Book Review

Siyanova-Chanturia, A., & Pellicer-Sanchez, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Understanding Formulaic Language: A Second Language Acquisition Perspective.* Routledge. xii + 277 pp. (softcover). ISBN: 978-1-138-63497-8.

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Introduction

The research of formulaic language has been well established in the field of second language acquisition. Most researchers agree that it plays a crucial role in language learning, processing and application. Its significance is underlined by its ubiquity, as "…up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expressions" (Hill, 2000, p. 53). Furthermore, the importance of noticing formulaic language for language learning, fluency development, expression of complex ideas and accurate pronunciation is significant (Lewis, 1993). Incorporating formulaic language into language teaching is commonly known as the lexical approach.

The purpose of this review is to introduce the reader to *Understanding Formulaic Language*, a book that combines the latest research on formulaic language processing, acquisition and use from three specific and interconnected perspectives: cognitive, sociocultural and pedagogical. Each of these constitutes a separate section of the book. The review will summarize and evaluate 1-2 chapters from each section both in terms of theoretical knowledge and its potential practical application in the classroom. It should also be stated that this is an edited volume, bringing together contributions from some of the more well-established researchers in the field of formulaic language.

Cognitive Perspective
Usage-based perspective

At the beginning of chapter 1 in this section a distinction is made between a rule-based approach to language acquisition that describes language learning as acquiring words and rules that determine how to merge these words together and a usage-based

approach that argues for a mental lexicon in which grammar and lexis are joined together (Wulff, 2019). From my perspective, being both a former English learner and a current English teacher, the former approach is much more familiar and traditional than the latter, essentially representing a grammar-based, linear syllabus. The latter approach is something I became aware of only recently and is associated with a break from grammar-focused language teaching and learning.

One of the primary factors for learning a language is the amount of linguistic input that the learners are exposed to. "Early emphasis on receptive skills, especially listening, is essential" (Lewis, 1993, p. 194). Regarding the usage-based approach, the chapter lists several aspects of input that contribute to formulaic language acquisition. The most relevant aspects for classroom contexts may be frequency, distribution, and saliency. Wulff differentiates that "token frequency is the frequency with which a particular construction occurs in the input; type frequency refers to the number of distinct realizations of a given construction" (Wulff, 2019, p. 22). She also points out that more densely dispersed and salient formulaic language usually has a higher probability of being acquired by language learners (Wulff, 2019).

The research summarized in this section could be usefully utilized in a language classroom by a principled practitioner of the lexical approach. According to Nation and Macalister (2010), teaching principles must be grounded in theoretical research and should not be too specific to provide variation and flexibility to accommodate for a wide range of conditions in which languages are learned. A language teacher could take a principled approach to teaching formulaic language by consistently selecting an appropriate amount of both reading and listening input containing most frequent, focused, and salient target expressions. This would most likely involve supplementing the course book with both online input and texts composed by the teacher, as the majority of published textbooks still adhere to the rule-based approach and focus on single word vocabulary. While they still may contain useful input, the target language may not be relevant for every teaching context. It would also likely mean designing tasks and activities that incorporate these multiword expressions in a way beneficial for their acquisition by the learners.

Online Processing

In chapter 2 the processing of formulaic language is described from the standpoint of both comprehension and production. In comprehension, one major factor in online processing that is mentioned is again frequency. Native speakers and language learners

are sensitive to multiword frequency. However, frequency seems to affect production of formulaic language in L1 speakers (for example, faster articulation and increased pausing), but the evidence is less clear with L2 learners (Siyanova-Chanturia & Van Lancker Sidtis, 2019).

Again, the research in this chapter should be useful for a teaching practitioner and could be applied in a principled way. The findings on comprehension are potentially useful for all levels of students, but especially lower levels, as the teaching focus should be much more on comprehensible input for the latter. Various techniques could be used to focus on frequent formulaic language. Input flood, where target language is concentrated in a short text. Highlighting and noticing tasks, as well as spaced retrieval and review could all potentially be designed or adapted with a focus on more frequent formulaic expressions and a goal of learners encountering these more often. This in turn could benefit acquisition.

Even though the findings on frequency in production are less conclusive for L2 learners, some practical application could also be suggested. As already mentioned, less pressure should be put on learners to produce the frequent formulaic language accurately and appropriately, compared to simply comprehending it. In addition, fluency activities could be designed, focusing on the repeated use of the most frequent expressions, and allowing for planning time beforehand.

Socio-cultural perspective
Pragmatic perspective

In chapter 5 the acquisition of formulaic language is discussed from the pragmatic perspective and the main factors that could affect the acquisition are outlined. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2019), this area of research is mainly focused on the social function of formulaic language, namely the use of particular phrases that may characterize whether or not the speaker belongs to a specific speech community. This is relevant for L2 learners, as their knowledge of colloquial multi-word expressions could influence their cultural identity and the degree of assimilation in the country where their L2 is the predominant language of communication. This point is in turn related to another major aspect of pragmatics discussed in the chapter, that of context. The author makes a distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competences. The former is how well the learner knows an expression and the latter is how well they can use it in an appropriate context (Bardovi-Harlig, 2019).

Several factors related to formulaic language acquisition are outlined in the chapter.

One has already been mentioned in this review and that is the difference between input and output. Bardovi-Harlig (2019) reports that when it comes to pragmatics, learners notice more conventional expressions than they can output. This lack of production is explained by either learners not knowing the expression, not knowing how to use an expression or by them misinterpreting the context of use.

Another major factor in formulaic language acquisition is learning environment. This is because in the country of their L2 learners could find themselves in situations where pragmatics would be particularly noticeable. They are also more likely to have more opportunities to notice input (Bardovi-Harlig, 2019). This is consistent with the belief of many of my university students that learning L2 in a country where it is primarily spoken is more beneficial than in their home country as a foreign language.

One other significant factor for acquisition is language instruction. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2019), instruction has a positive effect on output of formulaic language, but most textbooks lack authentic input to provide context and co-text for this target language. This is consistent with earlier comments in this review for the need by teachers to develop and adapt published materials to best accommodate the needs of their learners.

Reviewing the main points of this chapter, several pedagogical implications for formulaic language instruction may be derived. Regarding context, formulaic language should not only be taught in isolation, but rather it should also be presented to the learners in the context of a sentence, paragraph or a larger text. That way they could have a more comprehensive contextualized and co-textualized model of how the target language is used accurately and appropriately.

Another implication has already been mentioned above, namely learners should not be pressured to produce formulaic language right after encountering it for the first time. Rather the focus should be on providing them with large amount comprehensible input, with contextualized target language.

Finally, in relation to learning environment, the purpose of study should be clear to the learners and the teacher. Some learners would be satisfied with limited exposure to the formulaic language in their EFL context. They may have no ambitions of study abroad or altering their identity through language practice. On the other hand, learners who aspire to assimilate into the community of their L2 would usually have higher proficiency goals, may be more motivated and put more pressure on themselves in order to attain their learning goals. As much as possible, the teacher should be aware of their learners' goals.

Pedagogical perspective
Pedagogical approaches

Chapter 8 is focused on approaches to teaching formulaic language. There are three approaches outlined: incidental, semi-incidental and deliberate. According to Pellicer-Sanchez and Boers (2019), incidental language learning is a secondary result from primarily meaning-focused tasks, while deliberate learning encourages intentional memorization and strengthening the knowledge of lexis and semi-incidental learning is primarily focused on input meaning, while concurrently focusing attention on language items.

An example of incidental learning may involve learners reading a graded reader or listening to a story with the primary focus on meaning. As they read or listen, they may also notice formulaic language in the input and eventually add it to their repertoire. There are numerous factors that may contribute to incidental acquisition, but there are two main ones mentioned in the chapter: frequency and modality. While results of the various studies listed in the chapter vary, Pellicer-Sanchez and Boers (2019) concluded that overall, more frequent formulaic language was more likely to be retained by the learners. Also, both reading and multi-modal input (reading plus listening together) were more effective for incidental acquisition than listening alone.

In semi-incidental learning, input is presented with the focus on meaning, but also with target formulaic language highlighted in some way. There is no specific instruction to study the highlighted phrases, but as a result of highlighting, learners' attention tends to gravitate towards the target language. This is called typographic enhancement, which tends to be more effective for acquisition of formulaic sequences than unhighlighted input alone (Pellicer-Sanchez & Boers, 2019).

Regarding deliberate learning, several approaches are enumerated in the chapter. Pellicer-Sanches and Boers (2019) note that in contextualized practice, learners can try and find, or notice, examples of formulaic language in the input. Additionally, in decontextualized practice, they can do gap fill or matching tasks or study lists of expressions. They can also try to produce the target language either in written or spoken form, but mastering accurate and appropriate production usually takes considerable effort and repeated practice.

Overall, the authors aptly conclude that "the effectiveness of any pedagogical procedure – be it incidental, intentional, or both – will inevitably depend on the quality of its design and how it is implemented" (Pellicer-Sanchez & Boers, 2019, p. 167). In other words, no perfect methodology exists, and the effectiveness of acquisition will

depend on a variety of factors, such as teaching methods and context, learner ability and motivation, learning styles, learners' L1, and the purpose of study to name just a few.

One other interesting comment at the end of the chapter is about existing pedagogical practice of formulaic language. The authors state that it would be "useful to find out more systematically how teachers and course designers around the world are already addressing the challenge of FL learning" (Pellicer-Sanchez & Boers, 2019, p. 168). As a practicing university teacher, who incorporates the lexical approach in my classes, it is interesting to compare my own practice with the approaches in this chapter. Some of my own approaches match those in the chapter, namely incidental learning with the focus on meaning in the input and deliberate learning with students being asked to find and highlight examples of expressions in texts and using formulaic expressions in their essays. But my teaching practice also includes several other aspects not mentioned in the chapter. For example, learner training in the use of collocation dictionary, in how to organize a lexical notebook for the new and semi-familiar expressions they encounter during the course, and they also engage in reflection activities on the significance of formulaic language in their L2 development. It would be difficult to report with high confidence about the effectiveness of these teaching practices, but at the very least the attempt is there to raise the learners' awareness of formulaic expressions and increase their autonomy and independent skills they can hopefully use outside the classroom and after the course is finished.

English for academic purposes perspective

In chapter 11 several reasons for using formulaic language in this context are outlined. One reason is "that formulas are basic linguistic units" (Durant, 2019, p. 211). Just as individual words are learned by students, formulaic expressions and phrases should be focused on in a similar way. Learners should be made aware that many phrases express a single meaning and should not be broken down into individual parts.

Another reason is related to the processing function of formulaic language already discussed above. Formulaic sequences can make processing easier, so the learner can focus more on the meaning rather than form (Durant, 2019). This is related to fluency of both input comprehension and output production. The knowledge of formulaic language can allow learners to become faster readers by focusing their eye movements on larger chunks of text instead of individual words. It could also allow them to speak and write more fluently by using prefabricated set phrases instead of trying to construct sentences and utterances from individual words.

The third reason is that certain kinds of formulaic language are very specific to particular EAP communities and by using this language the learner can signal the membership in the community (Durant, 2019). This is related to the academic conventions that learners need to master in order to be successful in their university careers. Most prominently this may be relevant for academic essay writing – formulaic sequences used to frame and organize the essay content, objectively express stance, evaluate and analyze the sources, to name just a few examples. In my teaching experience with academic writing, initially learners often struggle with adopting these conventions and need extensive practice to become skillful at implementing them. The importance of this practice should be stressed to learners, as universities and colleges often require strict adherence to these conventions and failure to do so could result in poor, unprofessional quality of work.

Limitations and conclusion

Overall, *Understanding Formulaic Language* is a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in the field of formulaic language acquisition and study. By combining the cognitive, sociocultural and pedagogical perspectives, the book provides a wide range of the most recent research in the field that has direct relevance to classroom practice. However, the book also has some potential limitations.

One has to do with the difficulty of application of the research on formulaic language. While any teacher should be able to apply the research findings and principles from the book with their learners, this may be more difficult for novice or pre-service teachers. In particular, those not already familiar with or practicing the lexical approach or those not having necessary background knowledge in applied linguistics. The book does have a pedagogical application section, but it lacks ready-made, hands-on tasks and activities that beginner teachers would find especially useful because they would be able to start using those right away with their students. This limitation is not unique to this book though, as to my knowledge, much of the research in language acquisition is mainly focused on the theoretical, as opposed to practical side, and the struggle to integrate the two is a well-known issue in language teaching.

Another potential limitation is the terminology in the book, again mainly for beginner teachers. New teachers often struggle with reading second language acquisition literature due to their lack of knowledge of technical language. They find it a slow and often demotivating process. Even for MA students, it usually takes a semester or two to get acclimatized to technical language in journal papers and textbooks, so

more experienced teachers should sympathize with those who struggle to read technical language for the first time. And while the book is on the whole lucid and well-organized, some of the more technical language in it may present a difficulty for some readers. But again, this limitation is not specific to *Understanding Formulaic Language*, but is rather more general to the literature in second language acquisition.

Having mentioned this, it must also be stated that these limitations should not present a difficulty for a more experienced teacher. For teachers with MA in applied linguistics and multiple years of teaching with the lexical approach, *Understanding Formulaic Language* provides a comprehensive overview of the field and a useful reference source, clear principles for teaching methodology, and validation for existing classroom practices. In addition, every chapter of the book suggests future research directions for anybody interested in expanding the field of formulaic language. Additionally, experienced teachers should be able to create their own tasks and activities or adapt existing published materials based on the research findings in the book. Although this is likely to be a more time-consuming process, it may also be more beneficial for the learners' needs and more rewarding for the teachers from a professional development perspective. Learners could benefit more from tasks and activities specifically tailored to their needs and the learning context and teachers could benefit from a more involved lesson planning process that requires more creativity and thought.

To conclude, *Understanding Formulaic Language* is a useful resource for those who simply want to learn more about the field of formulaic language, for teachers who are interested in integrating formulaic language into their classrooms and for teachers who already practice the lexical approach. This book thoroughly explores its subject from multiple perspectives relevant for both researchers and practicing teachers.

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