

# Teaching and Learning Formulaic Sequences and Prefabs

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## Introduction

With the proliferation of corpus analyses in the past several decades, a few innovative approaches to language teaching have emerged to take advantage of the newly available perspectives. One of these, originally called “the lexical approach” was proposed in the 1990s based on the empirical findings that, in practically all language uses, much communication takes place in the form of lexical phrases, often referred to as “chunks” (Lewis, 1993). This rather casual term covers frequently occurring fixed expressions and set phrases necessary for producing spoken and written discourse in a broad range of contexts. In research and pedagogy, these ubiquitous and recurrent expressions are also called collocations, multiword units, prefabricated constructions, fixed strings, formulaic language, formulaic sequences, routines, phrasal vocabulary units, or frozen phrases (Hinkel, 2016).

As is often the case in language studies, the definitions of collocations and formulaic expressions vary in different schools of thought. However, the accepted basic concept is that these are multiword units of language—words that are connected to other words—that are remembered and used as single lexical items (Peters, 1983). Examples can be myriad: *not bad, too bad, how are you (doing)?, more or less, you are welcome, no parking, it seems clear/obvious, I wonder/I am wondering, what time is it, as has been mentioned/discussed, on the one hand, on the other hand, in this case, to give an example, at this time, rain or shine, take a rain check, to begin with, first of all, all things considered, if memory serves, or who knows.*

Formulaic expressions have a few specific characteristics. Although some are “frozen” and do not allow much room for variation (*a piece of cake, best foot forward, not on your life, anything for you, by the way*), others can be quite flexible and thus permit component substitutions (*several authors/experiments/reports have shown/demonstrated that, an (a very) interesting question/point/comment*). However, one key attribute of most collocations and formulaic expressions is the fact that their meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of their component parts (more on this

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below). That is, they have non-literal meanings that typically have to be used and learned as whole units.

Studies of language uses in ordinary communications, such as greetings, good-byes, requests, announcements, or written messages, indicate that they are learned at an early age. Proficient language users are almost always aware that formulaic sequences require a certain degree of accuracy to be effective and to perform their functions (e.g., *Hi there, Good morning, Mr. Smith, With best regards, or Give my regards to...*). Native and non-native speakers of many languages are cognizant of the fact that it is much easier—and cognitively less demanding—to use formulaic language and prefabs than to work one's way through, say, selecting appropriate words, grammar structures, and arranging them in particular sequences (Hinkel, 2014, 2017). To further complicate matters, idioms, formulaic language, and collocations can sound “right” or “wrong” even when their meanings are easy to understand (Yorio, 1989), for example, *fast food/train* but not *\*quick food/train, strong rain/wind* or *heavy rain* but not *\*heavy wind, a heavy coat/sweater* but not *\*a thick coat/sweater, or pay attention* but not *\*pay focus*.

Because prefabs and formulaics are used widely in all manner of discourse, these expressions can convey a great number of meanings and functions. In fact, their communicative versatility is one of the main reasons that they are employed in a broad range of contexts. Formulaic sequences reflect recurrent communicative needs that can be as short as a couple of words or as long as full sentences, for example, *No Entry, One Way, Garage Sale, End Road Work, Pay Toll 1 Mile, All my love, He/she really cares, Can't believe you said that, Did you really?, How are you?, See you later, or Can I help you?*. Based on an extensive body of corpus findings and real language studies, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) point out that conventionalized expressions and sentence stems typically facilitate effective and essential communications to “connect the meaning and structure of discourse” (p. 60).

## ELT Dimensions

Since the introduction of the lexical approach in the 1990s, the teaching and learning of formulaic sequences and multiword units has been gaining momentum in vocabulary and grammar instruction. Currently, it is well-known that language users have an enormous stock of formulaic language and prefabs. Some approximate counts indicate that formulaic sequences, idioms, and multiword units represent around 50 or 60% of language uses in both speech and writing (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). For this reason, researchers and teaching methodologists contend that language learners have to similarly deploy formulaic sequences and prefabs in order to produce language fluently. Specifically, it has been found that formulaic sequences, rather than individual words, have to be readily accessed in memory to enable learners “to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous connected discourse” (Pawley & Syder, 1983, p. 191). In their original work, Pawley and Syder (1983) point out that “fluent and idiomatic control of language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of ‘sentence stems’

which are ‘institutionalized’ or ‘lexicalized’” (p. 191). In keeping with a large body of empirical evidence, the basic principle adopted in the early lexical approach and subsequent teaching strategies is that chunks, collocations, and prefabricated phrases, rather than individual words, represent the fundamental units in language comprehension and production (Lewis, 1993).

Typically, conventionalized expressions and collocations are learned by hearing them being used frequently enough by other speakers, or by reading them in written texts. Practically all idiomatic constructions are encountered in everyday language and acquired in the process of communication, be it oral or written (Wray, 2000). An important advantage of employing conventionalized expressions and prefabs is that they are easy to remember and understand in specific and appropriate social contexts.

In language teaching, for instance, in the beginning stages, learners may have insufficient linguistic resources and familiarity with grammar rules and vocabulary. In these contexts, making use of formulaic sequences and prefabs can provide a bit of a shortcut in both comprehension and production. Using conventionalized formulas and expressions can facilitate learners’ development of fluency, social interaction skills, and writing abilities. To put it simply, employing collocations and formulaic language can reduce the amount of effort, attention, planning, encoding, and putting into words highly frequent expressions that can be used as whole units (Hinkel, 2017). In subsequent phases, formulaic sequences and prefabs can be replaced by more creative language uses when learners’ linguistic repertoire becomes more fully developed and extensive (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).

According to cognitive views of language usage, teaching and instructional materials can help learners develop their own stock of phrases and formulaic expressions. In this light, the teaching and learning of individual vocabulary items or grammar structures can be considerably more laborious and less efficient. As Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) state, “it is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantages of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and learners) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced” (p. 32).

As has been noted, one advantage of formulaic sequences and prefabs is that they can be processed more quickly than sentences or phrases that require grammar and lexical rules to construct them from scratch. In spoken interactions, for example, when language has to be produced and understood at a rapid pace and without much practice or leeway, proficient language users rely on formulaic sequences and prefabs to accomplish their interactional goals.

It is well-known today that some formulaic sequences in a second language are used incorrectly (e.g., *at last* instead of *finally/to conclude*) or mistranslated, some are underused, and others can be simply misplaced in context (Howarth, 1998). Furthermore, in second language writing, for instance, formulaic sequences and prefabs seem to be repeated and appear particularly frequently when learners stick to those that are safe and familiar (Wray, 2002). Although a few pedagogical

techniques have been developed and tested, on the whole, how to teach formulaic sequences has not been well researched. At present, little is known about effective (or less effective) techniques for teaching whole expressions. Based on the research findings for teaching single words, however, recycling and multiple exposures may prove advantageous (Nation, 2013).

Since the lexical approach was originally developed, the teaching of formulaic sequences and prefabs has not been without its critics. Several renowned authorities on English language teaching have pointed out that relatively little is known about how to teach lexical phrases in a principled manner, in what order, or for what purposes. A number of objections have been raised that teaching and learning formulaic phrases overlooks the importance of grammar and vocabulary instruction. Swan (2006), a prominent authority on the teaching and learning of English grammar, has been a noted critic of instruction based on formulaic sequences and chunks. Specifically, Swan states that it is crucial to find balance and prioritize instruction. One of his concerns is that, with the new spotlight on chunks, formulaic expressions may receive more attention than warranted while other aspects of language, such as the basics of vocabulary and grammar, may get slighted.

Most importantly, Swan points out that learning another language is difficult, and that it is unrealistic to expect that learning and using chunks and formulaic sequences can lead to native-like formulaic competence. According to Swan, the number of chunks and prefabs in English (or any other language, for that matter) is so large, that it is simply impossible to learn them all. Furthermore, the question of whether learners are able to generalize from formulaic sequences without explicit instruction has not been investigated and whether deriving grammar structures from lexicalized chunks is actually efficient or even advisable given that such units often include irregularities. (A few such aberrations can be noted in the earlier examples in partial sentences without the main verbs.) Swan's overall recommendations are to raise learners' awareness of the ubiquity of formulaic sequences and to include them in teaching when suitable in addition to, rather than in place of, grammar and vocabulary. He notes, however, that in the case of professional or academically-bound learners, teachers are well aware that a mastery of relevant formulaic language is necessary for certain kinds of pragmatic competence. However, to date, only a handful of studies have been conducted on how to teach multiword units, what teaching techniques are available, or whether learners benefit from teaching prefabs explicitly. Although much is known about word-centered vocabulary teaching and learning, when it comes to prefabs and formulaics, additional work and insights are required.

## Future Directions

As early as the 1980s, studies in language learning and cognition demonstrated that in the development of both first and second language, formulaic sequences and prefabs play a crucial role. Typically, repeated exposures and practice lead to

long-term memory retention and subsequent production in spoken and written discourse. That is, non-native speakers have great difficulty using formulaic language and becoming fluent simply because most lexical phrases cannot be pieced together in the process of communication. It is also well-known that prefabs require instruction accompanied by rehearsal, practice, and more practice. In the near future, there is little doubt that the teaching of multiword units is likely to occupy a more central place in language pedagogy, together with such mainstays as vocabulary and grammar (Hinkel, 2015).

Although most formulaic sequences and prefabs do not have immediately accessible and transparent meanings and grammatical structuring, a good number that are very common can be transparent and appropriate for learners at most proficiency levels. When it comes to formulas and collocations, a reliable rule of thumb is that the shorter the phrase is, the more likely it is to have a transparent meaning and grammatical structure (Nation, 2013; Nation, Shin, & Grant, 2016). The best example of derivable and easily intelligible units are those that consist of two words. This principle applies to prefabs of practically any kind, including those that consist of a function word and a content word or two content words. Another important consideration for teaching is that the short collocations and prefabs are encountered far more frequently than the longer ones, and thus, can be easier to learn and practice. Examples of frequent collocations and prefabs can be numerous: *you know, I think, a bit/a little bit, a lot of, thank you, very much, talk about, last night, this morning, look at, come in/to/back, think about, work on, in addition, too much/little, for example, for instance, as a result, last year, next year, go back, at the moment, at this time, and as well.*

Since two-word collocations are highly common and can be found in both spoken and written discourse, they are also relatively straightforward to locate online, in dictionaries, and in various teaching materials, such as picture books, textbooks, and electronic texts (Hinkel, 2014). On the whole, teaching and learning short collocations and prefabs are not very demanding tasks due to their ubiquity; for example, idioms and phrases are traditionally included in student textbooks on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For beginners, a small number of fixed or minimally variable expressions could be a good place to start. As learners progress, the phrases that mark conversational sequences are likely to be handy and easy to learn. In writing instruction, learning grammar constructions can take place in the context of early writing practice, say, when constructing formulaic essay openings with variants and substitutions, for example, *Many authors/books/articles state/say/ that ....*

In general terms, social exchanges and spoken interactions are highly conventionalized and extremely formulaic (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray, 2000, 2002). Conversational interactions and speaking routines are recurrent in an extraordinary range of situational and pragmatic purposes (Hinkel, 2014, 2015). In real-life usage, to make formulaic expressions and prefabs suitable for social interactions, routinized expressions and formulas are added, omitted, and modified to match, for example, levels of formality, communicative goals, or roles of participants.

Teaching formulaic sequences and prefabs can build on a few patterns that can be easily altered and expanded in the course of instruction, for example, *How are you (doing) (today/these days), How is everything (going), (It's been) Nice/good/great to see you, See you later/soon/next time*. Depending on pedagogical objectives, prefabs can cover various pragmatic functions and repertoire, such as introductions, information questions, greetings and responses, making small talk, asking for clarification, or conversational closings. One of the main advantages of teaching conversational prefabs and routinized expressions is that they can encourage learners to participate and thus help develop their speaking skills.

To a great extent, academic writing is also highly patterned, stereotyped, and rigidly structured, and particularly so in the case of university essays and student assignments (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Hinkel, 2015). The stereotypical structure of most types of academic writing usually begins with an opening or an introductory statement, followed by a topic nomination, then moving on to the main points, and some sort of closing statement at the end. By and large, the progression of writing from one rhetorical section to the next is clearly identified by means of formulaic phrases and prefabs, such as *To begin/start with/First, The main idea/point/question, and To conclude/sum up, In sum/conclusion, Finally*.

All in all, a great range of concepts, ideas, and functions can be expressed by means of formulaic sequences and prefabs when they are easily accessed in interactional routines and written prose. In speech and writing, formulaic sequences and prefabs can take the form of phrases or sentences. Many studies have demonstrated that recurrent patterned expressions are extremely common and fundamental to language learning and use. Stock grammatical and lexical chunks can become an efficient means of expanding learners' language range, particularly when they are also taught how to substitute discrete elements appropriately and in practical ways.

**SEE ALSO:** Proverbs and Idioms in Raising Cultural Awareness; Speech Act Theory and Teaching Speaking; Teaching Collocations; Teaching Grammar: Form-Meaning Mapping; Teaching Idiomatic Language in Context; Teaching Lexical Chunks

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#### ABSTRACT

A research-based method in language teaching makes use of formulaic sequences and long chunks of text and focuses on making lexical [vocabulary] substitutions within them. Since at least the 1970s, many studies have demonstrated that learning formulaic language and prefabricated expressions can be far more efficient and effective than learning to assemble new structures from scratch. Teaching and learning formulaic sequences relies on a "whole unit" approach to conventionalized phrases and sentence stems, also called multiword units. Taking advantage of formulaic sequences and prefabs is probably one of the most efficient, expedient, and practical techniques for teaching second language comprehension and production.

#### KEYWORDS

Formulaic Sequences, Second Language Acquisition, Prefabs