Reactions to a Functional-Notional Syllabus Teaching Communication Strategies and Formulaic Expressions

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Introduction

This study investigates the reactions of low-intermediate level EFL university students to an English Communication course curriculum designed around a functional-notional syllabus. The curriculum was implemented using lessons in which students were taught to use formulaic expressions to employ communication strategies which were intended to help students better engage in spontaneous discussions. At the end of the course students were tested on their ability to use the expressions to engage in group discussions and to come to a group consensus. Conversation strategies and formulaic expressions were chosen as the focus of the course curriculum due to the fact that the vast majority of other English Communication courses offered at the university were either designed around structural (grammar-focused) syllabi or were based around group presentation exercises. The researcher felt that, while learners would benefit from all of these course designs, learners did not have many opportunities to practice using strategies to discuss topics spontaneously. At the end of the course a questionnaire was used to gauge learners’ perceived utility of the course. Most students demonstrated adequate mastery of the strategies by the time the course finished, and reported increased English L2 self-efficacy, or the ability to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1977), as a result of the course content. They also reported high levels of utility regarding the use of formulaic expressions.

Literature Review

Functional-Notional Syllabus

A functional-notional syllabus is one in which target language and language features are grouped based on the speech acts that learners expect to accomplish with those acts (Wilkins, 1976). As opposed to a structural syllabus (Richards & Rogers, 2001), in which the course curriculum focuses on grammar and is arranged in such a way as to teach learners progressively more difficult syntax, and a situational syllabus, which teaches learners to use their L2 to navigate specific activities in specific situations (Krahnke, 1987), a functional-notional syllabus is unique in that learners are taught communication strategies, or how to use the L2 to successfully communicate universal speech acts (i.e., asking for
clarification, expression opinions, making suggestions, etc.) that can help them to engage in a wide variety of conversational circumstances. Such a syllabus has a number of advantages. Harlow (1978) predicted that a functional-notional syllabus would have motivational effects on learners due to its focus on practical communication in real-life settings. Wilkins (1976) also reported that a functional-notional syllabus is superior to a situational syllabus because it encourages students to engage in conversations which allow them to attempt to use a wide variety of grammatical forms, rather than limit them to the kinds of forms used in specific situations.

**Formulaic Expressions**

There has been difficulty among researchers in the field of SLA in agreeing on a definition for what exactly constitutes formulaic expressions, which Nation and Webb (2011) is evidenced by the sheer number of terms used to describe such expressions, including: collocations, formulaic sequences, lexical bundles, idioms, core idioms, and lexicalized sentence stems, among others. However, one widely referred to definition by Wray (2008) states that formulaic expressions have a number of specific traits. Specifically, they include strings of words which are processed like morphemes and “holistically stored in the mind”(Schmitt, 2010). Expressions such as “What’s Up?,” “Why don’t we_____?” and “That’s too bad” all constitute formulaic expressions.

Recent research has linked formulaic expression use in EFL learners with increased productive ability, particularly increased speaking fluency (swift and fluid speech). Wood (2010) showed in qualitative and quantitative measures that, through using formulaic expressions, participants in his study (overseas students studying at a Canadian university in a six-month intensive English program) made noticeable gains in their speaking speed and ability to produce more native-like pronunciation. Formulaic expressions might also provide learners with other advantages. Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, and Demecheler (2006) have suggested three reasons in particular why formulaic expressions might help learners. First, the use of such expressions can help learners to be perceived as more native-like. Second, they can help learners to speak more rapidly. Third, they can act as “zones of safety” which learners can use to maintain their turn in a conversation, while allowing them more time to utilize their working memory to produce correct grammar in their utterances. Therefore, it is thought that, by memorizing formulaic expressions, learners can also speak with more grammatical accuracy.

**Study**

This study was designed to analyze students’ perception of a communication EFL course in which the focus of the course was on developing broad communicative competence. An informal discussion with students at the beginning of terms revealed that most learners’ previous EFL classes had been primarily grammar focused. Most learners had practiced speaking English by enacting rehearsed scripts which contained target grammar and vocabulary which students were intended to study, or by memorizing reports and using them to give English presentations. Most students reported that they did
not feel confident enough to respond in English if spontaneously approached by another English speaker. The researcher, therefore, decided to design the course with the aim of increasing learners’ general communicative self-efficacy. It was thought that this could be best accomplished by explicitly teaching students expressions and phrases which could be used to perform communication strategies, rather than by continuing to focus on students’ mastery of grammar. The learners were made aware of this plan and its purpose, and the potential utility of such a program was explained to them in their native language (Japanese).

Institution and Learners

This study was conducted at a private university in western Japan, which specializes in educating students in topics related to globalization and international communication. All 42 participants were all first-year pre-school and elementary school education majors, between 18 and 19 years old. Most students displayed lower-intermediate English L2 receptive and productive ability, with a minority of students having passed the Test in Practical English Proficiency (EIKEN) level-3 (mid-level) exam before enrolling in the course. Of the 48 students enrolled in the course, 42 agreed to take and submit the end-of-course survey (see Appendix A), and agreed to allow their results to be reported.

The Class

This study was conducted in the university’s English Communication Seminar course, a 15-week single-term English conversation course which is compulsory for all students at the university who are majoring in education. The purpose of the course, as defined by the university, was to increase students’ practical English communication ability. However, no standardized curriculum existed for this purpose, and teachers leading the course were free to design the curriculum (goals, objectives, activities, and assessment) as they deemed fit. Two teachers who had previously taught this course were interviewed for this study. One teacher reported that they taught their course through a structural syllabus utilizing a task-based curriculum. Students’ final grades were based on attendance, the results of a final interview test with the teacher, and completion of workbook exercises. The second teacher reported using the class to teach students presentation skills. In most lessons students would watch videos of native English speakers giving presentations. Through this curriculum, students’ final grades were based on attendance, mid-term and an end-of-term group presentation, and completion of a weekly vocabulary notebook.

Research Questions

The researcher set two goals for the course. First, if successful, students would display the ability to engage in conversation about unknown topics with minimal planning. Second, students would report increased self-confidence (self-efficacy) in their ability to communicate in English. Finally, the researcher hoped that the learners agreed that the use of a functional-notional syllabus, rather than a structural or situational syllabus, was a worthwhile use of their study time. To reflect these goals, the
researcher asked three research questions:

1. Will students demonstrate the ability to engage in unprepared (spontaneous) conversations, in English?
2. Will students display increased levels of self-efficacy with regard to their productive English ability?
3. Will students find the course content beneficial compared to that of a structural or situational syllabus?

**Method**

**Course Outline**

To achieve these goals, the researcher created an original syllabus more similar to the first teacher interviewed (see above) than the second. In each lesson, students engaged in task-based activities which required them to interact with other learners in English to complete the tasks. These activities were chosen in accordance with research conducted by Swain (1985) which showed strong evidence that learners improve their L2 productive abilities most when they are pressured to use their L2 to engage in meaning-focused communication. Further research by Long (1996) showed that learners’ productive L2 accuracy also improves when they receive feedback from their conversation partner and are forced to reformulate their utterance until they are understood by the listener.

Additional components were added to the curriculum to make the class more balanced along the lines of Nation’s (2007) four strands methodology. Nation has suggested that all good language courses should strive for a balance of four components: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, a language-focus component, and a fluency component. The in-class communication tasks were largely concerned with engaging students in meaningful communication, thus covering the meaning-focused input and output components of the Four Strands. To address the language-focused component, learners studied vocabulary from the 2000 word level of the New General Service List (Browne, 2013) and were tested on their knowledge through weekly vocabulary quizzes. Furthermore, the instructor took note of common errors made by learners throughout each lesson and raised learners’ awareness of these points by writing them on the blackboard and instructing students to take notes in their notebooks. Schmidt (1990) suggests that activities which draw learners’ attention to their errors can increase their chances of noticing, and therefore correcting, their errors in the future. Fluency-focused activities were also included in the curriculum to help learners increase the speed and flow of their L2 output. Two activities which have been demonstrated to increase fluency and which were often used throughout the course were shadowing (Zakeri, 2014), the 4-3-2 activity (Nation, 1989), the latter of which involves learners engaging in progressively shorter rounds of conversation about the same subject with the goal of discussing the topic more quickly during each subsequent round. This 4-3-2 activity was also used as a review activity, in that students were reminded of language which has been the focus of past lessons, and were encouraged to use that language during the activity.
Main Class Activity

In each lesson, students were given worksheets created by the researcher (see Appendix B). Each worksheet contained an original dialogue (the Listening Task) which contained uses of the expressions and strategies that were to be the focus of that day’s lesson. Students listened to the dialogue twice. During the first time students listened for general comprehension, which was tested through three true or false questions. The second time, students filled in words that had been purposefully omitted from the dialogue of the transcript which was printed on their worksheets. After comparing their answers with a partner and finally checking their answers with the teacher’s copy, displayed via projector, students’ attention was turned to the day’s communication focus. The teacher explained the day’s focused speech act and how it was used. The teacher then discussed the phrases which could be used to perform the speech act, and explained any minute differences between them. Finally, the teacher modelled pronunciation and students repeated. The strategies taught and the expressions used to employ them were derived from the EFL textbook *Communication Strategies* by Kehe and Kehe (2004)(see Appendix C).

To confirm their understanding of the phrases and their usages, students were asked to first locate the speech act being performed within the Listening Task, and were then asked to write answers to situations described on the worksheet, using the expressions which they studied that day. Finally, learners engaged in communicative, meaning-focused tasks which required the use of the speech act as a communication strategy necessary for completing the task.

Methods of Investigation

Research question one was investigated primarily through daily observations made by the researcher, and through the results of the students’ final exam. The goal of the final exam was for students to discuss an unknown topic with a group of their peers and to come to a consensus regarding the topic. Apart from that goal, students were required to memorize the expressions studied throughout the course and to individually perform at least seven of the ten acts studied, and to speak at least 20 times overall. Question two and three were investigated through a 10-item questionnaire administered during the last lesson (see Appendix A). Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 4 (“I really think so,” 強くそう思う ) to 1 (“I really don’t think so,” 全くそう思わない。).

Results

The average score on the final exam was 89.1%. To achieve a perfect score (100%), each student was required to use at least seven different kinds of strategies, and were required to speak in any way at least 20 times. Points were not deducted for grammatical mistakes, as long as the speaker made themselves understood verbally, without the aid of verbal cues (gestures). Anytime that a speaker obviously did not make themselves understood their turn was not counted among the required 20. Therefore, an average score of 89.1% indicates that by and large most students demonstrated that they had memorized a number of phrases for a variety of purposes, and that they were able to use them in appropriate contexts.
Of the 42 students evaluated, three did not use seven varieties of acts (a deduction of five points for each of the seven acts not attempted), and only one student failed.

In most cases students reported perceived improvements in their English L2 proficiency as a result of learning formulaic expressions throughout the course (see Appendix A). 63% of learners reported increased speaking ability, although only 50% reported increased speaking fluency. 69% of respondents also reported a perceived increase in their ability to understand English as a direct result of studying formulaic expressions. Perhaps most importantly, the vast majority (71%) reported feeling more confident in their ability to use English to navigate a wider variety of communicative situations than they previously could.

In terms of perceived utility of the course content, results were mixed. Nearly all of the learners reported that they thought learning the target formulaic expressions was important for improving their English speaking ability (92%), improving their English listening ability (92%), and improving their overall understanding of English (90%). However, 68% of respondents reported that they wished the course had had more of a grammar-focused element, and 85% of respondents answered that they wished they had studied grammar rather than formulaic expressions.

Written responses largely addressed concerns unrelated to the teaching of conversation strategies and formulaic expressions. Most respondents reported being pleased with the course content. One student requested that a wider variety of activities be employed in future lessons.

**Discussion**

The results of the final exam seem to indicate that the goal set for students was an achievable one. Although students were required to use seven varieties of speech acts, it was possible for students to memorize only one form of each act. For example, in the unit on “expressing opinions,” students were taught a variety of expressions of this one act, including “In my opinion…”, “It seems to me…”, and “I think…” Therefore, to pass the final exam, a student only had to memorize one form of each act and could, presumably, rely on that one form repeatedly. Fortunately, this was often not the case. While many students did use the same phrase repeatedly each time they performed the same speech act, many students (17) used a variety of expressions to perform the same acts. This was an unexpected and welcome development, as learning not only many speech acts, but many ways to communicate each speech act, was surely an added mental burden on the learners.

There were other positive trends. In general, students reported a positive reaction to the study of formulaic expressions for the purposes of employing communication strategies. More than half of respondents reported perceived improvements in their English ability (understanding and general production), although only exactly half reported improvements in their speaking fluency as a result of learning the focused expressions. This is surprising, because many SLA researchers such as Wood (2010) theorize that increased speaking fluency should be one of the most obvious effects of employing formulaic expressions. One possible reason for the low number of students reporting increased perceived
fluency is that increased fluency is most evident once learners have begun to produce the expressions automatically. According to skill-acquisition theory, learning a new skill (or in the case of an L2, learning a new grammar function or a new expression) requires that the skill be processed as declarative knowledge in working memory first, and that new skills are only become automatic through repeated practice (Anderson, 1982). It is possible, even likely, that the learners in this course did not have enough time to automatize the new expressions which they had learned throughout the course. As a result, producing the expressions likely resulted in a burden to their working memory, which would have impeded their spoken fluency, rather than increased it. A second possibility is that learners’ spoken fluency did increase, but that was due to other fluency-focused activities employed in each lesson (namely the 4-3-2 activity and the shadowing homework). If that is the case, then the learners are correct to report that their fluency did not increase as a result of learning formulaic expressions. However, this would not explain why half of the students still indicated that they did perceive a fluency increase due to learning expressions.

The greatest outcome, however, was the students’ perceived utility of the acquisition of the course content. Participants overwhelmingly reported that they thought learning the expressions taught in the course was “important.” Yet, students also overwhelmingly reported a desire for a focused grammar component of the course. Grammar and accuracy were addressed in the course through corrective feedback supplied by the teacher after the 4-3-2 activity and after the task-based activity, both given by the teacher verbally and written on the blackboard. Furthermore, all worksheets were collected after each lesson and returned to the students each week with errors marked and suggestions made in writing. However, it was never explicitly explained to students that such feedback can constitute a language-focused aspect of a course, and therefore students might have been concerned that their general grammatical accuracy was not being addressed or improved. Another possibility is that learners simply expect an explicit grammar component to be part of any English curriculum, as such a component is nearly always included in Japanese EFL courses when it is not already the focus of the entire lesson.

Conclusion

The purpose of this story was to investigate the effect of a functional-notional syllabus focusing on the teaching of communication strategies and speech acts through the provision of corresponding formulaic phrases. The study investigated the levels of achievement displayed by students by the end of the course, and gauged raises in students’ self-efficacy through their perceived gains in English L2 productive ability and raises in confidence, as reported through an anonymous questionnaire. Observations from the researcher and results on learners’ final exam revealed that the majority of students were successfully able to memorize a number of expressions and correctly employ them to make themselves understood, better understand their peers, and to work with their peers to achieve group outcomes. The vast majority of students reported increased levels of self-efficacy and high levels of perceived utility for the course material as a means of increasing their English proficiency, although
some students missed having a more explicit grammar-focused component of the course. These results seem to suggest that, through a program such as the one described in this study, it is possible for lower-intermediate EFL learners to see improvements in their ability to engage in spontaneous conversation, in a fairly short period of time. Therefore, EFL teachers in similar contexts might consider using this somewhat novel approach, especially with students who doubt their general ability to communicate verbally in English.

References

Appendix A: Class Survey and Results

1. I am a better English speaker because I know these phrases.

(これらのフレーズを知っているため、私はより上手く英語を話せる。)
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1. a) I really think so. (8; 19.1%)
   b) I think so. (22; 52.4%)
   c) I don’t think so. (9; 21.4%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (3; 7.1%)

2. I am a faster English speaker because I know these phrases.
   (これらのフレーズを知っているため、私はより速く英語を話せる。)
   a) I really think so. (5; 11.9%)
   b) I think so. (16; 38.1%)
   c) I don’t think so. (17; 40.5%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (4; 9.5%)

3. I can understand English better now because I know these phrases.
   (これらのフレーズを知っているため、私は英語をより理解できる。)
   a) I really think so. (7; 16.7%)
   b) I think so. (22; 52.4%)
   c) I don’t think so. (9; 21.4%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (4; 9.5%)

4. I can speak in more situations, more easily, in English because I know these phrases.
   (これらのフレーズを知っているため、私はより多くのシチュエーションでより容易に英語を話せる。)
   a) I really think so. (4; 9.5%)
   b) I think so. (26; 61.9%)
   c) I don’t think so. (8; 19.1%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (4; 9.5%)

5. I think learning these phrases is important for improving my English speaking ability.
   (英語のスピーキング力を向上させるためには、これらのフレーズを学ぶことが重要であると思う。)
   a) I really think so. (19; 45.2%)
   b) I think so. (20; 47.6%)
   c) I don’t think so. (2; 4.8%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (1; 2.4%)

6. I think learning these phrases is important for improving my English listening ability.
   (英語のリスニング力を向上させるためには、これらのフレーズを学ぶことが重要であると思う。)
   a) I really think so. (20; 48.8%)
   b) I think so. (18; 43.9%)
   c) I don’t think so. (2; 4.9%)
   d) I really don’t think so. (1; 2.4%)

7. I think learning these phrases is important for improving my overall understanding of English.
   (英語の理解力を向上させるためには、これらのフレーズを学ぶことが重要であると思う。)
   a) I really think so. (15; 35.7%)

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b) I think so. (23; 54.8%)
c) I don’t think so. (3; 7.1%)
d) I really don’t think so. (1; 2.4%)

8. I wish we had studied something else (grammar, vocabulary) more, along with these phrases.
   （これらのフレーズと共に、文法や語彙等も学べたら良かったと思う。）
   a) I really think so. (13; 30.9%)
b) I think so. (23; 54.8%)
c) I don’t think so. (5; 11.9%)
d) I really don’t think so. (1; 2.4%)

9. I wish we had studied something else (grammar, vocabulary) instead of these phrases.
   （これらのフレーズではなく、文法や語彙等を学べたら良かったと思う。）
   a) I really think so. (12; 28.6%)
b) I think so. (24; 57.1%)
c) I don’t think so. (4; 9.5%)
d) I really don’t think so. (2; 4.8%)

10. If you took a class like this one (which focused on conversational phrases) again, what would you change?
   （もう一度このセミナーのようなコース（会話上のフレーズに重点を置いたコース）を受講するとすれば、授業の内容をどう変えますか。）

Appendix B: Sample Worksheet
In my opinion, students should not be allowed to use smart phones in class. First, if students have smart phones, then they will not pay attention to the teacher. Second, students might receive phone calls in class. And last, if students have smart phones, then they might not work together. It is better for students to study with just paper and pencils, I think.

I think that students should be allowed to use smart phones. First, students can use smart phones to do research. Second, smart phones have many applications, such as dictionaries, which are useful. And finally, students enjoy using their smart phones, so class would be more fun. Students will not play games if the teacher walks around the classroom. Why not use them?

### Appendix C: Course Syllabus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Classwork</th>
<th>Quizzes/Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introducing Others</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rejoiners</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Follow-Up Questions</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 2, Homework 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Expressing Opinions</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 3, Homework 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Persuasive Language</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 4, Homework 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Checking Understanding</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 5, Homework 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mid-Term Preparation</td>
<td>Writing Preparation</td>
<td>Homework 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mid-Term Presentation</td>
<td>Presentation Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Responding with Details</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 6, Homework 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Starting and Stopping a Conversation</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 7, Homework 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Making Group Decisions</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 8, Homework 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Correcting Someone</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 9, Homework 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Giving Advice</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 10, Homework 10</td>
</tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Final Preparation</td>
<td>Pair Work / Group work / Fluency Practice</td>
<td>Quiz 11, Homework 11</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Final Conversation Test</td>
<td>Final Preparation</td>
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