Improving second language academic presentations with formulaic sequences

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Abstract

This paper describes an action research study involving teaching formulaic sequences to a group of students on an English language course at a Japanese university with the aim of improving their academic presentations. Participants were exposed to a set of presentation-specific formulaic sequences through various consciousness raising tasks and instructed to memorize and use the sequences they had learned in two subsequent presentations. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the language data from these presentations revealed that this approach was beneficial for almost all of the learners, regardless of their English proficiency.

Keywords: formulaic sequences, presentations, EAP (English for Academic Purposes).

Introduction

Formulaic language is currently receiving a significant amount of attention in second language learning research. The ubiquity of formulaic language and the considerable advantages that productive and receptive control of formulae provides language users has prompted many researchers to stress the benefits of teaching formulaic sequences to second language (L2) learners (e.g. Nation, 2001; Wray, 2002; Boers *et al*., 2006; Segalowitz, 2010; Wood, 2010; Roever, 2012). However, while teaching formulaic sequences has many benefits, it also poses many challenges in L2 learning contexts. As Granger (1998:159) puts it, when it comes to teaching formulaic language, we still do not know "what to teach, how much to teach, and least of all, how to teach".

This paper reports on action research that engages to a degree with the above challenges. The research involved the teaching of a set of formulaic sequences to a group of EFL learners at a Japanese university with the aim of improving their academic presentations. Analysis of the language used by the learners in two subsequent presentations produced evidence that suggests that the direct teaching and memorization of targeted formulaic sequences can help EFL learners effectively use such sequences in genuine communicative contexts. The results also indicate that learners who used a range of formulaic sequences accurately and appropriately improved not only the quality of their presentations, but also their speech fluency. Based on the findings of the present study and previous studies, this paper argues that the explicit teaching and memorization

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of genre-specific formulaic sequences may be an effective way of improving L2 learners' communicative skills.

This paper is organized as follows. Firstly, formulaic sequences are defined and the relevant research literature is reviewed. The research questions and methods are then presented. Following that is a presentation of the results and a discussion of their implications. Finally, the limitations of the study are presented together with some brief suggestions for further research.

Defining formulaic sequences

Formulaic sequences have been studied from many different perspectives. This has resulted in a lack of consensus on their exact nature, the methodology used to identify them, and even what they should be called (Biber *et al.*, 2004; Read & Nation, 2004). Despite this, Wood (2010) argues that there is at least some agreement on the basic defining characteristics of formulaic sequences and the features that make them distinct. He states that there seems to be a consensus that formulaic sequences "are multiword units which are stored in long-term memory as if they were single lexical units" (Wood, 2010:38).

A definition that differs slightly from Wood's in that it encompasses both single and multiword units is Wray's *morpheme equivalent unit* (MEU). Wray (2008:12) defines an MEU as:

> a word or word string, whether incomplete or including gaps for inserted variable items, that is processed like a morpheme, that is, without recourse to any form-meaning matching of any sub-parts it may have.

Wray (2009:38) explains that as the MEU concept views formulaic sequences as behaving in the same way as single morphemes, it naturally follows that words doing likewise and morphemes themselves must be considered formulaic. This means that examples of MEUs can include everything from single words (e.g. *Hello, Thanks*) to idioms such as *kick the bucket*, as well as partly-lexicalized frames such as *NP give (tense) NP a piece of PRO(NP)'s mind*, which can be realized as *I gave John a piece of my mind* (Wray, 2009:38–39). The broadness of the MEU definition means that when used to analyze natural language it is less likely to exclude items that may be formulaic. It was therefore considered a useful starting point to begin analyzing the language data in the present study.

Teaching formulaic sequences

Several studies have provided evidence of the benefits of teaching formulaic sequences to L2 learners. For example, Towell, Hawkins and Bazergui (1996) found in a study of learners of French as a second language that increased fluency resulted from learners storing memorized sequences. In a study of international students in the USA, Sung (2003) found a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations

and the subjects' speaking proficiency, as did Hsu and Chiu (2008) in a study of Taiwanese EFL learners. Finally, Wood (2010) in a study of ESL learners in Canada found that speech fluency development was related to and facilitated by the use of formulaic language.

Despite these reported benefits, teaching formulaic sequences in L2 learning contexts poses many challenges. As Wray and Fitzpatrick put it, formulaic language "has proved difficult to characterize and challenging to harness for effective teaching and learning in the L2 context" (2008:123). Jones and Haywood (2004) have pointed out that there is no proven methodology for teaching formulaic sequences. Similarly, Coxhead (2008:155) has noted the absence of "theoretical underpinnings" in relation to teaching and learning formulaic sequences.

A small but growing body of research has explored some of the problems involved in teaching formulaic sequences. Jones and Haywood (2004) employed various methods in their study exploring the teaching of formulaic sequences to a group of L2 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners, including highlighting, encouraging students to memorize and use the sequences in their writing, and using tools such as concordances. They found that although awareness of formulaic sequences increased during the period of the study, students did not do so well at learning and using the phrases in their writing.

In a study of formulaic sequence use in L2 academic writing, Coxhead (2008) reported that while her participants expressed a desire to use academic phrases in their writing, not all previously learned phrases were recalled accurately. She found that among the barriers to learning and using phrases was a pragmatic learning approach, such as deciding to learn only one word at a time or focusing only on verbs (Coxhead, 2008:158). The teaching approach employed was also found to influence learners' formulaic sequence use. Coxhead (2008:159) concluded that "stipulating the use of target structures in tasks" appears to help learners focus on them.

Wray and Fitzpatrick (2008) investigated the capacity of L2 learners to improve their performance through the memorization of specifically targeted language. They claimed that memorization, effectively applied, can greatly benefit both beginners and more advanced learners. The subjects in their study reported that using memorized sentences in anticipated conversations was "a liberating experience because it gave them exposure to an opportunity to sound nativelike, promoted their fluency, reduced the panic of on-line production in stressful encounters, gave them a sense of confidence about being understood, and provided material that could be used in other contexts" (Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008:143). Wray and Fitzpatrick concluded that memorization seems to have several potential advantages in relation to learning, confidence-building and proficiency evaluation.

Research Aims

Building on the studies reviewed above, the present study aims to contribute to knowledge on the teaching and learning of formulaic sequences. The action research

reported here had the goal of improving the presentations of students in an advanced Communicative English Program (CEP) class at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS). In presentations given at the beginning of the semester several problems were apparent. One common problem was the underuse of formulaic discourse organizing or "signposting" expressions (e.g. *To begin with; Next, I'd like to talk about; To sum up*). Consequently, the presentations often lacked a clearly defined structure. Another common problem was that formulaic interpersonal discourse strategies, such as asking rhetorical or actual questions, were also greatly underused. As a result, the presentations did not sufficiently engage the attention of their audience.

To improve the learners' presentations it was decided to implement the action research reported here. The study explored the following research questions:

1. What effect does the teaching of a set of formulaic sequences have on the presentations of a group of L2 English learners?
2. Does the use of different procedures and instructions have an effect on learners' production of formulaic sequences in their presentations?

In the following section I will describe the participants involved as well as the methods employed in exploring these questions.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were ten (7 female, 3 male) Japanese learners of English enrolled in an advanced Communicative English Program class at NUIS. All participants were second or third year students who had completed the year-long, semi-intensive CEP course in their first year of study. Five participants had recently returned from a four-month long study abroad program in the USA. Due to the different English language learning experiences of the learners, the proficiency levels of participants varied from false beginner to quite advanced.

Teaching and learning procedures

In this section I will describe the procedures related to the teaching and learning stage of the study. The initial teaching stage took place over two weeks. Firstly, a list of presentation-specific formulaic sequences was compiled from various sources including previous research studies (e.g. Wray & Perkins, 2000; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), ELT presentation course books, and videos of relevant presentations from the YouTube website. The list of formulaic sequences was provided to each learner and examples of each type of sequence being used in context were presented. Learners then completed video- and paper-based consciousness raising activities designed to help them notice how formulaic

sequences were used in the context of successful presentations. Finally, learners practised using the formulaic sequences in context themselves by writing and performing sections of presentations in class. When preparing for their initial post-teaching presentations learners were instructed to use the formulaic sequences they had learned. To ensure that learners were actually planning to use the formulaic sequences they were also required to submit a draft script to the teacher researcher beforehand.

In order to explore the second research question, different procedures and instructions were implemented after the first post-intervention presentations. In the three weeks between the first and second presentations no further explicit teaching of formulaic sequences took place. For the second presentations learners were also not required to submit a draft script to the teacher researcher, but were reminded to continue using the appropriate formulaic sequences in their presentations.

Presentation procedures

Learners gave their initial post-teaching presentations in groups of three or four students. The presentations were on the topic the class had been studying for the previous month. Each learner spoke for approximately six to seven minutes, although a few learners spoke slightly more or less than this time. The second post-teaching presentations were given three weeks later. Learners gave these presentations in pairs and chose their own presentation topics. Again, each learner spoke for approximately seven minutes.

Data collection, identification and assessment procedures

All presentations were digitally recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Formulaic sequences were identified in the language data using a diagnostic criteria originally developed by Wray and Namba (2003), which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Twelve diagnostic criteria for assessing intuitive judgments about formulaicity

A : By my judgment, there is something grammatically unusual about this wordstring.
B : By my judgment, part or all of the wordstring lacks semantic transparency.
C : By my judgment, this wordstring is associated with a specific situation, register and/or genre.
D : By my judgment, the wordstring as a whole performs a function in communication or discourse other than, or in addition to, conveying the meaning of the words themselves.
E : By my judgment, this precise formulation is the one most commonly used by this speaker/writer when conveying this idea.
F : By my judgment, the speaker/writer has accompanied this wordstring with an action, use of punctuation, or phonological pattern that gives it special status as a unit, and/or is repeatingsomething s/he has just heard or read.
G : By my judgment, the speaker/writer, or someone else has marked this wordstring grammatically or lexically in a way that gives it special status as a unit.
H : By my judgment, based on direct evidence or my intuition, there is a greater than-chance level probability that the speaker/writer will have encountered this precise formulation before, from other people.
I : By my judgment, although this wordstring is novel, it is a clear derivation, deliberate or otherwise, of something that can be demonstrated to be formulaic in its own right.
J : By my judgment, this wordstring is formulaic, but it has been unintentionally applied inappropiately.
K : By my judgment, this wordstring contains linguistic material that is too sophisticated or not sophisticated enough, to match the speaker's general grammatical and lexical competence.
L : By my judgment, there is an underlying frame and one or more gaps in this wordstring. The frame is formulaic and the gaps can be filled with any lexical items.

When applying the criteria, judgments were made on a five-point scale: 1 (*strongly agree)*; 2 (*agree*); 3 (*don't know or not applicable*); 4 (*disagree*); and 5 (*strongly disagree*). In order to demonstrate how the criteria were used, an example from the data is presented in Table 2. The example is the phrase *on the other hand*, which performs a function in discourse other than conveying the meaning of the words themselves. It therefore is scored as a *strongly agree* for pragmatic function. As the meaning of the phrase cannot be discerned from its parts and it is almost certain that the learner who produced the sequence had encountered it before it also scored a *strongly agree* for both semantic opacity and previous encounter.

Table 2

Formulaicity in on the other hand

	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**H**	**I**	**J**	**K**	**L**
CRITERIA	Grammatical irregularity	Semantic opacity	Situation/register/genre specificity	Pragmatic function	Idiolect	Performance indication	Grammatical/lexical indication	Previous encounter	Derivation	Inappropriate application	Mismatch with maturation	Underlying frame
Judgment	5	1	2	1	2	2	5	1	5	5	4	5

Note. Adapted from "Formulaicity in code-switching: Criteria for identifying formulaic sequences" by K. Namba, 2010, *Perspectives on Formulaic Language*, p. 135. Copyright 2010 by David Wood and contributors.

Based on their broad coverage of the characteristics of formulaic language the criteria seemed a valid tool to support intuitive judgments on whether a word string constituted a formulaic sequence. On this basis, they were adopted in this study to help identify formulaic sequences from the language data.

The number of formulaic sequences produced by each learner in both presentations was then counted. The formulaic sequences were also assessed for accuracy and appropriate usage using a scoring scale employed in a study by Jones and Haywood (2004) which also took place in an EAP context with university-level learners. The scoring scale is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Measuring production of formulaic sequences

Key:	
3 =	Correct phrase
2 =	Correct phrase but problems with morphology, e.g. *Let's image* instead of *Let's imagine*
1 =	Some idea of phraseology but could not get the correct phrase, e.g. *to care of* instead of *to take care of*
0 =	No idea of phraseology

Note. Adapted from "Facilitating the acquisition of formulaic sequences: An exploratory study in an EAP context," by Jones and Haywood, 2004, *Formulaic Sequences*, p. 280. Copyright 2004 by John Benjamins.

Results and Discussion

The aim of this research was to improve the quality of learners' English presentations through raising awareness of presentation-specific formulaic sequences. To achieve this aim a very direct teaching approach was implemented, which involved the teacher researcher presenting a set of formulaic sequences typically used in presentations, further consciousness raising tasks, and in-class practice using the selected sequences in context. The learners were then instructed to use the formulaic sequences they had learned in two subsequent presentations of their own.

It was hoped that if the learners used the sequences they had learned it would make their presentations both more engaging as well as easier to understand. In regards to these two aspects the intervention appeared to achieve some measure of success. An increased use of interpersonal and discourse marking formulae in the post-intervention presentations did make the learners' presentations both more interactive and easier to follow. Several learners made good use of formulaic sequences that directly involved the audience, especially interrogatives (e.g. *Have you ever ..?; Do you know ..?; Can you guess why ..?*), resulting in much more interactive presentations. The use of formulaic discourse organizers which signal the overall direction of presentations was another area in which students improved. Almost all the learners made effective use of the discourse organizing sequences they had learned, including topic markers (*Today we'll talk about…*), topic shifters (*So, now let's move on to…*) and summarizers (*To sum up…; Well, that's all I have to say about…*). As a result, the post-intervention presentations were much easier for the audience to follow.

Still, some sequences were not always recalled accurately (e.g. *First, I tell about; Today, I'll tell us*) or, when produced accurately, were used inappropriately. For example, one learner produced the sequence ***Then**, I'll talk about* to shift topics in the middle of her presentation when ***Now**, I'll talk about* would have been appropriate. Overall though, as seen in Table 4, the total mean scores per sequence of 2.62 and 2.66 for the formulaic sequences produced in the first and second presentations respectively indicate a high level of accuracy and appropriate usage in the phrases that the learners produced.

Table 4

Number and quality of formulaic sequences in learner presentations

	Presentation 1			Presentation 2		
Student	Number of formulaic sequences used	Total score	Mean score per sequence	Number of formulaic sequences used	Total score	Mean score per sequence
1	23	58	2.52	20	55	2.75
2	21	53	2.65	13	30	2.3
3	22	60	2.72	25	73	2.92
4	31	79	2.54	20	58	2.9
5	28	71	2.53	29	74	2.55
6	31	68	2.61	28	82	2.92
7	16	44	2.75	24	68	2.83
8	40	117	2.93	30	84	2.8
9	17	49	2.88	23	69	3.00
10	18	50	2.77	20	53	2.65
Total	247	649	2.62	242	646	2.66

However, the quantitative results also reveal considerable variation between individual learners regarding the quantity and quality of the formulaic sequences produced. For example, as Table 4 shows, student 2 produced a total of 34 formulaic sequences across the two presentations whereas student 8 produced more than double this amount (70) with much greater accuracy. As these two learners possessed similar levels of proficiency and neither had lived in an English-speaking environment, it is difficult to account for such a wide discrepancy. Perhaps follow-up interviews with these learners would have revealed more about the use and apparent underuse of formulaic sequences in their presentations.

It is perhaps also significant that student 2 produced even fewer formulaic sequences in the second post-intervention presentation. Recalling that the learners received no explicit instruction on formulaic sequences between the first and second presentations and were not required to submit a draft script prior to giving their presentations, this could indicate that some learners may benefit from a more direct, stipulative teaching approach as recommended by Coxhead (2008).

However, as the total number of formulaic sequences produced in the first and second presentations decreased only very slightly, from 247 to 242, and the overall quality only very slightly increased, it is not possible to claim that the use of different teaching procedures and instructions had any significant overall effect. This appears even more

apparent taking into account that five learners increased and five learners decreased the number of formulaic sequences they used in the second presentations. Despite this, as a few participants (students 2, 4 and 8) did use considerably fewer formulaic sequences in their second presentations, stipulating the use of target forms in tasks, as Coxhead (2008) recommends, may be beneficial for learners until they can demonstrate greater control over the structures in genuine communicative contexts.

One interesting finding concerned student 7, who was the least proficient English speaker of the participants. As shown in Table 4, this student used only 16 formulaic sequences in the first presentation, but produced 24 in the second presentation. The sequences were recalled very accurately as well, especially in the second presentation where 22 out of the 24 phrases produced were used correctly. The complexity of many of the phrases this student used (e.g. *run out of ways; It may also imply that; Well, that's all I have to say about…; Finally, X will talk about*…) made her speech sound much more idiomatic than usual and improved her spoken fluency as well. Using memorized sequences also perhaps reduced the stress involved in having to generate long stretches of language on-line in what were undoubtedly difficult and stressful situations for a learner of limited proficiency. This finding concurs with those of Wray and Fitzpatrick (2008) discussed above, where learners reported similar benefits to memorizing and using multiword units in anticipated conversational encounters.

While findings such as the one discussed immediately above indicate that this research has been beneficial, several limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, as there were only ten participants it is not possible to generalize the findings to a wider population. Secondly, the short time period of the study, due to the class being only one semester long, meant that the time devoted to the teaching and learning stage was severely restricted and that the longer-term effects of the intervention could not be assessed. Another limitation of the study is that it focused on the language of the presentation genre only as presentations formed a large part of the assessment for the particular course and it was apparent that the learners needed to become much more proficient in them. Further studies exploring the benefits of the approach used in this study in teaching the linguistic features of other genres would be beneficial.

Conclusion

This paper has reported the stages and findings of action research intended to improve the academic presentations of Japanese EFL learners on a university English course through the promotion of the use of formulaic sequences frequently used in the presentation genre. A direct teaching approach was implemented that encouraged the memorization of a set of genre-specific formulaic sequences and stipulated their use in two subsequent presentations. Although based on limited data, the results indicate that in line with the findings of Coxhead (2008) and Wray & Fitzpatrick (2008) this approach to teaching formulaic sequences may be beneficial for beginners and more advanced learners alike.

Regardless of their level of proficiency the learners who made good use of the formulaic sequences they had learned gave post-intervention presentations which were both more engaging and easier to understand. Further studies implementing the procedures reported in this study would provide even more knowledge on the effectiveness of using direct teaching approaches, such as memorization and stipulating the use of target structures in tasks, in enabling learners to gain greater control over the various spoken and written genres they need to use.

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