Teaching Formulaic Sequences to Improve the Oral Communicative Skills of Omani EF Learners

Amira Al Maawali
Oman Tourism College
P.O. Box: 2008, P.C.:111, CPO, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 00968 99738758 E-mail: amiraatee@gmail.com

Abstract

Improving oral communication skills is fundamental when it comes to learning English, however; there are lots of factors that make mastering them challenging. English speakers often find managing verbal communication situations stressful, as they must mind and process many aspects of English in a restricted time.

This paper focuses on the effect of teaching multiword strings, known as formulaic sequences, as an operational tool that can ease to the learners the experience of communicating orally in English. It has been suggested that learning formulaic sequences is useful in improving not only fluency but also listening.

Keywords: formulaic sequences, fluency, oral communication

1. Introduction

Communicating orally in a foreign language can form a stressful challenge for many learners. One of the things that make this task complicated is that learners need to be equipped with many skills to communicate smoothly. From my own experience as a foreign language speaker, having a successful communication in the target language usually means being cautious about syntax, semantics, phonology and morphology of the utterances, among many other structural and cultural aspects. In real situations, learners must comprehend and produce language in a very limited time with as little hesitation as possible. What adds more pressure is that learners know that in many frames, their proficiency in the second language is often judged depending particularly on how good their speaking skill is (McDonough & Shaw 2003). However according to Oberg (2013), oral fluency is teachable, and one way to achieve it is through formulaic sequences which are "multi-word lexical strings or frames [that] are processed mentally as if single words" (Wood 2009, 40). According to some researchers, formulaic sequences can also be beneficial in another domain, which is language comprehension. Stubbs (2002) supports this view as he attributes the possibility of understanding fluent speakers to the multiword units stored in memory.

The present paper addresses this subject in two main sections. In the first section, a review of related literature is discussed. The importance of teaching oral communicative skills and some definitions that describe formulaic sequences are presented. After that, the roles that formulaic sequences play in language comprehension and oral fluency are examined.

The second section is started with describing the context of teaching English in Oman, where the value of securing good English communicative skills is recognized, but, according to many researchers, the outcomes of educational institutes do not display good results of having successful oral communicators. Another point that should be stated is that many Omani students are skillful in syntax and enjoy an advanced lexical level but struggle in oral communication situations. To facilitate the oral production and comprehension of English, some pedagogical implications in Omani classrooms are suggested in this section. They illustrate some ways to teach formulaic sequences to Omani learners.

The paper closes with a conclusion that reflects and summarizes some significant features of the formulaic sequences and how they can assist improving the oral communication of Omani learners.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Teaching Oral Communicative Skills

In the light of globalization, being able to communicate orally well in English is now crucial for graduates, as this skill empowers them to be efficient academically and professionally (Rahman 2010). In many contexts, those who can communicate appropriately get more opportunities to have brighter career lives. Roberts and Billings (2009) reveal that having the ability to communicate effectively is the answer for those who seek good jobs, citizenships, and decent lives. However not everyone is a skillful oral communicator. One of the reasons behind this might be that speaking and listening require a more immediate collaboration than reading and writing (Roberts and Billings 2009).

Teachers should realize the value of equipping their students with effective speaking skills. It is, as noted by

Rahman (2010), the most frequent form of communication; it is used to reveal ideas, make suggestions, build arguments, offer clarifications, and convey information. It is worth stressing, however, that speaking is often viewed as a very demanding task. This is due to many reasons among which what Roberts and Billings (2009) state in their study; they show that in oral communication situations, speakers do not get an opportunity to make drafts and outlines of what they say. Instead, they need to speak articulately and clearly enough to be understood at once.

Teaching listening is another essential area that should not be neglected. Liyong (2006) says that it is the first significant task to be taught in EFL classrooms. He emphasizes the central part of listening, and that it is impossible for those who are born deaf to speak because listening is the first step of learning a language. The same evidence of deaf mutes is mentioned earlier by Oprandy (1994) to show the connection between speaking and listening and how speaking is built on listening. Without listening, no conversation can take place (Liyong 2006). Like speaking, the chances of preparation in listening in genuine situations are limited, as there is usually one opportunity to understand and comprehend verbal statements. (Roberts & Billings 2009).

2.2. Defining Formulaic Sequences
The definition of formulaic sequences has been examined in various ways. Wood reports that, from a general viewpoint, "definitions of formulaic language units refer to multiword or multiform strings produced and recalled as a chunk, like a single lexical item, rather than being generated from individual items and rules" (2002, 3). Khodadady and Shamsaee (2012) emphasize that even though these chunks may look sometimes like sentences, they behave like words. Bannard and Lieven describe formulaic sequences as group-of-word pits that occur a lot (Khodadady and Shamsaee 2012). One of the most common definitions that are adapted by many researchers is the one of Wray and Perkins. They define formulaic sequences as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning 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" (2000, 1).

Formulaic sequences are named differently as they are viewed from diverse perspectives. Oberg (2013) lists forty-seven different terms given to name formulaic sequences or to refer to very particular types of them. The comprehensive classification of formulaic sequences includes, but not exclusively, "idioms", "multiword metaphors", "collocations", "phrasal verbs" and "chain-based formulas" (Oberg, 2013). In terms of both lexical structure and role, formulaic units can vary to a great extent. While they can work as simple fillers or have simple functions (e.g. Sort of, and Excuse me), they include collocations, idioms, proverbs, and lengthy standardized phrases (Boers et al 2006).

The growth of technology and the study of corpus and phraseology generated what supports the view that single words are more likely to appear in collocations and clusters (Wood 2009). Nattinger and DeCarrico mention that a large share of the words and expressions created in a language is covered by formulaic sequences (Wood 2009). Erman and Warren found that various classifications of formulaic sequences form up to 58.6% of the spoken corpus of their study (Wood 2009). Conklin and Schmitt (2008) display another piece from Erman and Warren's study that indicates that not less than one-third to one-half of language is made of formulaic sequences.

2.3. Formulaic Sequences and Developing Oral Communicative Skills
Commanding good oral communicative skills has become, as discussed in 2.1, necessary for language learners. The process of "the give and take of conversation" demands speakers to compare, contrast, and combine their ideas with those of the others involved in the conversation (Roberts & Billings 2009). This shows the complexity of being a part of a communicative situation. To overcome this issue, it has been suggested by many researchers to teach formulaic sequences to second language learners. One of the researchers who conducted a study on this area is Dickinson (2012). The findings of his study support the thought of teaching formulaic sequences to assist learners in real communicative settings

As speaking and listening are the key components of almost any oral communicative context, and as native-like fluency is a goal of many learners, the coming two sections will examine the role of formulaic sequences in fluency and language comprehension.

2.3.1. Formulaic Sequences and Oral Fluency
Securing a native-like fluency is challenging for many language learners, but it adds a lot of success and respect to the speaker's image, as it reflects how proficient the learner is in the language. Wray and Perkins (2000, 17) state that "the promotion of fluency is important for being heard out, and thus for being taken seriously as an individual". A noteworthy feature of speech fluency is that it is not limited to the spontaneous use of rules, but it also includes the recalling of the suitable expressions (Chen 2009). In fact, it goes further to include speaking smoothly, quickly, rhythmically, having a good cadence and making the right moves without hesitation (Binder, Haughton & Bateman 2002). As formulaic sequences are viewed as ready-made chunks that are retrieved as

unitary wholes, they are believed to ease fluent language use under real-time conditions (Boers et al 2006; Chen 2009; Oberg 2013).

According to Pawley and Syder (1983), "nativelike selection", the ability that speakers must choose the most proper ways of expressing things and thoughts from wide possible choices, and " nativelike fluency" are best explained as results of using the formulaic units stored in mind (Nation 2001). Skehan (1998) states that formulaic sequences give speakers chances in advance to plan and organize the things they want to say along with the linguistic form (Boers et al 2006).

To express the role of prefabricated sequences in speech fluency, Nation (2001) called them "the building blocks of fluent speech". Khodadady and Shamsaee (2012) indicate that as a significant portion of native-speakers' speech is made up of formulaic sequences, teaching them assists learners to sound more native-like. In contrast with this viewpoint, Brumfit (1984) emphasized that in teaching fluency, activities should give learners freedom to create their own expressions (Bygate 2001).

The results of a study conducted by Chen (2009) to examine the relationship between formulaic sequences and developing fluency in story retelling of a movie clip are in favor of the first view; they reveal that in three months, the subjects of the study improved significantly in oral fluency. Their speech fluency was indicated by "faster rate of speech", "extended mean length of run", and "an increased formulas/run ratio". Another study, done by Dickinson (2012), aimed to investigate improving second language academic presentations with formulaic sequences. Its findings show that the teaching of formulaic expressions promotes learners' speech fluency.

2.3.2. Formulaic Sequences and Developing Listening Skills

As discussed in 2.1., listening is essential for any oral communicative context, however, as noted by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), it is the skill that gets the least structured guidance in classrooms, and, among the other three skills, listening is often the weakest for many learners.

One thing that explains the complexity of listening is that it involves several stages. To start with, listening involves hearing what is being said, then breaking down and interpreting the apparent meaning of words, phrases, and sentences (Roberts & Billings 2009). Lynch (2009) mentions a third phase which is responding to what is being said in a suitable manner. Moreover, this process can be hindered by many factors. Lynch (2009) indicates that the expressions and terms the speakers choose and their speed of speaking, beside the unfamiliarity of content and cultural references are examples of what can work as obstacles to understanding spoken messages.

A worthy mentioning point is that when learners were asked about what they think the most significant component for second language listening success is, almost all of them said that it is the vocabulary knowledge (Vandergrift & Goh 2012). One of the studies that support this viewpoint is conducted by Bonk (2000) (Vandergrift & Goh 2012). The findings of his study show that strong lexical knowledge is correlated with high comprehension scores in listening (Vandergrift & Goh 2012). Many researchers express that the issue of having a strong lexical base to help learners with their listening skills can be alleviated through teaching formulaic sequences. "The process of word sequencing and stringing them into sentences help listeners keep them in mind as a whole rather than as a combination of individual elements" (Khodadady & Shamsaee 2012, 40). Oberg (2013) indicates that teaching idioms, which is a category of formulaic sequences, and explaining their meanings help learners in their listening comprehension. Wray and Perkins (2000) note that commanding socio-interactional formulae can guarantee that the listeners have good comprehension.

3. Teaching Formulaic Sequences to Omani Learners to Improve their Oral Communicative Skills

3.1. The Context

With the regard of English as the lingua franca of the world, Oman recognized the importance of teaching it well and using it to communicate with the globe. This lingua franca has been used by Oman since 1970 in trade relationships with countries such as Turkey, Sweden, Germany, Cyprus, France, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Austria, Portugal, and Russia (Al-Jadidi 2009).

As a result of this valuing of commanding good English communicative skills, English in Oman became a compulsory course in schools and universities. The current school curricula oblige students to start learning English from grade-one, and they have to continue learning it throughout the following eleven years. In higher education institutes, it is the medium of teaching all science-based courses, and it is a mandatory subject in the arts-based courses (Issa 2006 in Al-Hadhrami & Amzat 2012). In Oman, a graduate student who is skillful in written and spoken English is usually viewed as a valuable candidate in the private sector (Al-Jadidi 2009). Talking in English alone is a sign that shows the speaker as a well-educated person (Al-Hadhrami & Amzat 2012).

Despite the mentioned factors, the communicative competence of most of students does not meet the expectations. In fact, "the vast majority of these students fail to demonstrate any communicative competence in using this vital international language" (Issa 2006 cited in Al-Hadhrami & Amzat 2012, 68). Khan (2013) indicates that the large number of wrong expressions and utterances produced by Arab learners of English in

their oral performance shows that the issue is serious and need to be stopped at.

Being an English instructor in Oman made me realize that some students are outstanding in grammar and have a strong lexical knowledge. Both their reading and writing skills are good, but they still struggle and have many difficulties when it comes to the oral production and comprehension of English. Experiencing a fluid conversation in the second language can be very hard for many reasons. Finding the right expression to use without hesitation in a very limited time is one of the challenges that L2 speakers face. Understanding the vocabulary used is another. Al-Azri (2006) implies that vocabulary refers both to single lexical items and to units of words that together act like one. This leads to idioms and proverbs and other types of formulaic sequences. In such chunks, understanding single vocabulary items does not always lead to the meanings of these units as a whole. However, using collocations, a form of the formulaic sequences, can facilitate the understanding new utterances (Khodadady and Shamsaee 2012).

Additionally, Oberg (2013) implies other reasons that might explain the low level of oral communication skills, like the absence of practicing speaking and the lack of recognizing the common formulas that help to build a free-of-hesitation speech. Mentioning this leads to the fact that in Oman, students' exposer to genuine oral practice is very limited, and, as mentioned by Al-Hadhrami and Amzat (2012), it is very rare for Omani students to talk to their peers in English outside the classrooms.

3.2. Pedagogical Implications

As seen in the earlier section, the individuals and the government in Oman are aware of the importance of commanding good communicative skills. Despite this, the levels of many graduates do not meet the objective of having skillful Omani communicators in English.

The review of related literature shows that formulaic sequences can enrich students' oral communication skills and can help students in authentic communication contexts to produce and comprehend language accurately. This indicates the need to introduce these sequences in the instruction of English in Oman.

Teachers should realize the importance of teaching formulaic sequences to promote their students' oral skills. To start with, students should be taught sentence heads like 'would you like to …' and 'I can't deal with …' as they are very common in the everyday communication. Usually, in some types of formulaic sequences, including idioms, proverbs, and metaphoric expressions, the literal interpretation of words does not indicate the meaning that these units have as a whole. Their meaning is "conventionalized", and the sequence of the words they include is very precise (Khodadady & Shamsaee 2012). Teachers ought to ask students to memorize such sequences and create contexts in which they can be used. Moreover, the relationship between words that tend to appear together should be brought to students' attention because, as is mentioned in 3.1., it can help students in interpreting new lexical items.

In Oman, many students' only environment to practice English is the classroom. Therefore pedagogical plans should include more outlets for students to practice speaking and listening. In the occasions of students' speaking, teachers should encourage automatic responses and emphasize the habit of using multiword units. In the light of what Carter (2001) mentions about the improvement of vocabulary knowledge that happens more often in implicit ways, the teaching of formulaic expressions should also take an embedded form. The language that teachers use when teaching should exhibit some formulaic sequences. This establishes real settings that can help students to understand and get acquainted with the use of formulaic sequences.

4. Conclusion

The review of related literature exposed some reflections and studies on using formulaic sequences to promote oral communicative skills. It was found that learning formulaic expressions can contribute to the success of production and comprehension in oral communicative situations.

In Oman, both teachers and students appreciate the value of being able to produce connected speech and to comprehend spoken messages accurately. Achieving a native-like fluency is highly valued. However, many researchers shed the light on the fact that when it comes to English, most Omani graduates are not good oral communicators. To mend this, it is suggested to focus on teaching the different types of formulaic sequences. Students should understand and memorize these sequences, and they should have more opportunities to practice them in speaking and listening.

References

Al-Hadhrami, M., and I. Amzat (2012) 'Improving the Standard of English Language and Communication Amongst SQU Students in Oman: Challenges and Suggestions' OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development <on line> volume 4 issue 6, 55-70. Available from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2131427 [Accessed 30 November 2013].

Al-Jadidi, H. S. (2009). Teaching English as a foreign language in Oman: an exploration of English Language teaching pedagogy in tertiary education (Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University Melbourne, Australia)

Available from http://vuir.vu.edu.au/15216/1/Husna_Sept09.pdf [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Binder, C., E. Haughton, and B. Bateman (2002) 'Fluency: Achieving true mastery in the learning process' Professional Papers in Special Education, Available from http://special.edschool.virginia.edu/resources/papers.html/Binder-et-al_Fluency.pdf [Accessed 4 January 2014].

Boers, F., et al. (2006) 'Formulaic Sequences and Perceived Oral Proficiency: Putting a Lexical Approach to the Test' Language Teaching Research <on line> volume 10 issue 3. 245–261. Available from http://ltr.sagepub.com/content/10/3/245 [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Borg, S., ed. (2006) Classroom research in English language teaching in Oman. Muscat: Ministry of Education.

Brumfit, C.J. (1984) Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In Bygate, M. (2001) Speaking. in Carter & Nunan, p19.

Bygate, M. (2001) Speaking. in Carter & Nunan, 14-20.

Carter, R., and D. Nunan, eds. (1988) The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conklin, K., and N. Schmitt, (2008) 'Formulaic Sequences: Are They Processed More Quickly than Nonformulaic Language by Native and Nonnative Speakers?' Applied Linguistics <on line> volume 29 issue 1. 72–89. Available from http://applij.oxfordjournals.org/ [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Carter, R. (2001) Vocabulary. in Carter & Nunan, 42- 47.

Chen, X. (2009) 'The Role of Formulaic Sequence in Speech Fluency Development in ESL' Computational Intelligence and Software Engineering <on line> 1-4. Available from http://ieeexplore.ieee.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=5362997 [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Dickinson, P., (2012) 'Improving second language academic presentations with formulaic sequences' Journal of Niigata University of International and Information Studies <on line> 25-36. Available from http://nuis.academia.edu/pd/Papers [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Khan, I. A. (2013) 'Speaking skills and teaching strategies: the case of an EFL classroom' Elixir International Journal <on line> March. Available from www.elixirpublishers.com [Accessed 20 November 2013].

Khodadady, E., & S. Shamsaee (2012) 'Formulaic Sequences and Their Relationship with Speaking and Listening Abilities' English Language Teaching <on line> volume 5 issue 2, 39-49. Available from www.ccsenet.org/elt [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Liyong, Z. (2006) 'Developing Listening and Speaking skills in ELT classroom. CELEA' Journal <on line> volume 29 no. 4. 112-125. Available from http://www.celea.org.cn/teic/68/68-112.pdf [Accessed 30 December 2013].

Lynch, T. (2009) Teaching Second Language Listening. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDonough, J. & C. Shaw (2003) Materials and Methods in ELT: A Teacher's Guide. Applied language studies. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Nation, I. (2001) Learning Vocabulary in Another Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oberg, K. (2013) Formulaic Sequences for Improving Oral Fluency (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-River Falls).

Oprandy, R. (1994) Listening/speaking in Second and Foreign Language teaching, System <online> volume 22, issue 2. 153-175. Available from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0346251X9490054X [Accessed 30 December 2013]

Rahman, M. (2010) Teaching Oral Communication Skills: A Task-based Approach. ESP World <on line> volume 9 issue 1 Available from http://www.esp-world.info [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Roberts, T., and L. Billings (2009). Speak Up and Listen. Phi Delta Kappan <on line> volume 91 issue 2 Available from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513482.pdf [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Stubbs, M. (2002) Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantic. Oxford: Blackwell publishing.

Vandergrift, L., and L. Goh, C.M., (2012) Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening: Metacognition in Action. London: Routledge.

Wood, D. (2002) Formulaic Language in Acquisition and Production: Implications for Teaching. TESL Canada Journal <online> volume 20, issue 1. Winter 2002. Available from http://www.teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/search/results [Accessed 16 November 2011].

Wood, D. (2009). Effects of focused instruction of formulaic sequences on fluent expression in second language narratives: A case study. Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée <on line> volume 12 issue 1, 39-57. Available from http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/CJAL/article/view/19898/21736 [Accessed 16 November 2013].

Wray, P. & M. Perkins, (2000) The Functions of Formulaic Language: An Integrated Model, Language & Communication <online> volume 20, issue 1, January. Available from. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0271530999000154 [Accessed 17 November 2013].