



THE EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS AND REALIZATIONS OF FORMULAIC SEQUENCES IN CASUAL CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This research is descriptive qualitative study aiming at finding out EFL learners' perceptions and realizations of formulaic sequences in casual conversations and seeing how the perceptions relate to the realizations. 13 students of English Department of Unnes Graduate Program were chosen as the participants of the study. Two sources of data were used in this study: interview and audio recordings of the casual conversations. The result of the interview revealed that the learners generally have positive perceptions of formulaic sequences. However, they do not ever get any materials about formulaic sequence in their EFL learning so that they do not really familiar with its concept. From the analysis of the learners' casual conversations using the combination of Biber et al. (1999) and Celce-Murcia (2007) categorization system of formulaic sequences, all six types of formulaic sequences are found: inserts, collocation, routines, multi-word units, binomial expressions, and idioms. Furthermore, it is found that learners' problem in realizing formulaic sequences includes the tendency to simply use the expressions they heard from any sources without considering the appropriateness of the expressions, the difficulty in using correct formulaic sequences to be used in the given situation, the idiomaticity of formulaic sequences, the tendency to translate Indonesian expressions into English literally word by word, and problems related to grammar. The learners' perceptions of formulaic sequences are related to its realizations in terms of the problems they faced in using formulaic sequences in casual conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many problems faced by EFL learners in using English to communicate caused by the lack of input and exposure as well as late learning of English. One of the difficulties that EFL learners face is the lack of idiomaticity in their speech, which is one of the qualities of native-like language use (Ustunbas 2014). The lack of idiomaticity will make the EFL learners' speech sound unnatural and awkward when it is compared with English-native speakers.

Pawley and Syder (1983) report that native-like oral fluency depends largely on the speaker's ability to rely on automatized repertoires of prefabricated chunks which reduce the amount of processing and encoding involved in speech production and afford the speaker the time to attend to other aspects of the speaking process. These prefabricated chunks are commonly known as formulaic sequences (Wray 1999: 214; Celce-Murcia 2007: 44).

There are many problems related to formulaic competence in EFL learning. Based on my experience in teaching students in formal school, tutoring agency, and private courses, I found that Indonesian EFL learners tend to translate Indonesian into English word by word rather than to use formulaic sequences in their speaking. This results on unnatural and sometimes awkward expressions. Moreover, the movement from one word into another is often unfluent because they will need to think what the English translation of the next Indonesian word will be. As a result, their oral productions sound stilted and awkward, yet sometimes can change the meaning they want to convey. I assume that these conditions happen because of the learners' lack of formulaic competence. In this case, they found it difficult to use or recall the formulaic sequences in their speech. In

addition, their understanding of the concept of formulaic sequences itself may also affect their English learning. When they are not aware of the existence of formulaic sequences, they will tend to generate English word one by one whenever they speak in English.

These conditions are also found during my study in English Department of Unnes Graduate Program. The students majoring at English Education in this degree are supposed to have high formulaic competence. It is assumed that their formulaic competence is better than that of school students because they have longer span of time to learn and practice English. However, I found that both in the daily and academic conversation, they still find problems in conveying message to the interlocutor. They often confuse about how to say something. Sometimes, they create new expressions which sound awkward for other students so that they cannot understand what the speaker actually wants to say.

Based on those conditions, I am interested in studying this case to find out how EFL learners in Indonesia, especially college students majoring in English education, perceive formulaic sequences in their communication. I find that it is necessary to see how they perceive formulaic sequences in their communication because it may influence their actual use of formulaic sequences in communication using English. Furthermore, I am also interested to investigate the learners' realizations of formulaic sequences in casual conversation. In addition, I am challenged to see how their perceptions relate to their realizations of formulaic sequences.

Formulaic sequences

Formulaic sequence, which is also known as formulaic language, formulaic expression, lexical bundle, etc is defined 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 (Wray 1999:214; Wray 2000:465; Wray and Perkins 2000:1).

Formulaic sequences play important roles in oral language development. First of all, it facilitates learners to memorize chunks that can be drawn from long-term memory store and slotted in their speech. Wray (2000:473) states that formulaic sequences have a function to save effort in processing language. As a saving effort processing, Becker (1975) in Wray (2000:473) explains that:

(formulaic sequences) serve as ready-made frameworks on which to hang the expression of our ideas, so that we do not have to go through the labor of generating an utterance all the way out from S every time we want to say anything (Becker 1975 in Wray 2000:473).

This function of formulaic sequences can be benefitted as a language learning strategy both for children and adult in the context of second language learning (Weinert 1995:186-9). Therefore, learners will be able to save effort in learning English and hopefully they will be able to acquire the language faster and better.

The second role of formulaic sequences in second language acquisition is related to fluency. Kecskes states that formulaic expressions are basic to fluent language production (2007: 4). In line with this, Celce-Murcia (2007:48) states that "fluent speaker of a language draw on formulaic knowledge of the target language as often as they use systematic linguistic

knowledge". A study conducted by Guz (2014) provides another evidence that formulaic sequences can increase the speed of speech production and minimize the occurrence of hesitation.

The third function of formulaic sequences is to achieve interactional situations. This function relates to aspects of how we want others to treat or view us (Wray 2000: 474). The more number of formulaic sequences we stored, the more we will be facilitated to communicate and have interaction with others.

Types of Formulaic Sequences

Some scholars have provided taxonomies for classifying formulaic sequences like Becker (1975), Aijmer (1996), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), Biber et al. (1999), Kecskes (2007), Celce-Murcia (2007),etc. In this study, I employed the combination of formulaic sequences categorization from Biber et al. (1999) and Celce-Murcia (2007). The categories are multiword units, idioms, collocations, binomial expressions, routines, and inserts.

Multi-word units are sequences of words which function like a single grammatical unit (Biber et al. 1999:58). According to Biber et al. (1999: 59), multi-word units exist in various types such as phrasal and prepositional verbs like pick up, look at, and get away with; complex prepositions like as well as; correlative coordinators like both ... and, either...or, neither ... nor, and not only ... but also; complex subordinators like according as, as far as, as soon as, etc.

Idioms are expressions with a meaning not entirely derivable from the meaning of their parts and can represent many different kinds of structural units (Biber et al. 1999:1024). For example, the idiom *have bitten off more than you can chew* means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you.

Collocations consist of independent words that tend to co-occur (Biber et al. 1999:59). For example, the word *research* collocates with *conduct* become *conduct research* or *conduct a research*. When someone says *make a research* instead of *conduct a research*, people will still understand the meaning. However, it may not be a natural collocation which is used by native speakers.

Binomial Expressions are expressions which consist of two words from the same grammatical category, coordinated by 'and' or 'or' (Biber et al. 1999:1030). For example fish and chips, go and get, black and white, and in and out.

Routines are phrases which frequently occur and become specialized for discourse function which predominates over or replaces the literal referential meaning (Aijmer, 1996: 11). According to Celce-Murcia (2007:48), routines can be in the form of fixed phrases like of course, all of a sudden and formulaic chunks like how are you?; I'm fine, thanks. O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter (2007: 165) further described the varieties of routines based on its functions. They are greeting, leave-taking, expressives, commissives, and directives.

Inserts are stand-alone words which are characterized in general by their inability to enter into syntactic relations with other structures (Biber et al., 1999:1082). Inserts are spontaneously produced in the conversation to make it more expressive and communicative. It may appear as one single word such as well, yeah, and God or as multi-word unit such as excuse me and hey look.

Casual conversation

Casual conversation is a talk which is not motivated by any clear pragmatic purpose (Eggins and Slade, 1997:19). Eggins and Slade distinguished it from pragmatic conversation or goal-oriented conversation. According to Laden (2012), goal-oriented

conversation include activities of deciding, persuading, investigating, understanding, etc. while casual conversation is an activity that not only has no natural end but is also structured as ongoing. Furthermore, Eggins and Slade (1997: 20) characterize casual conversation as more informal, colloquial and contains more humour.

In this study, the learners performed such casual conversation in which they talked about random topics with no clear pragmatic purpose such as job, food, wedding ceremony, TV programme, and vacation.

METHODOLOGY

This research is descriptive qualitative study aiming at finding out EFL learners' perceptions and realizations of formulaic sequences in casual conversations and seeing how the perceptions relate to the realizations. 13 students of English Department of Unnes Graduate Program were chosen as the participants of the study. Interview was given to the participants to collect the data of their perceptions of formulaic sequences in their casual conversation. Five casual conversations were used as the data source of learners' realizations of formulaic sequences in casual conversations. The conversations are about fifteen minutes each. The learners' casual conversations were transcribed and the formulaic sequences were classified using the combination of Biber et al. (1999) and Celce-Murcia (2007) categorization system.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Learners' Perceptions of the Formulaic Sequences in Casual Conversations

Based on the findings, most of the learners feel that they are not really good at speaking English in daily life regardless the fact that they are graduate students of English

department. There are some problems faced by students in their speaking related to formulaic language such as the difficulty in finding the right words or expressions to say something, the difficulty in managing grammar and vocabulary to construct the utterances to make it sound English, and the limited number of expressions they have.

Those problems are related to learners' mastery of formulaic sequences. Good mastery of formulaic sequences can help learners to solve those problems as learners will be able to recall the pattern they have stored in their mind before to express what they want to say. We can also minimize the difficulty in managing grammar and vocabularies as formulaic sequences exist as building blocks that facilitate learners to generate the utterances easier. This is in line with Becker's (1975) statement:

(formulaic sequences) serve as ready-made frameworks on which to hang the expression of our ideas, so that we do not have to go through the labor of generating an utterance all the way out from S every time we want to say anything (Becker 1975 in Wray 2000:473).

Unfortunately, not all learners are familiar with formulaic sequences and the advantages they offer in learning English as a foreign language. However, learners basically perceive formulaic sequences positively. Most of them are aware of the role of formulaic sequences in EFL learning. They think that it can be a simple way to talk since it is helpful for them to convey their ideas while speaking. It can be the shortcut in learning English since we directly learn the language by its functions. It can also give them more time to think more about the other word which they need to generate by themselves. In line with this, Wray (2000b:473) states that formulaic sequences have a function to save effort in processing language.

Furthermore, the learners said that it facilitates them to learn English easier and avoid making mistakes like when they just translate Indonesian expressions into English word by word. Finally, it helps them sound native-like, more meaningful, and natural so that they can achieve the communicative goals. In line with this, Schmitt (2013:3) states that in L2 acquisition, formulaic sequences are relied on initially as a quick means to be communicative, although in a limited way. That's why formulaic sequences can be benefitted as a language learning strategy both for children and adults in the context of second language learning (Weinert 1995:186-9).

The findings also showed that all learners are not familiar with the types of formulaic sequences. It happens mostly because they never get materials about it in EFL learning. Furthermore, there are so many various categorization systems of formulaic sequences that learners may find difficulties to understand the term used to name the types of formulaic sequences.

Most of them feel that they are not good enough at employing formulaic sequences in their speaking. The problems are mostly on their understanding of the formulaic sequences and the input they get from their EFL learning. According to Howarth (1998: 186), L2 learners' problems with formulaic sequences are attributable to "a lack of awareness of the phenomenon". Therefore, the learners suggest that English department students should be taught formulaic sequences in order to be able to speak well. Especially for teachers-to-be, they need to master it well since they have to teach the students to be able to communicate well.

The Learners' Realizations of Formulaic Sequences in Casual Conversations

The learners' realizations of formulaic sequences can be seen from two aspects.

They are the types of formulaic sequences used by the learners and the learners' problems in using formulaic sequences in casual conversations.

Types of Formulaic Sequences

From the analysis of the learners' casual conversations, all six types of formulaic sequences are found. The frequency of use of each type can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The types of formulaic sequences used by the learners

| Types of formulaic sequences | Frequency |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Multi-word units | 56 |
| Idioms | 8 |
| Collocations | 293 |
| Binomial expressions | 21 |
| Routines | 112 |
| Inserts | 478 |

1. Multi-Word Units

Based on the data analysis, multi-word units were produced 56 times. Not all kinds of multi-word units stated by Biber et al. (1999:58) were found in the learners' conversations. The multi-word units produced by the learners are in the form of phrasal and prepositional verbs, complex prepositions, and correlative coordinators. There is no complex subordinators found in the conversations.

Phrasal and prepositional verbs found in the conversation are in the form of two-word phrases. Prepositional verbs were produced 39 times with various combinations of verb and preposition such as "dream of", "depend on", "based on", "interfered with", "cope with", "talk about", "stand for", "look at", "look for", "work on", "ask about", "tell about", "throw to", "heard from", "heard about", "listen to", "wait for", and "know about". Meanwhile,

there is only one phrasal verb found in the whole five conversation, "throw away".

Complex prepositions were produced 12 times in the form of two-word phrases like "as well", "because of", "such as", "up to" and three-word phrases such as "in front of" and "as simple as". Meanwhile, correlative coordinator appeared 4 times in form of "not only ... but also ...".

The multi-word units found in the learners' conversations have some functions such as giving detailed information, showing relation between two things, stating condition, stating acceptance, stating experience, stating action, stating activity, stating acknowledgment, adding more idea, stating position, stating reason, stating a range of number, stating quality, giving examples, and relating two ideas.

2. Idioms

Idioms appeared 8 times in the learners' conversations. They are the expressions like "I can eat a horse", "eat like a horse", "take it easy", "give birth" and "fall in love". The idiom "I can eat a horse" used by the speaker to express her desire to eat a lot of food. Similar to this, idiom "eat like a horse" was used to express someone's ability of eating a lot of food. Meanwhile, "take it easy" was used to express the idea of being relaxed and not use too much energy. The learners successfully use these idioms in the context.

In addition, idiomatic phrase like "give birth" is also found in the conversations. They are used to state the process of producing a baby from a woman's body. The example of the usage of this idiom can be seen in the following excerpt. The idiom "fall in love" appeared one time in the conversations. It is used to express the feeling of being very attracted to someone or somebody.

It is also found that some learners showed some attempts to create their own idioms due to their limited knowledge of

English idioms. For example, the learners use the phrase “thick wallet” which is translated from Indonesian idiom *dompettebal*. It simply means having a lot of money. The other example is the use of phrase “morning activity” and “throw away something” as idioms which refers to defecation. The term “morning activity” are commonly used in *Bahasa* as people commonly defecate in the morning. Meanwhile, “throw away something” seems to be originated from the Indonesian phrase *buang air besar*. Since those idioms are not used by English native speakers, they are not included in the idioms category of formulaic sequences in this study.

3. Collocation

Collocations were produced 293 times in the learners’ conversation. The collocation was realized in many forms. The first type is collocation in the form of adjectives and nouns such as “freelance translator”, “good swimmer”, “white sand”, “strict regulation”, “funny joke”, etc. Another types of collocations produced by teachers were the combination of verbs and nouns such as “earn money”, “get money”, “raise children”, “find job”, “get the payment”, “watch tv”, “provide information”, etc.; nouns and verbs such as “experience teach”, etc.; noun and noun such as “exchange rate”, “wedding ceremony”, “music contest”, etc.; verbs and adverbs such as “know well”, “know exactly”, “dress well”, etc.; adverbs and verbs like “really like”, etc.; adverbs and adjectives such as “all day long”, “really helpful”, etc.; verbs and adjectives such as “look bad”, “look beautiful”, “look fine”, “look happy”, “feel tired”, “feel hungry”, “sound funny”, “sound interesting”, “get hurt”, etc.; and collocations in prepositional phrases such as “useful for”, “the price of”, “within a year”, “in cash”, etc.

The collocations found in the conversations perform some functions including naming entities (persons and things), processes (actions, events, etc), and qualities.

4. Binomial Expressions

Binomial Expressions were produced 21 times by the learners during the conversations. This type of formulaic sequences are frequently found in the conversations in the form of noun and/or noun. Binomial expressions in form of noun and/or noun in the learners’ conversation were used to express a couple of things such as “guidance and counseling”, “wife and husband”, “food or cookies”, “jewelry and clothes”, “bride and groom”, “couple and the family”, “the judges and the contestants”, “the judges and the hosts”, “the actresses and the actors”, “nature and culture”, “coral and fish”, “ticket and hotel”, “somebody or someone”, “snorkeling and diving”, “fishing and surfing”, “swimming and sunbathing”, “snorkeling and surfing”.

The binomial expressions were also realized in form of adjective and adjective. They were mostly used to describe the characteristics of something. For example: “bigger and smoother”, “younger and older”, “happy and fun”, and “thin and slim”. There is no binomial expressions in the form of verb and/or verb and adverb and/or adverb found in the learners’ casual conversations.

5. Routines

From the data analysis, routines were produced 112 times. The routines produced by the learners in the casual conversation perform different functions. The first function is stating agreement and disagreement like “of course”, “of course not”, “I guess so” and “I think so”; expressing certainty like “of course”; greeting and leave-taking “hi”, “hay”,

“hello”, “how are you?”, “how are you today?”, “I’m fine”, “we are fine”, “I’m very well”, “not so bad”, “what about you?”, “how about you?” “that’s all for us”, “see you”, “bye bye”, “I’ll see you later”, “see you next time”, and “have a nice day”; showing appreciation like “that’s great”, “it’s great”, “that’s good”; showing acceptance like “it’s okay”, “that’s okay”, “it’s alright”; showing understanding like “I see”; offering like “do you want it?” and “do you want to read?”; requesting like “could you please tell us?” and “can you tell me about that?”; commanding like “come on”, condemning like “what a funny thing!”; suggesting like “it’s better for me to...”; asking for permission like “let me ...”; thanking like “thanks” and “thank you”; and apologizing like “sorry”.

6. Inserts

Insert appeared 476 times in the whole five conversations in form of discourse markers, attention signals, response elicitors, response form, polite formulae, and expletives.

Response form were produced 250 times. They were used to respond to the previous speakers’ utterance either it is questions, statements, or directives. Discourse markers were used 148 times by the learners to maintain their turn in the conversation. They were used either to initiate turn in speaking, shift to a new topic, or to indicate that the speaker is still continuing his/her talk. Response elicitor appeared 58 times in the conversations in the form of as “right?”, “is it right?”, “yeah?”, “then?”, and question tags like “aren’t you?”. This type of insert is used to elicit response from the hearer. The attention signals used by the learners in the conversations 7 times in the form of “hey” and “look”. Expletive “Oh my God” is used by the learners to express surprise. It appeared 7 times in total. Polite formulae are used to indicate politeness in the expression uttered by the

speaker. The polite formulae is used 6 times in the conversation in the form of “please”, “thank you”, and “I’m sorry”.

Learners’ Problems in Using Formulaic Sequences in Casual Conversations

The first problem is related to the learners’ tendency to simply use the expressions they heard from any sources without considering the appropriateness of the expressions. For example, learners repeatedly say “discuss about something” whereas there is no need to put preposition “about” between the main verb and the object.

The second problem is the difficulty in using correct formulaic sequences to be used in the given situation. For example, learners are confused in saying “What are you doing?” or “What do you do?” to ask someone’s profession or to ask what someone is doing.

The third problem is related to the idiomaticity of formulaic sequences. Learners often find it hard to use or understand the meaning of phrasal verbs and idiom since its meaning is different from the words constructing it. The analysis of the conversation shows that there are only 8 productions of idioms in the whole conversations. It proves Biber et al.’s assumption (1999) that idioms are less produced in the actual conversation. It is also in line with Utami’s (2015) research in which she found that idioms were the most infrequently type of formulaic sequences used by teachers while teaching English.

The analysis of the conversation shows that there are only 2 productions of phrasal verbs in the whole five conversations. This is in line with Keszkes (2007: 14-15), who states that EFL learners almost always considers the literal meaning as the most salient meaning both in production and comprehension. It makes them avoid using idioms and phrasal verbs in their speaking. According to Laufer (2000:

186), it is a strategy used by learners in order to overcome a communicative difficulty. Laufer (2000: 186) adds that sometimes “learners decided to use one form rather than another with which they feel safer in order to express the intended meaning”. In this case, learners prefer creating their own literal sentences to using idioms and phrasal verb.

Furthermore, Kecskes (2007:14-15) adds that EFL learners’ avoidance of idiomaticity in their speaking leads them to create their own expressions. If that does not work out they make the necessary modifications by negotiating meaning. It leads the learners to the next problem: the tendency to translate Indonesian expressions into English literally word by word. For example, a learner said “I don’t follow the institution”. The phrase “don’t follow” is a literal translation of Indonesian phrase *tidak mengikuti*. The appropriate expression is “I don’t work in any institution”. This problem is in line with Kecskes’ (2007: 11) statement: EFL learners frequently coin or create their own ways of expressing themselves effectively, and the mistakes they may make will carry on in their speech even though the correct form is there for them to imitate.

The last problem is related to grammar. Based on the data analysis, it is found that learners sometimes use the wrong grammar in the expression they made. For example, a learner said “you’re so looking happy”. The learner had used the right collocation “look happy” but she mistakenly used tense which is inappropriate with the context. The most appropriate expression for the above excerpt is “you look so happy”.

The Relations between the Learners’ Perceptions of Formulaic Sequences and the Realizations of Formulaic Sequences in their Casual Conversations

From the analysis of the learners’ casual conversation, there are at least 5 kinds of

problems faced by learners in employing formulaic sequences. These five problems are also mentioned in equivalent by the learners during the interview. Table 2 presents those five problems and its appearance either in learners’ perceptions or realizations of formulaic sequences in casual conversations.

Table 2. The Ways Learners’ Perceptions of Formulaic Sequences Relate to the Realizations

| Problems | Perceptions | Realizations |
|---|-------------|--------------|
| Copying random expressions heard from any sources such as television, magazines, etc. | √ | √ |
| Choosing the correct formulaic sequences to be used in the given situation | √ | √ |
| Problems with idiomaticity | √ | √ |
| The tendency to translate Indonesian expressions into English literally word by word | √ | √ |
| Grammatical problems | √ | √ |

Table 2 shows that the learners are aware of the problems they may face in employing formulaic sequences in casual conversation. Therefore, it is concluded that learners’ perceptions of the problem they face in employing formulaic sequences relate to the realization in which the problems they stated before really emerge in their casual conversations.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the learners are familiar with formulaic sequences. However, they mostly do not know about the categorization of formulaic sequences. Furthermore, the learners generally have positive perceptions of formulaic sequences. Most of them are aware of the important roles of formulaic sequences in EFL learning and speaking even though they do not ever get any materials about formulaic sequences in their EFL learning.

From the analysis of the students' casual conversations, all six types of formulaic sequences are found. Inserts were produced mostly, followed by collocation, routines, multi-word units, binomial expressions, and idioms. Furthermore, it is found that learners' problem in realizing formulaic sequences includes the tendency to simply use the expressions they heard from any sources without considering the appropriateness of the expressions, the difficulty in using correct formulaic sequences to be used in the given situation, the idiomaticity of formulaic sequences, the tendency to translate Indonesian expressions into English literally word by word, and problems related to grammar.

The learners' perceptions of formulaic sequences are related to its realizations in terms of the problems they faced in using formulaic sequences in casual conversation. It shows that learners' are able to notice their problem well and it should be useful for them as reminder to learn more and overcome their weaknesses.

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