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Cultivation of Oral English Competence among Chinese Mainland EFL Learners from the Perspective of Formulaic Sequences

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Abstract:

This paper aims to review the ideal language input and output unit based on formulaic sequences and the theoretical assumptions underlying input and output hypotheses in view of the relatively low oral English competence among EFL learners in Mainland China. Adopting a theoretical literature review approach, the authors have scrutinized the internal relationship among formulaic language, input and output hypotheses, and oral English competence based on the review. Our review showed that besides comprehensive input material, which has always been the Chinese EFL teachers' sole focus in teaching oracy skills, output opportunities connected with formulaic language should also be highly emphasized to increase students' oral competency. Implications: In light of this, several suggestions are offered to help cultivate Chinese EFL students' oral performance, namely 1) raising awareness of formulaic sequences, 2) broadening the channels of input of formulaic sequences, and 3) creating more opportunities based on formulaic sequences for students to practice speaking EFL classroom. This research reviews the ideal EFL teaching and learning unit from a new perspective by integrating input and output hypotheses with formulaic sequences. The highlight on creating authentic output opportunities based on formulaic language has been ignored in the past oracy skills teaching practice. This provides a solid theoretical foundation and implications for future EFL teaching practice in Mainland China.

Keywords: formulaic sequences, oral English competence, input and output hypothesis, teaching performance.

公式化序列视角下中国大陆英语学习者英语口语能力培养

摘要:

鉴于中国大陆英语学习者的英语口语能力相对较低, 本文旨在回顾基于公式序列的理想语言输入和输出单元以及输入和输出假设背后的理论假设。作者采用理论文献综述的方法, 在综述的基础上仔细审视了公式化语言、输入和输出假设以及英语口语能力之间的内在关系。我们的审查表明, 除了综合输入材料, 这一直是中国英语教师在教授口语技能方面的唯一重点, 还应高度重视与公式语言相关的输出机会, 以提高学生的口语能力。启示: 有鉴于此, 对培养中国英语学生口语表现提出几点建议, 即 1) 提高对公式序列的认识, 2) 拓宽公式序列的输入渠道, 3) 创造更多基于公式的机会。序列供学生练习口语英语课堂。本研究通过将输入和输出假设与公式序列相结合, 从一个新的角度回顾了理想的英语教学和学习单元。在过去的口语技能教学实践中, 忽视了基于公式化语言创造真实输出机会的亮点。这为中国大陆未来的英语教学实践提供了坚实的理论基础和启示。

关键词: 公式序列、英语口语能力、输入输出假设、教学表现。

1. Introduction

In learning the English language, the emphasis is always placed on the four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; listening and reading are input activities, while speaking and writing are output activities. Among these, speaking and writing skills are deemed the most challenging skills to be acquired by many foreign language learners, including EFL (English as Foreign Language) students in mainland China. Oral English Competence refers to the speaker's ability to communicate orally in English in a certain communicative situation (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). The forms of oral expression include description, introduction, explanation, speech, debate, dialogue, discussion, etc., to realize the communicative purpose of informing, explaining, and persuading (Jin & Jie, 2017). It involves both the speaker's internal knowledge of the language and the use of spoken language in specific situations. Oral activities are unique, as they are interactive, dynamic, and instant. In addition, oral expressions are often accompanied by paralinguistic and non-linguistic features (Halliday, 2004).

Based on a nationwide survey covering various educational stages and the job market, Zhang et al. (2017) investigated the status quo and reform needs of high school and college English education in China and found that high school students' oral English competence is in particular need of improvement especially the graduating students as they need to develop oral competence in English listening and speaking before joining the workforce could be related to two extreme tendencies in foreign language teaching in mainland China. The first tendency is represented by a structural approach in teaching, which emphasizes the study of grammatical rules. The ignorance of the use of language in the actual context has resulted in insufficient language fluency among learners. The second one is represented by adopting a communicative approach in teaching, which over-emphasizes the use of language in the context without paying attention to the system of grammatical rules.

Many EFL students in mainland China reported that it is quite difficult to find appropriate words when they

communicate with others in English. Some revealed that they could not express what they want to say fluently within the limited time when speaking.

The difficulties reported above are closely related to two major problems in ELT in China. First, it has long been a problem that English teaching mainly focuses on increasing scores of English language tests in which oral English is not a compulsory part involved in most provinces, and oral English competence was not given due attention in English classes (Huang, 2021). Both teacher and students did not pay enough attention to oral English, which results in the students' relatively lower oral English competence. The second problem is related to the teaching approach adopted by teachers in teaching speaking. Qi (2019) also stated that outdated teaching concepts, the sole teaching model, low utilization rate of modern teaching techniques, and lack of authentic communication context are still the issues in English classes. Hence, the students show little interest in listening and speaking classes. Moreover, there are not enough opportunities for them to practice oral English in a real-time context.

Regarding the daily use of language for native English speakers, many repetitive chunks occur frequently, and a rough estimation by Conklin and Schmitt indicated that one-third to one-half of native-speaker speech is formulaic (McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2018). In this regard, Qi and Xia (2016) suggest that students' mastery of oral competence is greatly related to their formulaic knowledge. They experimented on 41 sophomores from a three-year college and divided them into the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). The EG was required to recite the chunks during the eight weeks of the experiment. The results indicated that such a practice had enhanced the students' speaking and writing ability. However, in the EFL context of mainland China, there is a lack of formulaic knowledge for students who usually depend on separate lexis and grammatical rules to construct sentences. Due to the feature of formulaic language, it is not easy for EFL students to acquire and use them in their speaking practice.

Therefore, the focus of foreign language teachers

and second language acquisition researchers has been drawn on teaching formulaic sequences in recent years to promote the improvement of learners' oral English competence (Yingchen & Abdullah, 2020; McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2018; Ma, 2020). Nonetheless, research and practice on formulaic sequences in English language teaching (ELT) in China are still limited, especially at the tertiary level.

Additionally, learners' language input and output are associated with their oral competency. Following the input and output hypothesis (Chen, 2017), students could meet the need to communicate in English only by forming a virtuous circle of input, output, re-input, and re-output interaction. In the meantime, Pawley and Syder (1983) stated that with formulaic language, their oral competence could be improved with native-like selection and fluency (Huang & Zhou, 2016).

However, the reviewed literature shows that only a few current studies have looked into integrating input and output hypotheses and formulaic sequences on improving EFL learners' oral English competence in mainland China. The present study intends to review the ideal language teaching and learning unit based on formulaic sequences and input and output hypotheses. It highlights some suggestions to cultivate EFL learners' oral English competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Formulaic Sequences

In terms of formulaic sequences, many perspectives were drawn on the definition and the classification. This is due to the complexity of the formulaic language itself and the different research purposes. It was stated that the definition of formulaic language has always been the focus of debate and identification, the difficulty. Becker (1975) believed that the memory, storage, output, and use of language are not based on single words, and those fixed or semi-fixed, stereotyped structures are the smallest units of human communication. Researchers have come up with different terms for those structures from different perspectives, and Wray (2000) counted at least 46 terms similar to formulaic language, for instance, "formulae" (Bolander, 1989), "lexical phrases" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), "fixed expressions" (Moon, 1998), "lexical bundles" (Biber et al., 1999), and "formulaic sequences" (Wray & Perkins, 2000). Based on previous studies, Wray (2000) proposed his definition of formulaic sequences: "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."

In addition, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) divided formulaic sequences into four categories based on

structures as in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of formulaic sequences (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992)

Categories	Definitions	Examples
Polywords	short phrases which allow no lexical variations, usually used as the individual lexical items	for the most part in essence in public
Institutionalized expressions	lexical phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances	How are you? Can I help you? Where there is a will there's a way.
Phrasal constraints	Phrasal constraints allow lexical variation. People could change words in the slots according to different situations.	as far as I _____ the _____er the _____er a/an _____ ago
Sentence builders	lexical phrases that provide the framework for whole sentences	not only X, but also Y I'm a great believer in X. Let me start with X.

According to Lewis (1997a), formulaic language has been grouped into four types regarding the semantic connection and syntactic function within the lexis, as in Table 2.

Table 2. Categories of formulaic sequences (Lewis, 1997a)

Categories	Definitions	Examples
Polywords	short phrases composed of multiple words, and the words in these phrases cannot be replaced, nor can the order be changed arbitrarily	in public on display by tradition
Collocations	a combination of words that appear frequently including verbs plus nouns, or adjectives plus nouns.	make mistakes a heavy smoker
Institutionalized utterances	a combination of words with a fixed or semi-fixed form and a fixed pragmatic function. This type of formulaic language can full sentences or the beginnings of sentences	I'll get back to you as soon as I can. We'll see
Sentence frames and heads	sentence frames and quotations that are semi-fixed in form and can be filled or replaced, but have specific pragmatic functions. These are to a large extent the written equivalent of institutionalized utterances.	Firstly... secondly... thirdly... On the one hand... on the other hand...

Moreover, it can be seen from the above definitions and classifications that formulaic sequences frequently appear in daily communication. They have both lexical and grammatical functions and have a fixed or semi-fixed stylized language structure. In second language production, formulaic sequences play a very important role (Racine, 2018). As Lewis (1993) points out, an important part of language acquisition is understanding and producing formulaic sequences. Learners acquire language knowledge and communicative skills by learning formulaic sequences and ultimately obtain proficiency in using a certain language (McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2018). Therefore, it can be said that language learning is a process of accumulating formulaic sequences, and the acquisition of formulaic sequences at length promotes learners' language output ability.

2.2. Input and Output Hypotheses

Since the 1970s, the theoretical assumptions of language input and output have been one of the hot topics of foreign researchers' concerns. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and Swain's (1995) output hypothesis are the most influential. Krashen believes that learning can be divided into subconscious learning and conscious learning. In order to explain the real reason for language "acquisition", Krashen (1982) put forward the input hypothesis. He thought that the learners' language acquisition could only occur by accepting comprehensible input. The difficulty of the language input material should be slightly higher than learners' current language level ($i + 1$), where i represents the current competence of learners. This acquisition, according to Krashen (1982), is effective only when the learner receives input from language materials at the level of $i + 1$. Language acquisition is meaningless if the language material is only at the learner's current language level or is too difficult.

However, Krashen over-emphasizes the role of input, arguing that "comprehensible input" is the only condition for language acquisition, which is quite controversial (Yang, 2020). Gass (1988) argued that the learners absorb not all understood language input. In her opinion, in the process of target language input and the internalization of the language, there is a process of language intake, which is ignored by Krashen. After learners have processed and integrated the absorbed language input, their intaking will be internalized as part of their knowledge.

Given this, Swain (1995) proposed an output hypothesis based on her immersion program experience in Canada. She believes that language input plays an important role in language acquisition; however, only "comprehensible input" is not enough (Li et al., 2020). The role of "comprehensible output" on language acquisition cannot be underestimated, which mainly displays in three aspects:

(1) Noticing or triggering function. In language output, learners will find the gap between their existing language knowledge and the content they want to express. It may bring their attention to something they need to discover about the foreign language;

(2) Hypothesis testing function. The output can trigger the learner to try the hypothesis of the problem and modify the output according to the feedback;

(3) Metalinguistic (reflective) function.

Learners reflect on the language they learn, and thereby the output enables them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge. Language acquisition is a process of interaction between input and output. Without input, there can be no output. Input is the first, and input of language materials is the premise of output. Similarly, if there is only input but no output, language knowledge and information can hardly be internalized, and target language expression can hardly be automated.

In terms of the rules of language learning, namely input, intake, and output, the improvement of oral English ability is based on a large amount of input materials (Al-Ameedi et al., 2019). Without effective input materials, the learners' language output cannot be guaranteed, as in the case of foreign language learners learning English (Lv, 2019).

3. Methodology

The theoretical literature review method is adopted in this research for the present study to review the ideal language input and output unit based on formulaic sequences and the theoretical assumptions underlying input and output hypotheses. Databases used in this research are mainly google scholar and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), for those two databases are the most popular for peer-reviewed resources in mainland China. Other databases provided by the researchers' institutions are also utilized, such as EBSCO, Wanfang Data. The search terms determined for the analysis include lexical chunks, formulaic language, input hypothesis, output hypothesis, and oral English. For determining the appropriate articles, the "and" commands were used to combine the mentioned terms in various ways.

4. Findings and Discussions

Lewis (1997b) believes that teaching should focus on relatively fixed expressions. In his teaching design, Lewis proposes a model that comprises the steps, Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment, opposed to the traditional Present-Practice-Produce paradigm to teach formulaic sequences. This refers to the process of teaching; teachers should pay attention to the following points: to input a large amount of authentic target language to students of different levels; to organically combine language input, language awareness, and practice in classroom teaching; to encourage students to recognize and memorize formulaic sequences in context, avoiding memorizing words in isolation; to train students to reasonably divide the text according to formulaic sequences (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, in teaching, learners will continue to accumulate formulaic sequences through exposure to a large amount of comprehensible input and continue to practice to improve the fluency and accuracy of their oral output.

Accordingly, the suggestions for the teachers in their oral English teaching practice are proposed as follows:

4.1. Raising Awareness of Formulaic Sequences

For better guiding students, teachers must first have a comprehensive understanding of formulaic sequences and comprehend the background of the theory, the concept, classification, functions, and features of formulaic sequences. As the smallest units of language communication, formulaic sequences are also ideal for lexical teaching and oral communication. Therefore,

teachers should integrate formulaic sequence instruction into classroom teaching for students to have a more comprehensive understanding of the theory and let students fully understand the positive role of formulaic sequences in oral expression. Formulaic sequences also help improve the accuracy of language expression. Because native speakers master thousands of formulaic sequences and use them quite frequently, they rarely make verbal communication mistakes. On the contrary, foreign language learners start with words and grammatical rules. In the process of language use, they often generate sentences based on grammatical rules, ignore the role of formulaic sequences in language acquisition, and make mistakes in language expression. Formulaic sequences are beneficial for oral fluency for language learners. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) believe that people's fluency in using language does not depend on how many grammatical rules are stored in their brains but on how many formulaic sequences are stored; formulaic sequences are conducive to the logicity of language expression. Sentence builders are an important category of formulaic sequences and also an important part of language application. Mastering sentence builders helps learners better understand the textual structure of the language, grasp the integrity of language communication, and enhance the logicity and coherence of the language. Formulaic sequences are conducive to the attraction of language expression since they can effectively increase the charm of language output through idioms, proverbs, aphorisms, etc.

4.2. Broadening the Channels of Input of Formulaic Sequences

Reading is the main way for learners to acquire formulaic sequences. Texts and after-class exercises are the sources of formulaic sequences. Teachers should guide students to continuously learn to accumulate formulaic sequences from texts and related exercises and encourage students to absorb formulaic sequences from English newspapers, magazines, and other authentic English materials (Fuad et al., 2021). Secondly, audio-visual materials are also an important channel for the input of formulaic sequences. From the audio-visual materials, learners can access many authentic language materials and learn many idioms and proverbs to enrich their mental lexis. Audio-visual materials can also bring visual and auditory shocks to learners, and the resulting emotional factors can promote the input of formulaic sequences. Thirdly, the teacher could directly provide formulaic sequences. In oral English teaching, the teacher can prepare relevant formulaic sequences according to specific topics. Due to the explanation of formulaic sequences, students can understand their meaning, characteristics, and application in the actual context to enhance their memorizing. In short, through these methods, learners can access a large number of authentic English materials and accumulate formulaic sequences, which

guarantees the output of fluent language.

4.3. Creating More Opportunities Based on Formulaic Sequences for Students to Practice Speaking

In teaching practice, teachers should do a good job of combining in-class and out-class activities, creating more real language environments and opportunities, and guiding students to connect the formulaic sequences they have learned with specific topics to improve language output through oral and written expressions. In the classroom, related exercises can be designed, and related activities can be organized to allow students to use the acquired formulaic sequences, such as translation between the mother tongue and the target language, enrichment of formulaic sequences, sentence making, etc. In addition, storytelling, oral composition, classroom discussions, and other forms of activities stimulate students' enthusiasm for using formulaic sequences, thereby promoting the internalization and output of the target language. Outside class, teachers should give full play to the motivation and initiative of students, organize students to carry out a variety of extracurricular activities, such as English corner, English oral speech contest, English composition contest, etc., which can not only stimulate students' interest in language learning but also increase self-confidence in the use of formulaic sequences, to enhance the fluency and accuracy of output of formulaic sequences.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

This research reviews the ideal unit in EFL teaching and learning from a new perspective by integrating input and output hypotheses with formulaic sequences. It provides a solid foundation for pedagogical suggestions to improve EFL students' oral English competence in mainland China. In addition, most research conducted in mainland Chinese EFL context only focuses on the value of input materials. So, another novelty of this study lies in its highlights on creating output opportunities based on formulaic language, such as guiding students to connect formulaic language with specific topics in oral English classes.

However, the approach adopted in this research is a theoretical literature review, which cannot provide an exhaustive overview, including empirical analysis of the effectiveness of integrating formulaic sequences and input and output hypotheses in the Chinese EFL teaching context. Though some suggestions based on analysis from findings could offer implications for teaching practice in EFL speaking classrooms in mainland China, more empirical evidence is still required to form triangulation support.

In terms of functions, formulaic sequences compensate for the lack of fluency of EFL learners caused by structuralism. At the same time, it also overcomes the drawback of a low level of accuracy

caused by the communicative approach.

Based on both input and output hypotheses and the advantages of formulaic sequences mentioned above in language processing, it is suggested that the teachers raise the learners' awareness of formulaic sequences, develop learners' ability to identify formulaic sequences; the channels of formulaic sequences should be constantly broadened so that learners can communicate and network; and teachers should provide students with more opportunities to formulaic output sequences. Ensuring the fluency and accuracy of language output on improving EFL learners' oral English competence, these approaches are conducive to the real internalization of formulaic sequences to provide some enlightenment for future English teaching and learning on oral English competence in mainland China.

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