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Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages
English Language Department

Investigating the Effect of Using Ready-Made Utterances in Developing Fluency in Iranian EFL Students

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

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We hereby recommend that the thesis by

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Dedicated to my Family

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Thesis Title: The effect of Using Ready-made Utterances in Developing Oral Fluency in Iranian Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

This study investigated the effects of using ready-made utterances in developing oral fluency in Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language. More than 500 question form sentences along with more than 2000 answers for them were selected from two well-known coursebooks (Starter and Headway 1 up to unit 8 and Intro and Interchange one up to unit 8). These sentences were then employed in the experimental class largely on the basis of Lexical Approach. Scant amounts of reading and listening were also employed to avoid monotonousness and unidimensionality.

On the other hand, the control group was taught by common multifaceted coursebook-based methods. The oral performance of subjects in the experimental and control groups were cross compared at the end of the second term. This comparison included the average number of syllables uttered by each subject, the average number of tokens used by each subject, the average number of word types per subject, the average number of utterances per subject and the frequency of pauses in the two groups.

The subjects were all beginner level female volunteers aged between 14 and 24. The 43 subjects were divided into two groups of 21 and 22 randomly. Then the groups were assigned to two experimental and control groups. The decision about which group to be the experimental group was also made randomly.

The results obtained from simple frequency counts and independent t-tests, run in the SPSS program, were all in favor of the experimental group. These results showed that the differences were really meaningful at the 0.05 level of probability and confirmed the directional hypothesis of the research.

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LA	Lexical Approach
TBI	Task-Based Instruction
CLL	Cooperative Language Learning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1: Overview

In chapter 3 of their book called Second Language Research Methods, Seliger and Shohamy talk about preparatory phases that a researcher should go through in order for his/her research to be qualified as a disciplined form of scientific inquiry. Three sources for research questions introduced in the phase one of Seliger and Shohamy's book are experience and interest, other research, and sources outside second language. In the second phase concepts such as feasibility, the how of the research question, prerequisite knowledge, the consistent definition of concepts and terms, and logistical and practical problems are discussed. Seliger and Shohamy's description of preparatory phases of a scientific research includes two other phases, but what I mean to mention here is that, the following research project has been conducted with all the above considerations in mind. The research question and hypothesis of this research project were both motivated by all three sources introduced by Seliger and Shohamy. At the same time, the present researcher has tried to consider the feasibility of the current research and acquire enough background knowledge before suggesting the research hypothesis or setting out on the implementing the research itself. On the other hand, Mackey and Gass (2005: 17) emphasize that research questions need to be theoretically interesting; otherwise we run into a "so what response to our research. Another prerequisite mentioned by Mackey and Gass is that research investigations need to be current, which of course entails that the questions have not already been answered in the literature, or have only partially been answered and therefore require further or additional investigation. This is actually the main motive behind this research project, since developing spoken fluency is one of the least investigated areas. The reasons that speaking in L2 is one of the least investigated areas according to Nunan and Carter (2001: 14) are three:

- The influence of grammar translation
- Technology, and
- Exploitation of oral communication marginally and as part of different methodologies except for Grammar Translation

Therefore, the whole research project has been an informed attempt to find a satisfying answer for one of the thorniest issues in the area of English as a Foreign Language in Iran; that is, developing oral fluency in Iranian EFL learners.

12: Justification for the Research

Many language learners spend huge amounts of time on learning single words, grammatical rules, etc., while memorizing a few thousand ready-made utterances, in my opinion, will give them a tacit knowledge of all these areas plus a relative fluency in speaking. According to Larsen-Freeman (2007), linguistic subsystems, dimensions of language proficiency, and even individual elements of language interact in ways that are supportive. … They are supportive in that development in one of these subsystems, dimensions, or elements might depend upon the development in another. Larsen-Freeman evokes Shanker and King's "interactional synchrony or "dance metaphore for communication to the effect that:

> Based on very simple procedures (steps) carried out in coordinated fashion in dyads, complex patterns emerge from the interaction between the two dancers, and even increasingly more complex and unpredictable patterns will emerge overtime when a pair of dancers interacts with other pairs on the dance floor.

Larsen-Freeman's Chaos/Complexity Theory, too, in the same commentary, acknowledges the complexity and the interconnectedness of the issues in SLA.

Pienemann, as well, in his review of Dynamic System Theory (DST) quotes from De Bot, Lowie, and Vrespoor that in SLA all variables are interrelated and therefore changes in one variable will have an impact on all other variables that are part of the system.

In the same way, the findings by some other researchers demonstrate that rote-learning and the construction of rules are not independent processes, but interact and actively feed into one another (Myles, Hooper and Mitchell 1998). Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981, cited in Ellis, 1994: 32), suggest Multidimensional model which accounts for the developmental properties of interlanguage in terms of a number of processing operations, which are organized hierarchically according to the order in which they are evident in learners' production. Thus,

initially learners rely on non-linguistic processing devices (for example, formulas and lexical items that are not assigned to grammatical categories) and then move through a series of stages until they are able to carry out more complex grammatical operations.

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992, quoted in Schmidt and Carter, 2008), are of the view that formulaic sequences are ubiquitous in language use. Erman and Warren (2000) calculated that formulaic sequences of various types constituted 58.6% of the spoken English discourse they analyzed and 52.3% of the written discourse. Wray (2000) refers to Altenberg's 1998 comment in which it is said that: corpus research has made a number of estimates of the proportion of formulaic material in normal language, stretching as high as 80 percent. Pawley and Syder (1983: 213), too, suggest that the number of sentence-length expressions familiar to the ordinary mature English speaker probably amounts, at least, to several hundreds of thousands. If formulaic sequences are so widespread in English discourse, it follows that proficient English speakers must have knowledge and mastery of sequences at some level.

A similar idea is suggested in Schmitt and Carter inspired by Sinclair (1991). According to these researchers, the idea that proficient language users know numerous formulaic sequences is intuitive, however, it fits well with Sinclair's claim that language as a whole is organized according to two main structuring principles: *an open choice principle* and an *idiom principle* with the latter involving the widespread use of formulaic stretches of words. These multi-word units were often relegated to a peripheral category by scholars; acknowledged, but dismissed as having only a minor role in language (Wray 2002). The advent of computerized corpus studies made additional patternings evident, and it soon became clear that lexical patternings were not limited to these obvious multi-word units.

Accordingly, we will see later in this paper that, it is the extensive memory store for lexical items that is responsible for fluent fast speech. This means that a form-focused program should accompany any effort for developing fluency as a complement. The ability to generate novel utterances fills the gaps whenever speakers do not have quick access to ready-made utterances or formulas. On the other hand instructors can maximize the efficacy of chunks by using substitution tables, like the one below (Table 1.1) which is adopted by some modification from Hutchinson & Waters (1987: 25), so that learners can understand that a lot of these utterances are open to modifications.

Table 1.1: Sample substitution table

It	is	sunny windy snowy rainy hot cold	today
	was		yesterday

Schmitt and Carter believe that formulaic sequences can have slots to enable flexibility of use, but the slots typically have semantic constraints. For example, if we wish to express the notion that some activity or achievement is unusual, unexpected, or exceptional, then we can use a phrase like *Diane thinks nothing of sleeping 14 hours per night,* but not of sleeping *8 hours per night* because this amount of time is usual.

Wray (2000) discusses three recent attempts to introduce formulaic sequences into the teaching program in a principled way. A comprehensive description of these attempts is given in Chapter 5.

From a psychological point of view too, we can assume that the resemblance of ready-made utterances to what is used by native speakers in similar real-world speech events can stimulate internal learning processes. The learners are expected to reshape the given input via the application of general cognitive capacity.

Richards and Rodgers (2003: 132) believe that a lexical approach reflects a belief in the centrality of multiword lexical units or "chunks that are learned and used as single items. Schmidt (2002: 12-13), invoking some insights from Halliday, acknowledges that much of the systematicity in language comes from lexical choices. Following that, he quotes from Pawley and Syder that preformulated structures are likely to reside in memory as sequences which are already formed. Since these structures are already formed and 'ready to go' they should take less cognitive energy to produce than sequences which have to be created from scratch. Schmidt further stresses that evidence from corpora shows that much language is made up of multi-word units many of which are likely to be preformulated in the mind. This line of thought is very close

to the idea proposed by Skehan's dual route, mentioned above—initially lexical and another rule-based mechanism working in collaboration to account for different speech events.

DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, in Schmidt (2002: 26), speaking about the interdependence of grammar and lexis, make the point that when we try to make general statements about grammar that neatly identify broad patterns, we are abstracting away from the overall system in ways that are somewhat artificial. One reason is that it is very difficult to isolate grammar and lexis into completely separate categories, because grammar does not exist on its own. It is interdependent with lexis, and in many cases, grammatical regularities and acceptability are conditioned by words. These researchers go on to stress that native speakers tend to use a great many expressions that act as single lexical units used as wholes. That is, they are not composed each time from scratch by the rules of syntax. As fixed units they appear to be intermediary between lexical words and grammatical structures. Also, Widdowson (2007: 79) states that, certain items tend to keep company, or collocate, with others: there is a kind of mutual attraction that draws them together. So the word *unforeseen* will attract the word *circumstances*, *foregone*will attract *conclusion, crying* will attract *shame* and *pious* will attract *hope*, and so on. But collocation goes beyond the relationship between two lexical items in a noun phrase to include many other recurring combinations in phrases like: *as a matter of fact, when all's said and done, all things being equal, for better or for worse*, and so on; … but there are innumerable other textual patterns and phrases that emerge from corpus analysis that the language user is not aware of.

In recent decades, with the advancement of computer science, and analyses of large spoken data bases, it has become evident that the vast amount of lexical patternings in speakers' utterances are memorized as unified wholes or chunks and not made from scratch. Thus, the role of memorization is confirmed with the knowledge gained from corpora; but it has become evident that what gives fluency and accuracy to natives' speaking is not the memorization of single words. Fluency and accuracy are the result of unified wholes committed to the long- term memory which are retrieved instantaneously in appropriate time. The role of memory is stressed in lexical and other communicative approaches because of the prominence that collocations have in language processing. Lots of situations in human affairs are recurrent and this illustrates a natural tendency to economy of effort. Of course there are some counterarguments. For example Lyons (1981: 5-6) states that "one of the most important facts about language is that there is in

general, no connection between words and the situations in which they are used such that occurrence of particular words is predictable, as habitual behavior is predictable from the situations themselves .

In sharp contrast to Lyons, a lot of researchers today believe that, language processing is not a question of learning grammatical structures. It is far more a question of deploying larger units made of several words. For example, Nunan (1993: 69-70) makes a reference to *frame theory*, which suggests that human memory consists of sets of stereotypical situations, or 'frames' which are constructed out of our past experiences. These provide a framework which we use to make sense of new experiences. Following the same line of thought, on page 71, Nunan evokes the *schema* theory according to which the knowledge we carry around in our heads is organized into interrelated patterns. These are constructed from all our previous experiences and they enable us to make predictions about future experience.

Nattinger (1980, cited in Doughty and Long, 2005: 67) states: "for a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and … comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. The comprehension part of Nattinger's statement is similar to Oller's (1979: 23) definition of pragmatic expectancy where he says that "We don't just happen to remember things in all their detail; rather we remember a kind of skeleton, or possibly a whole hierarchy of skeletons, to which we attach the flesh of detail by a creative and reconstructive process. That process, like verbal and cognitive activities, is governed largely by what we have learned to expect .

Therefore, there are a lot of good reasons for focusing on utterances in developing oral fluency. The main reason being that, from the very first session learners are involved in speaking through exchanging simple ideas expressed by these utterances. Willis and Willis (2007: 2) state that the most valuable thing we can give a learner is the confidence and willingness to have a go, even if their language resources are limited. Skehan (1998: 16), too, as evidence for the insufficiency of a comprehension-based approach, quotes six roles from Swain (1985), as well as other scholars, for output. These are:

- to generate better input,
- to force syntactic processing,

- to test hypothesis,
- to develop automaticity,
- to develop discourse skills, and
- to develop a personal voice.

As learners learn more, certainly, they will be able to express more complex ideas. Even innovation can come into play as learners become more confident in their capability of managing different situations. This means that communicative competence and even features of real-life discourse like generic structure, associated grammatical choices and the role of pronunciation in creating meaning can be incorporated in the program, taught, and learned. No doubt, these features to be grasped need time and have to be accompanied by some consciousness raising activities. Fast and smooth talking without unnatural hesitations is a matter of practice. The elements of these practice are not words but utterances which in addition to being native expressions are ready to go and hopefully will contribute to the fast flow of speech.

My own classroom experiences have convinced me that a focus on communicative language strategies (components that learners need to actually use language) would be very helpful to change our learners to successful language users. Truly fluent speakers must have command of the vocabulary, idioms, and utterances of the language which are used as chunks.

Research on second languages has proved that interlanguages are reduced and impaired versions of target languages. My hunch is that using ready-made utterances would account for these shortcomings to a great extent. Certainly, it is an impossibility to provide ready-made utterances for every real-life situation. Fromkin et al. (2003: 10) are right to some degrees when they say that "few sentences are stored in your brain, to be pulled out to fit some situation or matched with some sentence that you hear. This highlights the need for two kinds of memory which Skehan (1998, quoted in Kaplan, 2002: 35) has proposed. Of these two memories one is an extensive memory store of lexical items, including formulaic chunks and the other is a lexico-grammatical repertoire for generating novel utterances.

Therefore, there are some conceivable benefits to adopting such a stand. A brief list of these advantages is given below.

- Using multiple-word meanings and ready-made utterances will necessarily contribute to the knowledge of vocabulary and structure (complexity) as well as fluency (speed) of speaking.
- These also enable learners to attend to and learn collocations and sequences and borrow them for productive use.
- Better productive skills can have a motivating effect making students have a better feel for English and devote much time and energy to learning.
- Learners won't be concerned about the grammaticality of their utterances and so will be less hesitant or halting in their speech.
- It adopts a somewhat sociolinguistic approach, in that, it allows the user to either formulate or interpret an utterance which is not only linguistically accurate but which is also phrased in what Pawley and Syder (1983, cited in Bachman 1995: 97) call a *native like way*.
- Better pronunciation and intonation is conceivable with this method. And finally,
- It is interesting to note that, the influence of the mother tongue in discourse level is reduced to the minimum by this method.

Peccie (2006: 39) cites two example sentences from Wolfson in which an Iranian bilingual boy transfers the poetic way that complements are expressed and accepted in Iranian culture into the way he expresses himself in English:

Complementing his mother:
It was delicious Mom. I hope your hands never have pain.
Responding to a complement about his "nice shoes":
It is your eyes which can see them which are nice.

This kind of transfer—negative transfer—could have been prevented if the speaker had memorized appropriate expressions for these or similar situations.

13: Goals Statement