

The Effect of Explicit Instruction of Formulaic Sequences on Oral Proficiency Improvement of Young Iranian EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to shed light on young Iranian EFL students' oral proficiency improvement through explicit instruction of formulaic sequences (FSs). This pretest-posttest quasi experimental study was conducted in a bilingual school in Shahrekord, Iran. Accordingly, based on ACTFL OPI test, two groups of low intermediate students with age range of 11 to 12 were chosen to be assigned as control and experimental groups. The control group with 20 participants continued its regular instruction focusing on analytic grammar rules and discrete vocabulary, while the experimental group with 40 participants received explicit FSs-based instruction through readings, by adopting a teaching procedure inspired by Lewis' prescribed strategies for lexicon instruction. After 24 sessions of instruction, the participants were interviewed again, and their oral performance was recorded and transcribed to be scored by two experienced judges. Subsequently, ANOVA results revealed the significant oral proficiency improvement of experimental group in comparison to the control group, pointing to the effectiveness of FSs instruction.

Key words: Formulaic Sequences, Oral Proficiency, Input Noticing, ACTFL OPI

Introduction

Speaking is almost the ultimate goal to be attained in learning a language. Proficient speakers show their language mastery by their ability in producing an accurate and fluent speech in a variety of discourse. They are accurate when they use language correctly, with very few mistakes, and they are fluent when they communicate automatically and quickly with few pauses. Many researches have explored the relationship between FSs mastery and upgrading of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner's oral proficiency.

The notion of FSs refers to fully fixed combination of words with potential of holistic retrieval from memory, which can lead to higher speech proficiency. Wray (2002) defines these strings of words as a sequence, continuous or discontinuous of words or other elements, which seem to be prefabricated in a way to be stored and recalled wholly from memory at the moment of need without referencing to generation or grammatical rules analysis. Wray (2002) also asserts that these single, multi-word choices link linguistic competence with language production idiomaticity or whatever which is called 'idiom principle' by Sinclair (1991). In this regard, Dechert (1983) believes that German learner of English was more proficient due to their use of FSs, and called these prefabricated chunks as "islands of reliability," which guaranteed an accurate and fluent language commitment by learners. In order to determine the effect of FSs instruction on oral proficiency improvement, this study sought to address the following research question:

Does FSs instruction have any significant effect on oral proficiency improvement of young Iranian low-intermediate EFL students?

Background to the study

Advantages of FSs instruction and their prevalence in daily utterances encouraged many researchers to focus on teaching FSs as part of EFL syllabus (e.g. Nation, 2001; Wray, 2002; Boers *et al.*, 2006; Segalowitz, 2010; Wood, 2010). Boer (2006) believes that FSs act as ‘zones of safety’ for learners, and their proper use can decrease the breakdowns of speech in one’s discourse. Another study directed by Sung (2003) revealed a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations of a word or word string, processed like a morpheme, without recourse to any form-meaning matching of any sub-parts that it may have, and the subjects’ speaking proficiency. Jackendoff (1995) investigated a small corpus of TV quiz show of language and revealed that FSs may be of equal if not greater significance than the lexicon of single words. He has noted that lexicon of English speaker’s includes as many multiword expressions as single-words. Based on a study done by Towell, Hawkins and Bazergui (1996), learners of French as L2 revealed that increased proficiency is the result of learners storing of memorized sequences. Sajavaara (1987) in a study about affective factors on second language speech observed that a single lexical item can kindle the release of other lexicalized components: A "word" activates, for example, certain frequent and prefabricated phrases, word combinations, grammatical constraints, selection restrictions, semantic concepts and fields (Sajavaara, 1987, p.54).

Various studies claim that FSs can significantly improve oral proficiency particularly in terms of speech fluency. This phenomenon was first expressed by Pawley and Syder (1983) that native speakers have cognitive restriction to process language rapidly. They argued that native speakers have the potential to process a single clause of 8–10 words. Nevertheless, they can produce language seemingly beyond this constrain. Moreover, Wood (2010) in a study of ESL learners in Canada found that FSs are productive in speech fluency enhancement. Wray and Fitzpatrick (2002) believe that memorization have more benefits than learning for improving proficiency level and confidence-building. Then, in 2008 they investigated that L2 learners can have better linguistic performance by efficient memorization of target language specific expressions. They also, claimed that memorization can significantly improve both beginners and advanced learners language production. Their results showed that memorized sentences usage for filling the gap of conversations is “a liberating experience because it gave them exposure to an opportunity to sound native like, 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). Raupach (1984) studied French adult learners and found fluency of speech due to formulaicity, especially in modifiers and rhetorical organizers.

There is a relationship between FSs mental processing and fluency which is discussed by Wood (2002) in which he devotes a great proportion of speech acts and familiar concepts to the capacity of the language to be expressed formulaically, and if a speaker can pull these readily from memory as wholes, fluency is enhanced. This procedure decreases the amount of time devoted to the encoding procedure, and the speaker has more time for meditating on other speech necessities, such as generating specific lexical items, predicting the next unit of discourse, syntactic organizing of novel pieces. He has investigated the fluency production from a different aspect, too. Wood (2002) states that stimuli in input or context can activate memorization of conceptual items and links, lexical items, phrases and patterns of language and ideas. Then, the ideas related to these stimuli can trigger the appropriate strings of language, and fix them within the formulae. Thereby, the proficient speech will be produced. As asserted by Pawley and Syder (1983), just a small proportion of speech clauses are novel, and that prepared chunks in memory

contains the majority of the speech of daily conversations. Avoiding word for word encoding of language can turn the focus of the speaker to rhythm, and creativity in order of chunks combination.

Generally, the notion of FSs, like any other linguistic concept, has its own pros and cons. Chomsky's concept of generative grammar is a sample theory with no contribution to the matter of prefabricated phrases or lexicon of the language. Despite the human mind capacity for grammatical processing of language input and output, much of language is received and produced holistically. This issue which is basically discussed in psycholinguistic area of FSs development is opposed to Chomsky's framework which claims that we have a greater understanding of language structure than we could merely get from the input. Generative grammar theories and novelty in language, or rather the potential for it, has been the focus of modern linguistic theory for many decades. Chomsky (1965) declares that language specific property is its potential to be generative that we can produce as many as thoughts that can be fitted to various contexts. The point is coexistence of both novelty and prefabricated chunks. When we say, *Hi, how is everything?* Our preference to use this formulaic language as quick and easy to retrieve from mind puts no place for novelty at the moment.

Methodology

Participants

Participants of this study were 60 EFL low intermediate students, who were chosen based on ACTFL OPI test. They were divided into two groups. Experimental group with 40 participants who received the FSs instruction through reading, and control group with 20 participants which continued its regular instruction based on analytic grammatical rules and reading texts followed by single vocabulary items with conventional meaning. Their ages ranged from 11 to 12, and they were all male Persian native speakers.

Instruments

ACTFL OPI

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview (ACTFL OPI) is a standardized assessment of speaking proficiency in a FL, which was administered for selecting the student of both experimental and control group, and also it was used in respect to scoring the speaking level of participants in both pretest and posttest. ACTFL major levels are; *Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice* which subdivided into *High, Mid, and Low* sublevels. The assessment is conducted in the form of a face to face interview, in which expert interviewers assessed the speaking proficiency of test takers by asking a series of questions in the context of a structured conversation. The questions were based on the test taker's interests as they were determined by a preliminary set of questions in the interview and were adapted during the course of the interview based on the test taker's speaking proficiency level.

Readings containing FSs

Reading was used as an instrument of instruction for feeding FSs input, and also intended FSs were focused during explicit instruction procedure.

Procedure

The participants of the current study were selected out of 125 EFL learners who took the pretest of ACTFL OPI, based on their speaking scores given by two different raters' consultation (with 10 to 12 years of teaching experience). The study was conducted in Omid bilingual intelligent school in Shahrekord, Iran where the learners had started EFL in young ages.

Teaching of FSs took a sequence of 24 sessions about two months. The focus was on the chunk noticing by explicit teaching of FSs in a reading-based context. Lewis (1993) has focused on 'chunk noticing' in his *'Lexical Approach'* in respect to represent an appropriate strategy for teaching FSs. By noticing, it was attempted to draw learners' attention to the FSs to be conveyed to the teaching community. Based on this approach, learners should systematically notice recurring lexical chunks in the authentic encountered L2 language. Although, Lewis has suggested some more applicable strategies for teaching lexicon, he has provided no practical way about how to memorize the chunks. It seems that he intended to signify the power of awareness-raising to trigger acquisition via imitation of sequences exposed to either inside or outside the classroom. In this regard, after the printed readings were distributed among the participants, and in addition to the students' awareness-raising by teacher, the following suggested guidelines of Lewis (1993) were implemented for teaching these kinds of readings to the experimental group:

- *Intensive reading in L2
- *L1 and L2 comparison and translations carried out chunk-for-chunk rather than word for word.
- *Repetition and recycling of the activities
- *Guessing the meaning of new vocabulary items from the context
- *Working with corpus-based dictionaries and other references tools
- *Noticing lexical patterns and collocations.

During the instruction, the teacher went through the process of input noticing by feeding linguistic input containing FSs to the learners. The teacher declared the unitary meaning of phrases by emphasizing their holistic nature, and the learners were asked to frequently use the learnt chunks in their summaries of reading to proceduralize the declarative knowledge. Previously, they had to find word by word counterpart meaning for every single word, and their utterance was cognitively restricted to learnt grammatical rules. Then, they were asked to highlight the strings of the words to understand that there is no need to have an analytical perspective in respect to every piece of encountered language.

Scoring

The participants took both pretest and posttest. Also, interviews with them were recorded and transcribed for further elaboration on their production performance. The researchers represented two sets of pretest and posttests scores for every participant of both groups. Every one of the learners was scored by two blind judges (with 10 to 12 years of ELT teaching experience) during an interview. The judges scored the interviewees performance in terms of speech naturalness, accuracy, fluency, rate of FSs usage and so on. They were scored by numbers assigned to their performance as follows: 0=weak, 1=neutral, 2=good, 3=very good, 4=excellent.

Data analysis and results

Collected data for the current research was both quantitative and qualitative. The data were elicited from real observation of students' performance during the interview. Then, the qualitative data were changed to quantitative via scoring procedure. To examine the relationship between the effect of FSs instruction and oral proficiency improvement of the participants, the data were analyzed through mixed between-within subjects ANOVA. Two sets of scores (pretest and posttest scores) were available for every participant in the experimental and control groups.

Descriptive statistics displayed general estimates of participants' oral proficiency improvement. As it is obvious from Table 1 below, the mean and standard deviation (Std.) of FSs-based instruction group is highly improved in comparison to the control group which continued its single word form and meaning matching. In pretest, the mean score of the

experimental group was 2.03, and in posttest it was 2.8. The difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of the experimental group was .73 (this number is about .1 for the control group which is considerably lower than .73). In addition, Std. Deviation results approved that oral proficiency of the experimental group was successfully enhanced in comparison to the control group.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Groups' Oral Proficiency

group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	control group	2.10	.718	20
	experimental group	2.03	.768	40
	Total	2.05	.746	60
posttest	control group	2.20	.768	20
	experimental group	2.80	.883	40
	Total	2.60	.887	60

Figure 1 below also shows that oral proficiency of the experimental group was tremendously improved due to FSs instruction. Although, the linear diagram demonstrates an ascending progress from pretest to posttest for both groups, but the slope of related line to experimental group is steeper.

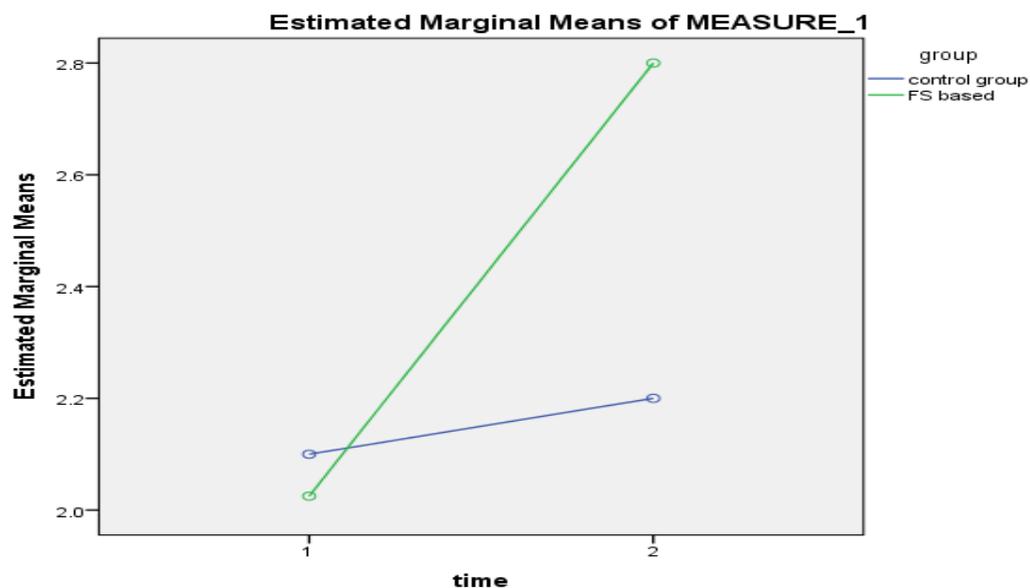


Figure 1. Interaction plot for the groups' oral proficiency improvement

Multivariate tests results, represented in Table 2 below show FSs-based group noticeable oral proficiency achievement over the time span of pretest to posttest. In this type of statistics tables, the most commonly reported statistics is Wilks' Lambda which shows significance of time and group interaction (time*group). The Wilks' Lambda is .000, i.e. smaller than considered alpha level of .05; therefore, it confirms that the FSs instruction has significant effect on young Iranian low-intermediate EFL students' oral proficiency.

Table 2. Multivariate tests Results for Oral Proficiency Improvement

	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	
time	Pillai's Trace	.378	35.296 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.622	35.296 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.609	35.296 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.609	35.296 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
time * group	Pillai's Trace	.266	21.004 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.734	21.004 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.362	21.004 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.362	21.004 ^b	1.000	58.000	.000

a. Design: Intercept + group
Within Subjects Design: time

b. Exact statistic

Discussion

The present study set out to improve oral proficiency level of the students by explicit academically-based FSs instruction. The results revealed that FSs contributions can be influential for closing an obvious gap in communicative competence of young Iranian EFL students who were accustomed to deductive chunk analysis. These multiword expressions can be a solution to problems of teaching grammar to young learners in early stages of EFL and also, memorizing the words in chunks can raise the young learners' ability for predicting the words occurrence in a fixed order. Therefore, it prevents the production of inappropriate and strange words combinations by non-native learners. Consequently, language users will have the opportunity to maintain a longer run of speech between two pauses, and they will have a more convincing communicative competence. Furthermore, the raters of the study believed that the students of the experimental group were more confident in posttest rather than pretest, and their speech seemed to be more natural and proficient

Formulaicity of speech is related to the automatic retrieval of ready to use chunks to produce proficient and continues fluid of speech without collapsing the communication by abrupt pauses. But novelty in language processes is a controlled procedure which needs attention and production of speech according to the confronted context. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) declare, FSs are characteristic units that have specific communicative purposes. They constitute a vital part of one's command of vocabulary and have a fundamental impact on the ease of

comprehension and interpretation of messages which are otherwise unlikely to be conveyed. At psycholinguistic level, FSs research is founded to come along with holistic retrieval of linguistic component from memory during speech production. Due to the holistic procedure, there is no more need for analytic reference to the grammatical rules specially for both in early levels of language learning and in young ages, which there is not much dominancy over target language grammar. Hence, the proficiency increases by memorizing and retrieving FSs for injecting into appropriate speech moment. To recap, this study found that receiving explicit knowledge of FSs through academically-based instruction can improve oral speech in respect to communicative competence.

Despite the pretest mean scores of both control and experimental groups which showed homogeneity of the participants, posttest mean scores revealed FSs noticeable positive effect on oral proficiency of the experimental group. Holistic nature of FSs retrieval from memory can increase the pace of language production in respect to removing lots of unnecessary pauses wasted for analyzing the grammatical rules to make appropriate cluster of words in early levels of language learning. Besides, FSs prepare ready to use chunks and omit lots of processes which restrain the smooth of natural communication. Consequently, as it is stated by instance theory, the frequent production of a formula and a single-step process of their remembrance can lead to its automatization over time (Logan, 1988). More than this, although input noticing was theoretically discussed in lexicon approach, it was applied in FSs instruction procedure of the current investigation. Since, there is now considerable agreement in SLA circles that attention is essentially needed for retaining an input in memory, so the instructor drew learners' attention to FSs occurrence for kindling their acquisition. According to Schmidt (1990), to be conscious or aware of formulas saliency in input causes primary storage of a pattern-recognition unit, then merges through input frequency and will be available for single-step memory access. Therefore, the exact imitation of the chunks leads to accurate memorization, and in later steps facilitates the accurate retrieval of fixed expressions, and according to what is claimed by instance theory, more elaboration and practice on FSs automatization will result in the learners' quick retrieval from memory.

Conclusion

In this study, the instruction was based on FSs contributions for bridging an obvious gap in communicative competence of two groups of participants, who were accustomed to deductive chunk analysis. The results of the study may shed light on the issue of how to develop Iranian EFL students' oral performance by raising their awareness to use fixed ordered multi-word units of language, appropriately. This study can yield oral proficiency improvement in Iranian EFL educational system by its pedagogical implications for English language teachers in respect to prefabricated chunks in their classroom instruction. Furthermore, this research offers guidance for teachers and administrators during the process of curriculum and syllabus development to use formulaic language for closing the gap of oral communication in early stages of EFL instruction. They can offer a contextualized course based on attending to teach these multi-word units with the assistance of computer in their curriculum.

The advantages of FSs instruction are more noticeable for bilingual elementary school students who have academically started to be literate in their own language and acquire a foreign language, simultaneously. In this age and level of knowledge, the students even do not know much about their own language grammar. Thereby, it will be a burden to start EFL courses by teaching grammar and its related pitfalls. Thus, due to holistic approach toward language receptive and productive skills, FSs instruction can pave the way for the need of grammar in primary levels of ELT. To summarize, based on the previous findings and current study results,

explicit instruction besides chunk noticing (input noticing) can promote FSs usage and considerably, uplift the level of EFL learners' oral proficiency.

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