Useful expressions in the EFL classroom

Michio Tajima[1], Daniel J. Waldhoff[1] and Tsuyoshi Kurosawa[2]

Abstract

Experience shows that many Japanese EFL students entering a communication based English language program have no had previous experience in speaking English as they prepare for grammar and vocabulary based university entrance exams. Many non-Japanese EFL teachers have only basic skills in Japanese. These circumstances can combine to make learning and teaching strategies less successful at the onset. This paper looks at fixed expressions as tools to facilitate advanced language acquisition and use.

Key words: classroom English, communicative ability, creative speech, fixed expression, formulaic speech

Introduction

This paper's present interest lies in an attempt to display EFL instructors' views concerning what expressions can be useful for their students to make themselves understood in the classroom. It also aims to review some preceding articles dealing with the importance of fixed expressions and arguments concerning the relationship between fixed expressions and productive language. In agreement with Weinert (1995) who considers three functions of formulaic language, 1) communicative, 2) production, and 3) learning strategy, it is worth taking fixed expressions into consideration for ESL/EFL to help learners to acquire English more effectively.

Fixed expressions

It is not difficult to imagine that L2/FL learners using many fixed expressions for communicative situations in the target languages. Here, a "fixed expression" means both 1) memorized entirely-fixed whole phrases or sentences and 2) semi-fixed phrases and sentences with open slots that can be replaced with other appropriate words to make variations with expansions and substitutions. Examples of the former are "How are you?" and "Good to see you again." The latter is "Can you tell me how to get to + (noun)?"

Language learners learn to carry on communication, selecting some expressions from input such as language lessons and memorizing by rote learning. As English in Japan is (recognized

[1] 日本大学歯学部　英語
　〒 101-8310　東京都千代田区神田駿河台 1 - 8 -13
[2] 大東文化大学　地域連携センター
　〒 355-8501　埼玉県東松山市岩殿 560
（受理：2008 年 9 月 30 日）

[1] Nihon University School of Dentistry
　1-8-13 Kanda-Surugadai, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-8310, Japan
[2] Daito Bunka University Chiiki Renkei Center
　560 Iwadono, Higashimatsuyama, Saitama 355-8501, Japan

as) a foreign language, but not a second language for most people, they may not have many opportunities to use English on a daily basis unless they are in learning situations or facing certain specific occasions, like demands from work sites, traveling overseas, or communicating with friends or family members who speak English. Even though there are opportunities to communicate in English, it may not be expected for them to use it naturally and fluently like L1 speakers. There can be many reasons to learn the language, but if it is learning to be able to carry on verbal communication in the target language, acquiring fixed expressions seems to be a very important aspect of language acquisition.

There are many different names for fixed expressions, with many researchers discussing the use and learning of them in L2/FL as well as L1. "Chunk" and "ready-made expressions" are examples and others are as follows:

Ready-made utterances (Lyons, 1968)

Prefabricated routines and patterns (Hakuta, 1974., Krashen & Scarcella, 1978)

Formulaic expressions (Fillmore, 1976)

Units (Peters, 1983)

Lexicalized sentence stems (Pawley and Syder, 1983)

Formulaic speech (Ellis, 1985., Yumoto, 1992., Yamaoka, 1999)

Formulaic chunks, preassembled and memorized patterns (Widdowson, 1989)

Lexical phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992)

Formulaic utterances (Kanno, 1993).

Howarth (1998) uses a term, phraseology, which includes different kinds of expressions like pure idioms, routine formulas, slogans, proverbs, catchphrases to name a few, and compares native and non-native speakers' speech performances.

The variety of naming would indicate that many researchers acknowledge the impact of fixed expressions on language acquisition. In fact, it appears to be an important aspect of language acquisition (L1/L2/FL) educationally and academically.

These different names can represent slightly different characteristics. For instance, while prefabricated routines are memorized wholes, prefabricated patterns are still memorized sentences, parts of which segments can be replaceable with other possible words depending on situations.

Naturally, L1 speakers use fixed expressions, too, which may make it possible to dispute the opinions that advanced learners eventually stop using them. Advanced learners presumably use fixed expressions less and less, as the more advanced levels they achieve, the more they are

expected to use creative speech. However, as Kanno (1993) writes that "formulaic utterances play a crucial role" for beginners, more advanced learners and even native speakers of the target language. Pawley and Syder (1983) write that an individual has hundreds of thousands of lexical phrases, which also holds up the importance of fixed expressions for language learners, and that "native speakers do *not* exercise the creative potential of syntactic rules to anything like their full extent, and that indeed, if they did do so they would not be accepted as exhibiting native like control of the language" (193, italics original). One of the reasons for this opinion would be that some productive languages, which are linguistically correct, are sometimes socially unnatural to native speakers of the language.

Without knowing the meaning of some expressions often used in daily lives, people may not be able to respond to them appropriately (Yamaoka, 1999). Most Japanese university students can say "Fine, thank you." when their teachers ask "How are you?" to them, but the authors found that a large number of them do not know what to say to "What's up?" Some have never heard such a greeting, not to mention its response "Not much" or "Same old thing." The usefulness of the expression "What's up?" may not be as high as "How are you?" in general. However, the fact that "How are you?" is asked by many teachers repeatedly and learners can react to it without problems by saying "Fine, thank you, and you?" shows automatization occurs in them.

There appear to be many ELT materials employing similar approaches, which start with important words, introducing model dialogs with useful expressions, checking grammar, and letting learners make some variations, depending on their interests, with a typical focus on form approach. This also perhaps shows that it is a widely accepted idea that formulaic speech can help lead to creative speech.

There are many reasons why the authors think fixed expressions are important and useful for foreign language learners.

1. Sense of security, in that one can avoid miscommunication by using fixed expressions in appropriate situations.
2. Confidence in correctness by knowing that they are natural expressions and that the L1 speaker says them, too (Kanno 1993., Pawley and Syder 1983).
3. Being able to utter things more quickly by memorizing them rather than constructing new sentences from scratch. Fast and quick response is often crucial in the effort to continue conversations naturally. People tend to wait to listen to the speaker at a one-to-one conversation level, but less advanced learners or slow speakers may feel left behind when having conversations with more than one person.

4．Using fixed expressions from time to time enables speakers to focus more on making some new sentences. Additionally, advanced learners are expected to use more creative sentences.

5．When one finds it difficult or impossible to construct some sentences, it is usually easier to depend on some fixed expressions to maintain the natural flow of conversations as a shortcut device. Learners "memorize a number of ready-made expressions to compensate for lack of sufficient L2 rules to construct creative speech" (Ellis 1985, 168). In fact, it unburdens pressure at least a little and broadens communicative ability.

Many researchers study the relationship between fixed expressions and creative speech. Yumoto (1992) believes formula-based speech leads to creative speech, based on the idea that creative construction is built on the basis of fixed expressions.

Some say that learners memorize formulae, analyze them, then understand rules (Fillmore, 1979), while Lyons (1968) says ready made utterances have no extension and no variation and he calls sentences or phrases parts of what can be replaceable "schema." Krashen & Scarcella (1978) write that prefabricated routines and patterns develop individually from rule-formation. However, they do not deny the use of prefabricated routines and patterns by saying prefabricated routines and memorized wholes may lead to prefabricated patterns, partly creative and memorized, and then forward on to more advanced levels. They seem to say learners can develop rules without prefabricated routines and patterns as well.

However, the predominant view is perhaps that learners develop their language skills both ways (Kanno, 1993). Language acquisition is a complex of different alternatives of learning methods. It is hard to imagine one never learns useful expressions before analyzing rules, or vice versa. Yamaoka (1999) also supports the theory that memorized wholes and knowledge of speakers' internal structure are rather a continuum, and that they do not occur separately. Kanno (1993) mentions that "even after the internal structures of formulaic expressions become clear to the learner, these expressions can remain as "chunks" in the lexicon as long as they serve to save processing cost in speech production" and that not only L2 or FL learners but also L1 speakers use formulaic utterances.

Certain expressions do appear to be of help in conducting language lessons smoothly, as can be seen with the example of "How are you?" The authors also remember some useful expressions at the beginning of certain language courses. Because of the particular nature of the situation, variations of language are limited inside the classroom, especially for less advanced courses. Making sure learners understand and say certain frequently used expressions and communicate with their teachers and classmates is a preparation for them to go outside and actually use the target language in real life. For example, there is a discussion by Nattinger and

DeCarrico (1992) regarding the practical aspects of teaching implications of fixed expressions which may give some good ideas.

Survey

The survey was conducted in April and May in 2008. Four English language teachers teaching at universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The questions were rather simple. The questions for the teachers were :

> With fixed expressions (chunks, lexical bundles) in a foreign language, we can communicate more smoothly. Could you tell me if there were any sentences or words, excluding greetings, students have tried to say but not in quite the right way? Are there any expressions you found difficult to understand or for which you wish they know the right expressions? Are there any sentences you hope your students know so that you won't feel tired trying to understand what they mean? What are the common expressions students should know when they talk to you, can they say them naturally and can you feel they are reaching you easily, something which might encourage them to speak more? (e. g. : "Sorry I'm late, there was a train accident." or "Could you tell me when the deadline of the assignment is, please?" etc.)

Results

1. Phrases to learn new words and spellings
   How do I say (xxx) in English?
   How do you spell that, please?

2. Asking for more work!
   I've finished my work. Can I have some more, please?
   I've finished. What can I do next?

3. Borrowing
   Please lend me the (xxx). (dictionary, etc.)
   Excuse me, could you lend me your (xxx/dictionary/glue/etc.), please?
   →　Yes/sure/just a moment.

4. Expressing not understanding
   I don't understand.
   I don't know.

5. Stating situations

I've lost my (notebook/textbook/dictionary). What should I do?

I'm sorry, my dictionary battery ran out.

Excuse me, can I (collect/get) my (dictionary/notebook/textbook) from my locker?

6. Reasons/excuses for being late/absent/forgetting homework

Sorry, I'm late, (the train stopped/I was sleeping).

I'm sorry I'm late but my train was delayed.

I'm sorry I was absent last week but I was ill (had a cold).

Last week I was absent because (xxx/I was ill/I was sleeping). What work did I miss?

Next week, I'll be absent because of (basketball training/a hospital appointment).

I will be late for (absent from) class on (xxx) what should I do?

I forgot to do my homework. I'm very sorry. Can I submit it next week?

7. Asking for clarification

Will you repeat that, please?

Could you repeat that, please?

Could you say that again, please?

Excuse me, could you speak more slowly?

Could you break it down into words? Please tell me the words/What are the words?

Could you write it down for me?

Excuse me, (I'm not sure/I don't understand) what I have to do. Please explain it again.

I don't understand what (I need to do/you want me to do).

I don't understand what you mean.

Can you show me how to (xxx), please?

What do we need to do?

I'm sorry, but I can't hear you.

8. Others that are not directly related to class activity.

May I go to the restroom, please?

May I turn up/down the heat/air conditioning, please?

Will (xxx) be on a test?

Opinions about the survey itself

(i) I don't really interact much with students in this way ; the sort of things I have the most difficulty with (like establishing whether a student wants to refer to a "range" or a "variety" of objects -- the two words are not always the same) are pretty subtle and not generally problems outside the grad school.

(ii) For most everyday interactions outside classes, I (necessarily) have a very high tolerance for Japanese English, and simply react to the meaning without being very conscious of the exact form, scaffolding as much as necessary.

(iii) It strikes me that the question may be the wrong way round — it might be more helpful to ask *students* what they want to be able to *say*. Monolingual teachers will, by definition, be unaware of these things if the students can't express them.

... As it happens, I was just interrupted by a 4th-yr student who wanted to know how to use English better to communicate with his izakaya customers. The things *he* most wanted to say were:
-What would you like to drink?
-Would you prefer your beer in a bottle, a glass, or a mug?
[He didn't know "prefer", or "mug", miming the latter]

So [expressing preference] at least does seem to be a useful conversational area; the expressions "I would like", "I would prefer" should be known.

[Meanwhile, the tragedy of that izakaya worker is, most of his foreign customers actually speak Portuguese rather than English.]

Discussions

Expressions that the EFL teachers considered useful can be divided into groups, covering different classroom situations, among which are (1) the learning of new words and checking the spelling of words, (2) asking for more tasks, (4) expressing that students do not understand, and so forth. It is understandable that all those sentences are chosen by the teachers as useful expressions in the EFL classroom. Learning new vocabulary and spellings are quite essential when learning a new language. Expressing a lack of understanding of what the teacher means and asking for more tasks when students finish early are vital to carry on classroom activities.

The examples of (3) and (5) include some expressions that most teachers wish not to hear. Even though borrowing some items such as stationary when the learners forget to bring them is perhaps necessary, they are simply expected not to forget them to begin with. Likewise, confessing that they lost something or did not bring study materials from their lockers show the learners' lack of responsibility, the reality in English language courses being that some learners do not bring their study materials home but leave them in their lockers at school. However, considering the fact that any human being will eventually forget something occasionally and it

is difficult to study all one's subjects every day, these might very well be ordinary expressions after all.

There are more variations of phrases with regards to clarifying what teachers mean (7) and excuses for being late or absent (6) than the others. As for (6), it tells that some students need to know expressions saying they are late, absent, or will be absent with some reasons. Although it is not realistic to expect all the students to attend every lesson, the fact the teachers think these are useful expressions for students reveals their absence and being late for lessons is a disturbance to classroom activity. As for (7), it shows that teachers take more seriously the importance of learners understanding their instructions. This also may mean that the teachers feel frustrated to a certain degree that the students do not fully express whether or not the students really understand.

There is a fear that one may not develop the language skills which one should be able to if one depends on fixed expressions too often. Instructors should be cautioned not only to focus on the usefulness of fixed expressions but also to place value on the effort of creativity.

Criticism against the usefulness of fixed expressions often revolves around the fact that it is not always easy to justify the same response to a certain fixed expression. Speaking ability and listening ability, however, are not the same, as one's understanding is usually higher than one's ability to actually express oneself in the target language. Learners' active and productive capacity of language knowledge is perhaps smaller than their receptive knowledge. It does not seem strange that one can understand but can not produce what one understands naturally. Also, it would also appear true that one learns more variations of the target languages when one encounters expressions never heard. Therefore, it should be remembered that learning fixed expressions is only one of many basic language-learning skills, but it does not provide universal solutions to inevitable language learning problems.

Many learners seem to be willing to communicate in English individually, while they tend to be rather quiet in the classroom. There must be many reasons for that. But if they are sure some fixed expressions are not wrong, but rather are natural and used by L1 speakers, it could reduce anxiety about making mistakes, encouraging learners to use those expressions. In addition, knowing them, learners can undoubtedly use them outside the classroom if they, by chance, encounter a similar concept, and using them with other people besides teachers and instructors can raise self-confidence and learners can acquire new phrases in advance.

Hopefully, some of the expressions listed above would be helpful for instructors to teach more efficiently and learners to improve English language skills effectively. At least, using

these expressions for purposes of memorization is a pre-condition for students moving on to the next stages of language development and for developing their hidden abilities.

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