



Capítulo 9

On track: variations in EFL learners' formulaic sequence use¹

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Key words: formulaic sequences - EFL - instruction - acquisition - variations in use

1. Introduction

In this paper we present the variations encountered in advanced university learners' controlled and uncontrolled productions after a focused-instruction experience of formulaic sequences. After a brief reference to the theoretical framework, the study is described in terms of the context, the selected FSs, the research design, the treatment and data-collection procedures. What follows is the analysis of the data gathered through the different instruments in search of the target and non - target use of the FSs taught and the different types of variations offered. Based on the literature, we then turn to the discussion of some guidelines for the teaching of FSs.

2. Theoretical framework

For the last few decades the field of applied linguistics has been enriched by a wave of corpus studies into the nature of language and the interrelationship between grammar and lexis. Implications of these investigations have pointed to the need to teach foreign language learners recurrent and pervasive strings of words in language which go beyond the word. These sequences of words have been given multiple names especially depending on the research schools from which this research springs. In this study, the term 'formulaic sequence' (FS) is used, following Wray (2002)'s definition,

“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” (p. 9).

The learning of these sequences has been proved to be essential for foreign language learners, who appear to come up against some difficulties in the formulaic expression of meanings. Decades of research into the recurrence of these strings and their acquisition (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2012; Granger and Meunier, 2008a; Hoey, 2005; Howarth, 1998; Granger and Meunier 2008b; Schmitt, 2004; Wood, 2010) have led to new insights with respect to the learning of vocabulary and of these strings of words. From these investigations, innovative trends have stemmed for the teaching of these sequences, proposed by authors like Boers and Lindstromberg (2009), Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000), Wood (2010) and Wray (2008).

Based on the teaching guidelines offered by these authors, researchers like Ab Manan (2014a y b), Alhassan and Wood (2015), Colovic-Marković (2012), Jones and Haywood (2004), Lewis (2009), and Peters and Pauwels (2015) have conducted vocabulary-focused instruction studies mainly with advanced

¹ This paper presents results of part of the studies carried out within Research Project J023 “Secuencias formulaicas y su adquisición en estudiantes universitarios de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera”, subsidized by Secretaría de Ciencia y Técnica, Universidad Nacional del Comahue.



university students to describe the different types of obstacles learning FSs poses to learners of English of different L1s. The present study follows in these steps.

3. The study

This section describes the investigation carried out with thirteen advanced Argentinian university students of English with the purpose of assessing the effects of the teaching of FSs present in a text on travelling expectations from the coursebook, as measured in the variations and attempted sequences produced by learners in the data-collection instruments. Through these productions we set out to explore students' knowledge of the TFSs, of their meaning and of their typical occurrence in context. The following subsections will describe the procedures used to select the FSs, the intervention in terms of the pedagogic decisions made to design the tasks learners completed. Then follows a description of the research design followed throughout the four months during which the experience lasted and of the techniques used to gather data. The overall design for the study is based on Čolović-Marković (2012)'s investigation into the effects of explicit instruction of a series of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and topic-induced FSs which were measured in controlled and uncontrolled situations. The present study, however, is concerned with a limited number of selected FSs.

3.1. The context

The learners in this study were part of the Lengua Inglesa III annual course at the Teacher-training programme at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional del Comahue. The course is taught around four units from the proficiency-exam (Cambridge) coursebook by Capel and Sharp (2013), namely Changes, Expectations, Strange Behaviour and Rituals. On the basis of the contents in the book, additional material is selected to complement the treatment of the topics.

Of the 22 students who were present for the pretest, previous to the intervention, only thirteen completed the three treatment sessions and at least two posttests and are considered participants in this experiment. All learners lent their consent to the study and signed their written permissions to be part of the experience. Participants were two males and eleven females of an advanced level of proficiency, certified in the scores they obtained for Papers 1 Reading and Use of English in the Certificate of Advanced English (Cambridge ESOL). Learners' age ranged from 20 to 25.

3.2. Pre-test and selected FSs

The main text from Unit 2 in the coursebook (Capel & Sharp 2013:16-7), an adapted version of 'The way we travel now' by De Botton (2003), was selected for the intervention. To decide which FSs in the text were worth teaching, their relative frequency in native language and their novelty for this particular learning environment was assessed by conducting searches different corpora of native English language use (BNC² (2007) and COCA³ (Davies, 2008)), in Google and in online dictionaries. The latter were checked to determine whether a separate entry was given for the whole sequence consulted. Whole sentences were extracted from the databases to be used as contexts to trigger learners' use of the TFSs. Those which occurred most frequently in the sources and appeared as units of meaning in dictionaries and concordance lines in the corpora were selected as possible targets to be taught. Following Čolović-Marković (2012), in order to discard those FSs learners might be familiar with and know, a cued-production pretest was designed containing 23 contexts of use of possible TFSs for the experiment. Learners were

² The British National Corpus, version 3 (BNC XML Edition). 2007. Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. URL: <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

³ Davies, Mark. (2008-) The Corpus of Contemporary American English: 520 million words, 1990-present. Available online at <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.



asked to complete a c-test exercise where the first letter or cluster of letters was given for them to complete with the key word in the sequence, as shown in the example below.

1. I'm not sure to what e _____ you agree with Qian's theory.

As the purpose of this test was to assess which FSs learners were already familiar with so as not to teach and test known items, in the pretest they had to complete only the keyword -and not the whole phrase- under the assumption that, if learners were able to fill in the one-word gap correctly, they knew that FS to some extent. The pretest was piloted with three proficient speakers of English and adjusted to suit learners' linguistic competence.

The following nine sequences obtained the lowest scores among learners, and were selected for the experiment.

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>the prospect of</i>2. <i>outside the constraints of</i>3. <i>without the inconveniences of</i>4. <i>ignore at (someone's) peril</i>5. <i>(be) oblivious to sth</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">6. <i>cloud my appreciation of</i>7. <i>(be) at once obvious and surprising</i>8. <i>be subject to</i>9. <i>for all the good [...] (do) them</i>
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Table 1 Selected TFSs

3.3. Research design

Following Ćolović-Marković (2012)'s plan for her study, the present research was organized around four instruction sessions (I, II, III and IV), preceded by the Pre-test described in section 3.2. above. After the completion of the instruction sessions, data was gathered through a post-test and two delayed c-tests, and through three uncontrolled, essay-writing practical assignments. Table 2 below outlines the research plan for each of the instruction sessions (in white) as well as for each data-collection procedure (in grey). Each activity type is described together with the number of hours devoted to each instruction task.



Session	Activity types	Number of hours
Pretest (week 1)	c-test (23 contexts)	
Session I (week 3 and 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning revision • Noticing and matching FS with its definition • Analysis of FS use in context • Gap-filling 	2 hours
Session II (week 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C-test (9 sets of three two- or three-word gapped sentences) • Matching of beginnings and endings of FSs • Free production of sentences using FSs 	1 hour
Session III (week 8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformation exercise 	1 ½ hour
Written practical assignment (week 9)	Spontaneous use (LUPA 10)	
Session IV (week 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictogloss • Checking 	1 ½ hour 1 hour
Post-test 1 (week 11)	c-test (9 TFSs + 5 distractors)	
Written practical assignment (week 12)	Spontaneous use (Term-exam II)	
Post-test 2 (week 14)	c-test (9 TFSs + 5 distractors)	
Post-test 3 (week 16)	c-test (9 TFSs + 5 distractors)	
Written practical assignment (week 16)	Spontaneous use (Final exam)	

Table 2 Research design: Treatment and data collection instruments

The study stretched over sixteen weeks, the whole second academic term in our university. In the table above, both instruction sessions and data-gathering instances have been placed on a timeline and the week number when they took place is indicated in brackets.

3.4. Treatment

The pedagogic intervention consisted of four training sessions explicitly focused on the meanings and uses of the nine selected sequences to be taught during 7 one-hour periods of class time over five weeks (weeks 3, 4, 5, 8, and 10) out of the sixteen-week semester.

The focused-instruction sessions were organized to include different tasks which first encouraged students' noticing of the TFSs in context and awareness-raising of the meanings conveyed and the patterns in which they occurred. At a later stage, tasks were presented on a cline from more to less controlled and from more to less guided. All the contexts in the tasks were taken from authentic academic sub-corpora. All the materials and tasks designed were piloted with proficient teachers of the foreign language, and modified where necessary to be tailored to learners in this context.



In the first session, which lasted two hours over two different lessons, learners' attention was drawn to the TFSs as used in the source text and they were asked to indicate in which line each sequence appeared and then match it to its definition. They were also encouraged to analyse the use of the sequences in the source text through guided questions oriented at helping them perceive patterns appearing in the wider context around the strings. In addition, participants completed a gap-filling task with the whole TFSs.

Session II was meant to provide learners with more typical samples of the TFSs taken from the BNC (2007) and COCA (Davies, 2008). With this purpose, a C-test was designed to include 9 sets (one for each FS) of three gapped sentences, which learners had to complete with either two or three words making up the TFSs. In the next activity participants were to match the beginnings and endings of the TFSs. Finally, they were invited to write sentences of their own using the TFSs, which were later checked in class.

Session III consisted only of a sentence transformation task where learners were to rewrite a given sentence, keeping its meaning while using any of the TFSs.

An output task devised by Wajnryb (1990) known as Dictogloss or Grammar Dictation was used in the final training session. In this activity

a short, dense text is read to the learners at normal speed; while it is being read, students jot down familiar words and phrases; then the learners work together in small groups to reconstruct the text from their shared resources; the final versions are then analysed and compared. (Swain, 1998:70)

The initial text, consisting of 237 words and constructed by the researchers to include the nine TFSs, was thematically related to the source text and included examples of use similar to those found in the coursebook text. Session IV was devoted to a whole-class discussion of the different versions provided, which took place the following lesson.

3.5. Data collection

In order to measure the impact of the explicit focused instruction of FSs, a set of post-tests were administered at different points in time after the training period was over. Data was also collected through the text-reconstruction process after the Dictogloss and through the written assignments learners were asked to write during the course, while and post-treatment.

3.5.1. Dictogloss text reconstructions

For the grammar dictation activity, students were divided into six groups of three or four members and explicitly instructed to write a new text that conveyed the same meanings as the original, pooling together the notes taken during the dictation. They submitted their versions on that same day. These new reconstructed texts contained between 157 and 298 words and were analysed in search of the TFSs. The TFSs produced were counted across groups.

3.5.2. Posttests

The three delayed posttests were designed as c-cloze tests, where learners were to fill in the blanks with the whole TFS and the first letter or cluster of letters were provided as cues. Each test consisted of fourteen items: nine target sequences and five distractors which had also been tested in the pretest. The distractors were randomly selected for each of the posttests and all fourteen contexts were presented in random order, which varied across tests to control for order effects. An example of the cued-production items follows:



2. The water crisis has revealed that groundwater is part of a system of powerful hydrological interactions that we i _____. We should reconsider and work for a better future.

The contexts of use for each of the items were always the same sentences extracted from either COCA (Davies, 2008) or BNC (2007). They were selected for their clarity and their self-contained meaning. The three posttests were piloted to ensure the items tested FS knowledge.

As shown in Table 2, the first posttest was administered immediately after treatment; the second delayed posttest took place three weeks later and posttest 3, two weeks after that to guarantee that enough time elapsed for the study to realistically measure retention rate and acquisition of the TFSs throughout time.

3.5.3. Spontaneous use in reading comprehension tasks and essays post-treatment

For the purpose of this descriptive analysis, all instances of spontaneous use, i.e. not cued or guided, appearing in learners' written production, were transcribed and listed separately with the full linguistic context accompanying them, and a record was kept of which participant had used each TFS and in which practical assignment. LUPA 10, Term Exam II and the Final exam for the course, the uncontrolled tasks in this study are fortnightly in-class Language in Use Practical Assignments comprising a reading comprehension task on a news report and the writing of an essay were spread across seven weeks.

4. Results and discussion

The aim of this descriptive study is mainly to explore the types of variations encountered in learners' productions (guided and spontaneous) of the TFSs through the different data-collection instruments presented chronologically first, a description of participants' use of the sequences in the text-reconstructions for the dictogloss task, second, a discussion of the number of correct and modified answers to the delayed c-tests, and finally, a report on the spontaneous use of the TFSs in the written practical assignments. However, it will also quantitatively characterise the data obtained through the different instruments. The scores given to answers and the statistical analysis of the data are beyond the scope of this paper.

4.1. Dictogloss text reconstructions

The texts learners produced were analysed in terms of number of words and the number of TFSs used when attempting to convey the same meanings as those in the text dictacted and their length is seen to be directly related to the number of FSs included, as can be observed in Table 3 below.

	Number of words	Number of TFSs
original	247	9
A.	298	9
B.	157	3
C.	224	9
D.	233	8
E.	199	4
F.	160	0

Table 3 Characterisation of dictogloss reconstructed texts



Shorter renderings of the original text have included fewer TFSs (B, E and F) and longer versions present the highest number. Two groups used all nine expressions (A and C) and only one group failed to use any of them (F). Table 4 below illustrates learners' preferred TFSs in this task, together with alternative means of expressing those meanings. Most reconstructions have incorporated the TFS *for all the good (it/ that) did (us), without the inconvenience of, ignored at our peril, cloud our appreciation of, be at once ADJ and ADJ and be subject to*. The least produced were *be oblivious to* (2), *the prospect of* (3) and *outside the constraints of* (3).

In some cases, learners have introduced changes to the TFSs, such as modifying the number marking of, for example, the noun *inconvenience*. This variation has been found to be correct in the corpora consulted, even if it is not the original version. Some modifications have led to errors in the choice of preposition as in **without the constraints of* instead of *outside the constraints of*, which could be explained by the interference of the other TFS *without the inconvenience of* and the identical structure underlying both (Prep+the+Noun+of).

Other changes have allowed students to convey the same meanings of the TFSs, as in *at our will* instead of *outside the constraints of*, and *as we were not interested in* in the place of *without the inconvenience of*. Other variations for *ignored at our peril* were *even though we were advised against doing so* and *although the taxi driver had advised us against going there*, paraphrasing as a compensating strategy.

TFSs	Instances (N=6)	Learner variations offered
1. The prospect of	3	
2. Outside the constraints of	3	<i>Without the constraints of; at our will</i>
3. Outside the constraints of	3	<i>Without the constraints of; at our will interested in</i>
4. Ignore at (our) peril	4	<i>Other forms: Even though we were advised against doing so; although the taxi driver had advised us against going there...; ignoring –at our peril-; ignoring at our peril</i>
5. Be oblivious to	2	
6. Cloud our appreciation of	4	<i>Presented in these other forms: didn't let the three-hour queuing clouded (sic) our appreciation of; that didn't cloud our appreciation of; it didn't cloud our appreciation of the exciting atmosphere</i>
7. Be at once ADJ and ADJ	4	<i>+Both;</i>
8. Be subject to	4	<i>Was our being subject to</i>
9. For all the good that/it did us	5	<i>For all the good IT did us; for all the good it did; Pointlessly</i>

Table 4 Variations offered per TFS in text reconstructions

Twice, the gerund *ignoring at our peril* is used, even when the original included the form *ignored*. In these cases, learners have avoided using the TFS and paraphrased it while conveying the same meaning.



This has been found to be a typical strategy in FS acquisition by advanced non-native speakers (Howarth, 1998; Ab Manan *et al.*, 2014a, b)

4.2. Posttests 1, 2 & 3

In this section the different answers offered by participants in the c-tests are presented, especially focussing on the variations learners have retrieved from memory for each of the items in each of the posttests. First we describe the table below, then we characterise participants' behaviour across tests and later we analyse learners' modified versions of the TFSs in more detail.

Table 5 below summarises the percentages of 'correct answers' (Corr), 'no answers' (NA) and 'variations' (Var) for each of the TFSs for each posttest. An additional line describes each TFS in terms of the number of words they are composed of. In brackets under each posttest we have included how many participants have taken the test.

The figures below evince a general tendency of decreasing correct answers for posttest 3, even if for TFSs 4 to 9 the percentage of correct answers remains quite high. This could be taken as a typical test-effect, where repeated instances of the contexts of use for the sequences have contributed to a higher retention rate. This effect disappears as time progresses. Only the percentages for TFS1 do not seem subject to these variations and stay quite constant throughout the tests.

		1. The prospect of	2. Outside the constraint of	3. Without their convenience/sof	4. Ignore at (our) own peril	5. Be oblivious to	6. Cloud (my) appreciation of	7. Be at once ADJ and ADJ	8. Be subject to	9. For all the good did (him)
	# words	3	4	4	4	3	4	5	3	6
P1 (13)	Corr.	61,5	61,5	84,6	84,6	92,3	46,2	92,3	76,9	84,6
	NA	15,4	0	7,7	15,4	7,7	30,8	0	15,4	7,7
	Var	23,1	38,5	7,7	0	0	23,1	7,7	7,7	7,7
P2 (16)	Corr.	50	43,75	56,25	81,25	93,75	50	81,25	75	100
	NA	31,25	31,25	0	6,25	6,25	12,5	0	12,5	0
	Var	18,75	25	43,75	12,5	0	37,5	18,75	12,5	0
P3 (11)	Corr.	63,6	36,4	36,4	63,6	100	27,3	81,8	81,8	81,8
	NA	36,4	0	0	9,1	0	18,2	0	9,1	9,1
	Var	0	63,6	63,6	27,3	0	54,5	18,2	9,1	9,1

Table 5 Correct answers, no answers and variations for Posttests 1, 2, and 3

The cells in a dark shade of grey indicate those FSs which have obtained the highest percentage of correct renderings. FSs 5, 7, 8 and 9 do so across the three tests, which might point to the fact that, in spite of the passing of time, learners still retain knowledge of these sequences, though statistical analyses outside the scope of this paper will confirm or refute this.

Boxed cells signpost those cases in which the TFSs have received a significant percentage of 'no answers' and/or 'variations'. These provide evidence of learners' difficulties in retrieving the whole sequence, and typically accompany a lower level of correct answers than in previous tests.

In a lighter shade appear those FSs which have been retrieved correctly quite infrequently. These figures coincide with the last posttest and attest to the inherent complexity of these FSs, which are made



up of more words. Such is the case of TFS2, 3, and 6, where the correct answers have been halved in posttest 3, and the variations have increased considerably.

A more detailed analysis ensues of the different types of variations learners resort to when they retrieve the TFSs from memory.

In the data, a considerable number has been found of attempted sequences where prepositions have been omitted or replaced. This is shown in erroneous sequences like **without the inconvenience*, **clouded my appreciation* and **outside the constraints*, all of which lack the preposition of next to the noun and are inadequate in the grammatical context of the c-test items. These variations occur to a higher degree for posttest 3, where these omissions increase in number. It might be argued that these respond to a test effect, where learners have grown used to the linguistic contexts and are content with identifying which the TFS is needed. An incomplete version, however, is provided.

Two TFSs are susceptible to preposition replacement: *clouded my appreciation of* and *ignore at our own peril*; in the first case, *of* is replaced with *on* and in the second, *at* is replaced with *to*. It is no coincidence that these variations have been produced by the same learners in each case. This might lend support to Wiktorsson’s claim that “the learner has some notion of the correct prefab, but has failed to learn it completely. Most erroneous elements [...] are function words.” (*op. cit* p.159).

With respect to alternative lexical items inserted in the sequences, many learners have provided the following answers summarised in Table 6:

TFS	LEXICAL REPLACEMENTS
1. The prospect of	the surprise of/ the idea of (PT1 &2)/ the feeling of thinking of /through
2. OUTSIDE THE constraints of	outside/ over
3. Without the inconvenience of	without the PROBLEM OF (PT2); without the CONSTRAINST OF (PT2)
4. CLOUD my appreciation of	CONTRIBUTED TO (2)/ CONSIDERED/ CONDITIONED/ CONSEQUENCES TO/
5. Be at once adj and adj	at the same time (pt1,2,&3); *at BOTH; APPARENTLY
6. Be SUBJECT TO	sued (2) same subject; SUGGESTED IN (PT1); SUBJECTED TO (PT2)

Table 6. Lexical replacements for the TFSs

The analysis of these data highlights the fact that *the prospect of* and *cloud my appreciation of* have triggered more of these variations. In the first case, learners have mainly respected the det+N+of structure of the original but have obviously failed to retrieve the TFS.

In the second case, learners have not been able to comply with the grammatical and lexical requirements of this TFS, and have produced inadequate versions for that precise context, like *consequences to*, *contributed to*, and *considered*. The only modification which is appropriate for that context is *conditioned*, which satisfies these conditions both grammatically and lexically. The lexical items selected to complete a gap with an initial ‘c’ are not felicitous in any of the cases above. It is believed that the hint provided may have triggered these inappropriate answers.



It is obvious that when learners use *apparently* in the blank meant for *at once +adj+and+adj*, a grammatical analysis has been favoured over meaning and learners have also attempted to respect the initial letter provided in the context. In a few instances of TFSs participants have turned to the use of a single preposition instead of the whole sequence in an attempt to condense the meaning of the unretrievable TFS (*over*, *outside*, and *through* above).

Most of these variations point to a process Wray (2002) refers to as “loss of detail”, which she attributes to learners’ reliance on the memory of the visual and/or phonological shape of the entire unit (p. 200), which might be incomplete or fading. An explanation for these erroneous renderings seems to be related to students’ tendency to aim for a target sequence which they fail to produce correctly. This may trigger “different types of mistakes or errors some concerning prepositions, some concerning the choice of lexical items” (Wiktorsson, 2003: 159). Many mistakes are also due to the misspelling of words.

4.3. Spontaneous use in reading comprehension tasks and essays post-treatment

Table 7 below records the number of instances of TFSs produced spontaneously in the written practical assignments administered in weeks 9, 12 and 16. Because these are free production tasks they constitute possible and not compulsory contexts of use for the TFSs. Absence of TFS production cannot be interpreted as lack of knowledge of the sequences, but rather as learners’ intention to express their meanings in other words or lack of need to express those meanings altogether.

	LUPA 10	TERM EXAM	FINAL EXAM	Total
The prospect of	---	---	---	---
Outside the constraints of	1	---	---	1
Without the inconvenience of	---	1	---	1
Ignored at our peril	2	3	1	6
Be oblivious to	10	2	1	13
Cloud our appreciation of	---	1	1	2
Be at once ADJ and ADJ	1	---	2	3
Be subject to	1	2	---	3
For all the good that did us	---	---	---	---

Table 7 Number of spontaneous TFS produced per data collection procedure

Students have clearly favoured the use of *be oblivious to*, especially in the first record of their written practice closer to the treatment⁴. This preference is not maintained throughout the rest of the course. These productions occur across eight different participants’ assignments. In three cases, the same learner has included this FS twice in the same writing sample, which could evince a conscious trial-error process meant to test his/her knowledge of the TFS. Examples a) and b) illustrate correct and deviant use of this TFS, respectively.

- a) We spend hours immersed in these technologies, **oblivious to** whatever happens around us. (Lliii14)

⁴ These figures could have been affected by the fact that the text for the reading-comprehension task in LUPA 10 included this FS, which may be considered reinforced exposure. However, this sequence did not appear in the prompts offered for the essay.



- b) *After overcoming them, we are able to distinguish between the characteristics of our personality that we should keep and those ones that we should **be oblivious to**. (Lliii11)

The lexical infelicity of b) lies in the fact that this participant has erroneously taken this TFS to mean *discard*, which refers to a conscious, intentional choice and which clearly contrasts with the meaning ‘not conscious of something, especially what is happening around you’ (*Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2008). All other instances of this FS are correct and show learners’ awareness of its meaning and use.

Another outstandingly productive sequence, though used to a lesser extent, is *ignore at our (own) peril*, which was employed six times by three different participants. One student in particular seems to have purposefully included this FS in each of the practical assignments. However, not all instances are entirely correct, as shown in c) and d), where there is a spelling mistake in a content word of the FS and a missing component of the meaning underlying this FS (*ignore or (not) do sth at your own peril*).

- c) *But, on the other hand, we **ignore at our own perit** what the risks of altering nature are. (Lliii4)
- d) *In other words, drinking affects people’s life **at their own peril**. (Lliii9)

As regards the use of *outside the constraints of* and *without the inconvenience of*, only one occurrence has been found for each, e) and f) below:

- e) there are some places that remain **outside the constraints of** human-altered landscapes (Lliii3)
- f) We can see that they can talk to and interact with their peers **without the inconvenience of** being shy or timid. (Lliii4)

Although both examples reflect learners’ awareness of the grammatical form of these FSs, they fail to comply with the semantic and pragmatic requirements of both sequences and sound unnatural. Similarly, one of the two instances of *cloud our appreciation of* appears to convey only part of the meaning of the FS.

- g) *In general, these adults’ unacceptable actions have **clouded their appreciation of** a healthy life. (Lliii9)

The shortcomings in g) could be resolved if a phrase like *the benefits of* were included before ‘a healthy life’.

Two out of three occurrences of *be at once+Adj+and+Adj* show participants’ awareness of the typical usage patterns, combining a positive and a negative adjective, as in h), while in i) both adjectives have a positive connotation.

- h) So, it appears as if making use of what we are provided with was **at once fruitful and useless**. (Lliii4)
- i) *one can find images that **are at once breath-taking and magnificent**. (Lliii16)

Three different learners have satisfactorily resorted to *be subject to*, this FS, as illustrated in j):

- j) Mostly, this kind of behavior **is subject to** criticism as friends or family consider it annoying. (Lliii16)

However, k) seems to indicate only partial awareness of this FS’s co-text, for when *must* accompanies the string in native corpora, the noun occurring after *to* is semantically linked to the idea of rules and regulations. This participant’s use fails to reflect this.



k) *Education must be subject to improvement. (Liii19)

This section has analysed spontaneous productions of the TFSs in this study in terms of felicitous and erroneous renderings obtained through written practical assignments in the course. Some of these uses are evidence of learners' acquisition of the formal aspect of the sequences but fail to comply with the semantic and pragmatic usage requirements of the TFSs. This appears to contradict what Wiktorsson (2003) hypothesises in her study with respect to the production of erroneous prefabs by Swedish EFL learners: "the learner has stored the concept underlying these expressions, i.e. the meaning, even if they have not yet fully mastered the form linked to that meaning" (p. 159).

5. Conclusion and pedagogical guidelines

Even though this paper is intended to report on the analysis of the non-native variations produced in students' texts of the TFSs, it should be noted that most learner productions have been felicitous as regards form, meaning and use. Students appear to have successfully acquired the sequences, even if, as in Dickinson (2012)'s study, some "were not always recalled accurately, or, when produced accurately, were used inappropriately" (p. 32).

Following Wiktorsson (2003), the results show that most variations affect, on the one hand, function words, evinced in the replacement and omission of certain prepositions and, on the other, the selection of alternative lexical items to convey similar meanings to those of the TFSs. When faced with the challenge of making use of the sequences learnt, and when confronted with their newly acquired - and therefore developing- knowledge of these FSs, they resort to compensation strategies of avoidance and paraphrasing (Howarth, 1998), as illustrated in the results for the dictogloss (Section 4.1.).

In fact, the data collection procedure which has yielded the most accurate uses of the sequences is the dictogloss, probably due to the guided nature of the task. In contrast, it is in the posttests (Section 4.2) where most variations occur, possibly as a result of a test-effect in relation to the cues. In the essay-writing assignments, some learners seem to have made a conscious effort to include FSs, which might be evidence of them trying to apply what they have learnt in new contexts of use. Their implementation of this strategy seems to have given rise to them finding other correct usage patterns for these sequences. However, not all TFSs have lent themselves to this and spontaneous use of some of these strings has not been possible.

Overall, the results in this study seem to evince participants' growing awareness of the typical patterns of the TFSs and in Čolović-Marković (2012)'s words, "explicit instruction helped students become familiar enough with the FSs to recognize their usefulness and employ them in their essays" (p. iv). They appear to be on the right track to their acquisition and on the way to further developing their formulaic competence.

The findings reported in this paper were obtained after an explicit, vocabulary-focused instruction experience based on a series of tenets posed by Hoey (2005), Lewis (1993, 1997 & 2000), and Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) for the teaching of chunks and formulaic language. These principles are outlined as an aid for teachers to foster their students' acquisition of FSs since the main aim of explicit instruction should be drawing learners' attention and focus to the sequences in context by guiding them to notice and analyse multiple examples of authentic use. Teachers should ensure that copious input is presented to learners so that they are exposed to repeated instances of the same sequence, which will reinforce the storage of information of how that word or phrase is used (Hoey, 2005). Subsequent encounters of one same word trigger a revision of the information stored and cause adjustments of this storing. This cumulative exposure is claimed to favour the development of learners' awareness of target FS use, bringing together meaning, form and use. Through conscious analysis of sentences extracted from databases like the BNC or COCA, students are encouraged to study authentic samples in the shape of



concordance lines and perceive underlying patterns and restrictions of use for these FSs. In order to do so, teachers may want to make sure, first, that the selected examples are suitable to their learners' level, and if necessary adapt them accordingly. Also resorting to these databases, they can implement practice stages where students can, for example, fill in the blanks, match TFSs with possible examples, and write transformation sentences, among other tasks, thus providing more opportunities of use.

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