* (EG2 Liii32); *prospects* (EG1 Liii13) (correct in the corpora consulted)
- ✓ Modifications in the **choice of preposition**
- **errors**, as in **without the constraints of* (EG2 Liii28) / (PT2) (EG1 Liii15)= blends: other TFS -- the identical structure underlying both

b) Variations in spontaneous use

- **Few instances of ‘attempted FSs’ in both EG1 and EG2**
- *Yet, these waves of satisfaction and excitement **cloud our VISION of reality**, and make us oblivious to the possible downsides that travelling may entail (EG2 Lliii29)*
- *This may possibly lead to **cloud their VIEWS** and stay in bed all day long making no effort to achieve their tasks. (EG2 Lliii38)*
- **Whenever we access the internet, we may well face a number of risks **OF which we seem to be oblivious**, especially children.(EG2 Lliii33)*
- **Some infelicitous occurrences:**
- **This misuse of technology may lead users to **be subject to criminal acts**. (EG2 Lliii43)*
- **We can meet people from all around the world **outside the constraint of travelling abroad**.(EG2 Lliii28)*
- **Innovative technologies can be at once helpful and*

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

- **Variations** encountered in learners' productions in **function words** and **lexical items**
- Posttests: most variations occurred (**test-effect?**)
- Extent to which variations are included is **independent** of number of words the FS is composed of
- Most **spontaneous FS uses** have been **felicitous and correct** as regards **form, meaning and use**.
- Evidence of participants' **awareness** of the patterns of use of the TFSs in this study (ANALYSIS? OR RETRIEVED WHOLE?)
- Some FS **imprint** left in learners' minds → **incomplete** retrieval: attempt to **repair** the blanks of missing components (alternatives: **same** part of speech)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS (Cont.)

- TFS memory → *apparently stored* around **content** words in the FS
The *rest*: unimportant → learners *probably* rely on their **ability** to **retrieve** them **whole** afterwards.
- Formulaicity lies **in the phrases** themselves: **not** in learners' *ability to retrieve* them *whole*
- Formulaicity: observed in the **syntactic make-up** of the phrases produced by learners
- FS form seems to be **negatively affected** by recall of *function* words
- Formulaicity in L2 learning → **NOT** only related to FS successful automatization
 - *Attempts and variations* play a role → A more **process-oriented** view of

the *development* of their formulaic competence

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