The Instruction of Formulaic Language in the Classroom

Jason Parry, 2012
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In highlighting the outcomes from his research surrounding formulaic speech and fluency, Wood (2008, 2009) introduces his readers to a compelling new approach to second language teaching. According to Wood, when L1 speakers generate speech they do so by stringing formulaic sequences – such as collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs and fixed expressions – into comprehensible sentences and texts. To their minds, these sequences are processed as single words, allowing them to focus their thinking on other aspects of their speaking. For example; in comparison to the set phrase how are you, producing a sentence such as what is the current state of your well being bears a significant cognitive load. By selecting formulaic sequences such as how are you, the speaker is able to produce dialogue with less effort, ultimately allowing for more complex and fluent and speech.

Bearing this in mind, Wood determined whether there is a similar relationship between formulaic speech and fluency in L2 speakers. This was accomplished by subjecting three Mandarin speaking participants to one of three short silent films, six times over a 24 month period, each time having them record a retelling of the story of the film on an audio tape. The recordings were then analyzed by holistically applying five general criteria to decide whether a sequence was formulaic, and measuring fluency using four temporal variables and a formula/run ratio. In doing this, Wood found evidence which suggests that over time, with continued learning and experience; L2 speech will exhibit a faster rate of production, L2 speech will exhibit a greater amount of production time spent speaking as opposed to pausing, L2 speech will exhibit longer runs between pauses, and formulaic sequences will appear more frequently in the longer runs between pauses. As with L1 speakers, it seems that L2 speakers also exhibit a relationship between fluent speech and formulaic speech.
Building on this, Wood then set out to establish whether the focused instruction of formulaic sequences in a classroom environment could improve a Japanese learner’s fluency. By introducing a set of formulaic sequences which were embedded within a listening text, then focusing on the said sequences in fluency workshops, he found that after six weeks the learner had made considerable progress. While the initial Mandarin speaking students had increased their speech rate by 16.5 percent in 6 months without attending the fluency workshops, the Japanese student was able to improve her speech rate by 13.8 percent in only six weeks. Moreover, as a result of the focused instruction, the Japanese student's mean length of runs increased by 26.3 percent, while the Mandarin speakers only demonstrated an increase of 19.3 percent.

In comparison to the gains made by the initial group, these findings represent a significantly faster increase in the student’s use of formulaic expressions and in her fluency as well. In this, one could assert that the focused instruction of formulaic sequences can help to improve a student’s language proficiency. That being said, these two research studies weren’t necessarily meant for comparison, and differences in the students’ educational backgrounds could also have played a role in their susceptibility for improving their fluency. Furthermore, as a result of the limited number of participants in the studies, the fluency gains and increased use of formulaic expressions (or lack thereof) could have been the result of a number of other variables as well.

Nevertheless, these finding are important as they merit further research in the field. As noted in our class, fluency development is an aspect of second language teaching which is rarely given attention in the classroom. Should the focused instruction of formulaic expressions
consistently be able to yield results similar to those of the Japanese learner, then further research could have immense pedagogical implications.

The literature also seems to agree that fluency practice has a place in the classroom. Ellis, for example, contends that while practice may not be suitable for acquiring structures, it can be “quite effective in helping learners to remember new lexical material, including formulaic chunks such as ‘How do you do?, ‘Can I have a ...?, and ‘I don’t understand’” (Ellis, p. 170 in Richards an Renandya, 2002) As noted by Nation, developing fluency “overlaps most of all with developing the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing” (Nation, p. 261 in Richards and Renandya, 2002).

Nation suggests that fluency building exercises should include tasks which incorporate language and context which is familiar to the learner, ensure that the learners’ focus is on the message, and push the learner to perform better than usual, using tactics such as time constraint and repetition (Nation in Richards and Renandya, 200). We have also learned that we can help to improve a student’s fluency in the classroom by introducing a set of formulaic sequences which are embedded within a listening text, then focusing the students’ attention on the said sequences through shadowing, dictogloss, a mingle jigsaw, a chat circle, a 4/3/2 narrative, and finally in free talk.

By doing just this, Wood found that after six weeks, his Japanese learner was able to spontaneously produce 18 formulaic sequences which were present in the initial listening exercise, as well as 34 which were not.

It was quite interesting to note that aside from the formulaic sequences which were the focus of the fluency workshops, the Japanese student also produced a great deal of new
expressions which seemingly had materialized autonomously. It appears that although the additional 34 expressions where not focused upon, that by focusing on specific formulaic expressions during the workshop, the student had also gained an ability to recognize sequences in other forms of input.

As noted by Wood, it is normally quite difficult to make formulaic expressions salient to learners of second languages. If focused instruction does in fact lead to a heightened awareness of their existence, then this could provide students with an indispensable skill for the duration of their language careers. By identifying and acquiring formulaic expressions, students are able to reduce the mental stress required to generate sentences and speak more fluently and ‘nativelike’.

These studies have reminded me of my recent travels to India, where I spent a month traversing the sub-continent. Although the majority of the people there were able to speak English to some degree, they rarely spoke using formulaic sequences. Instead, they produced awkward phrases such as *what is the nation of your birth*, or *what is your current occupation*. Although these phrases were grammatically correct, and a testament to their lexical knowledge and the time they spent studying English, they betrayed them as clear indicators of their language proficiency. This alone highlights the importance of focused formulaic sequence instruction, especially when the students have limited exposure to L1 speaker input.

Furthermore, when the locals did produce formulaic sequences, they would often make small errors in their delivery, forming sentences such as *where you from*, and *what you do*. I believe that this is a result of how these phrases were learned. I would assert that many of these phrases were passed along orally, from one local to another. Like copies of copies on a photocopier, they had become distorted along the way. In this, I was pleased to see that aside
from oral input in the fluency workshops, the students were also exposed to the formulaic sequences in writing. I believe that this would be imperative to the successful acquisition of the phrases.

As noted before, I think it is a shame that so little study has been done to determine the efficacy of explicitly teaching formulaic expressions, and would be extremely interested in seeing the outcome of a larger study in this field, using participants from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds.
References

