



THE USE OF FORMULAIC EXPRESSIONS IN EFL STUDENTS' INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

Formulaic expressions are very important for EFL students to be sound natural and fluent in speaking. The study aims at describing types of formulaic expression used by the students, the most frequent types used and why they are used, the students' problems when using formulaic expressions and their strategies to cope with communicative demands. This study was a conversation analysis which used descriptive qualitative approach. The research subjects were nine students from English Study Program in Timor State University in Kefamenanu, East Nusa Tenggara Province. The data were obtained by recording their interactions for one hour each group. The recordings were transcribed and observed as well as two speaking materials used by the teacher when teaching Speaking 1 and Speaking 2. After all data were collected they were classified and analyzed based on Biber's et al (1999) corpus linguistics. This study showed that the students used collocations, lexical bundles, inserts, idioms, and binomial expressions. The most frequent types were collocations and lexical bundles since the students were more familiar with literal meanings instead of idiomatic meanings. However, there were many unnatural expressions in their interactions therefore formulaic expressions have to get more attention in teaching instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of teaching and learning a new language is communicative competence which aims at creating meaningful texts both written and spoken. Formulaic competence is one of some competencies in communicative competence to help students create meaningful texts specifically to sound natural and fluent when speaking (Celce-Murcia, 2007:48). Formulaic competence refers to formulaic expressions. They are fixed or prefabricated chunks which commonly used by native speakers in everyday life.

Native speakers tend to use particular formulaic expressions frequently therefore to sound like native, nonnative speakers have to use those formulaic expressions. Since many EFL students especially in Timor University in Kefamenanu, East Nusa Tenggara Province, have great difficulties to produce natural expressions. Kecskes (2008) argued the reason is that there are different language experiences between native and nonnative speakers.

Some studies have shown that by learning formulaic expressions, it improves students' speaking. Dickinson (2012:32) conducted a study by teaching some English formulaic expressions for academic presentation. From the study, it was found that the students got more natural and fluent when presenting their materials. Therefore, it is very important to draw students' attention to formulaic expressions. Formulaic expressions are defined differently from different experts. Wray (2008:12) said that formulaic expressions can be a single word unit. Whereas Fernanda-Parra (2008:52) said that one word expressions are not included into formulaic expressions. There are five types of formulaic expressions I adapted from Biber et al (1999). They are collocations, idioms, lexical bundles, binomial expressions, and inserts. Formulaic expressions relate closely to linguistic competence and sociocultural competence. Linguistic competence is very important to be achieved for example phonology, lexis, morphology, and syntax but it would be unbalanced without formulaic competence.

Students would speak grammatically correct but it does not guarantee that they speak the same way as natives speakers do.

Sociocultural factors need to be considered in using formulaic expressions. There are four components in sociocultural factors. They are social, stylistic appropriateness, cultural, and non-verbal communicative factors. In stylistic appropriateness for instance specifically politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1987:136) proposed some strategies to show politeness in English way. In one of their negative strategies, they suggest "speakers to *be conventionally indirect* so that the hearer is not being imposed to do something for example, *you couldn't possibly pass the salt, could you?*" Based on the above description, it is interesting to conduct this study around spoken language especially EFL students' interactions.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative approach since it was designed as a discourse analysis, particularly a conversation analysis. The participants of this study were nine second semester students from English study program in Timor State University in academic year 2013/2014 who attended speaking class. The students were divided into three groups and asked to converse for one hour. The conversations were held in different days. Day 1 for group 1, day 2 for group 2, and day 3 for group 3.

Since they had to speak for one hour, I gave them one week to prepare themselves before having the conversations. They practiced speaking in group and decided by themselves what topics they want to talk about. I counted from one to three to gave them sign to talk as soon as the video recorder on. Their recordings were transcribed and observed as well as its transcriptions and teacher's materials of speaking 1 and speaking 2. There were three observation checklists provided. The checklist contained 6 statements, 4 statements, and 10 statements to be confirmed. Data triangulation technique was used to collect data from different

sources in order to make this study valid (Guion et al, 2011:1). To classify the formulaic expressions in the students' interactions, I used corpus linguistics from Biber et al (1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aims of this study are four. They are to find out types of formulaic expressions in the students' interactions, to find out the common types of formulaic expressions which are frequently used and the reasons why, to find out the students' problem when using formulaic expressions when speaking, and their strategies to cope with communicative demands.

Types of Formulaic Expression in the Students' Interactions

1. Collocations

Some constructions of collocations which appeared were adjective + noun (*last night*), noun+ noun (*boarding house*), verb + noun (*study hard*), noun + adjective (*years old*), adverb + adjective (*very well*), adverb + adverb (*far away*). However, not all collocations were correctly produced by the students. There were times when the students produced incorrect collocations as in *number phone* (pg.222, turn 91) instead of *phone number* because of different language system. Sometimes the students produce uncommon collocations such as *low mind*, *new rector*, and so on. Different from native speakers who are able to produce natural collocations when speaking. According to Farrokh (2012:56), every native speaker has an automation which helps them to associate words to produce collocations correctly and the automation is obtained after many years of speaking English.

2. Lexical bundles

Lexical bundles in the students' interactions were personal pronoun + lexical verb phrase (*I don't know*), Wh-question (*What do you want?*), yes-no question (*Would you like to?*), adverbial clause fragment (*If you want to go to*), To-clause fragment (*would like to go to*), and prepositional phrase (*in the middle of*). From corpus linguistics in Biber et al (1999:1002-1003), formulaic expressions with verbs like *know*,

think, *mean*, *said/tell*, *want*, and *with* modals/semi-modal verbs such as *is going to*, *was going to*, *would love to*, *will have to*, and so forth mostly occur in native speakers' speech.

The data suggest the difference between the way native and non-native speakers use formulaic expressions and at the same time it shows that tense and verbs use does influence the occurrence of formulaic expressions in the students' interactions which more common to use simple tenses. Kecskes (2008:14) discovered that non-native speakers just intend to achieve their communication goal. This means that what non-native speakers actually need is that listeners can understand well what they are trying to say so they just pick simple words or expressions which convey literal meanings for others to understand clearly.

3. Insert

There are greetings and farewells (*good morning*, *bye bye*), response form (*I see*), polite formulae (*thanks*), response getters (*right?*), discourse marker (*you know?*), and expletive (*oh my God*). Sometimes the students made mistakes in using inserts for example in response form as in "*yes I don't go to church*" and "*yeah I don't sleep...*" The same reason as in lexical bundles and collocations, this incorrect responses are transferred from L1. In relation to polite formulae in making a request, English native speakers would begin their utterances with *would you* and *could you*, but the students did not produce such expressions. They were more direct. It can be said that the power relation among the students are equal hence they seemed to be more direct in making a request.

4. Idioms

The students produced idioms when speaking such as phrasal verb (*wake up*), prepositional verb (*look for*), verb + noun phrase (*take a bath*), prepositional phrase (*by the way*). EFL students have to acquire as many as possible to sound native. However, they should be well aware that other interactants understand their speaking. differently from native speakers who share common background knowledge which makes them easier to understand each

others. They automatically understand the meaning and respond appropriately.

5. Binomial expressions

There are only two constructions of binomial expressions in the students' interactions, noun and noun (*grandmother and grandfather*), and adverb and adverb (*again and again*). The way nonnative-speakers produce binomial expressions are quite different from native speakers. Native speakers make binomial expressions based on their experiences (Biber et al, 2002:448). Their common binomial expressions are for example *wait and see, day and night, there and then, black and white* and so on.

The Most Common Types Used and the Reasons of Use

From the students' interactions it was found that there were two common types of formulaic expressions used by the students. They were collocations and lexical bundles. The total number of formulaic expressions appeared in their interactions is 192. Collocations are 83 and lexical bundles are 68. Inserts are 20 and idioms are 18. Whereas there are only 3 binomial expressions in the students' interactions. It means that collocation is used 43.2%, lexical bundle is 35.4%, both insert is 10.4%, idiom is 9.4% and binomial expression is 1.6%.

It can be seen that the students were more familiar with compositional or literal meanings. Since non-compositional meanings are not very much expressed in the students' interactions. Based on my analysis, I found out that in speaking 1 the students got more focus on very simple expressions which have literal meanings mostly. The expressions are very simple just like *good morning, hello, goodbye*, etc. or when introducing ourselves or someone. The author gave formulaic expressions like *my name is..., I live in..on.., my father is a..* and so on. In Speaking 2, the author presented many lexical bundles and a number of idioms too, however the students did not to use them when speaking.

Students' Problems in Employing Formulaic Expressions

Inappropriate Used of Formulaic Expressions

In findings section, I have stated that there are some formulaic expressions used by the students inappropriately. I also gave the examples like *glad to meet you* which is used in an inappropriate context. It is actually accurately produced by the speaker. However, she used that expression to begin the conversation in which to native speakers they would use the expression in the end of a conversation. They were also not appropriate when answering a yes-no question. They said *Yes, I don't know* instead of *Yes, I do* or *No, I don't (know)*. It was because of transferring from Indonesian language.

Grammatical Problems in Using Formulaic Expressions

I have stated in findings that the students in this study produced many formulaic expressions inaccurately in relation to completing lexical bundles which have gaps or are incomplete. To complete a lexical bundle the students added or continued a lexical bundle with their own construction based on a given context. The inaccurate occurred when they forgot using finite in their expressions. The students also tend to drop subject for example in turn 25 the speaker said "*and I think that have e many many...*" The student seemed to use the word *that* as the subject of the second clause which actually it is the word attached to the verb *think*.

Strategies Used by Students to Cope with Communicative Demands

There were 5 strategies students used to cope with communicative demands. The first strategy was achievement or compensatory strategy. They are divided into several types but in the students interactions it was found four types. They are foreignizing, codeswitching, literal translation, and retrieval. These strategy actually contrasted the nature of formulaic expressions use.

The second was avoidance or reduction strategy occurred when a student was asked to share his experience. He avoided it by asking his friends' favorite color as in "What color that you like?" The student might think that he would not be smoothly or fluently telling his experience so he preferred to avoid the topic. The third strategy was stalling or time gaining. The students frequently said *um*, and *e* to gain time to think what to say or to recall certain words.

I also discovered one of the students said *you know* and *you know what happened* just like native speakers. English native speakers sometimes say *well*, *ok*, *you know*, or *you know what happened?* to gain time to think. The fourth was self-monitoring strategy. It occurred when a student said *he ran* after he made a mistake in terms of tense and language system as in *he run*. The speaker directly changed the verb *run* into *ran*. The last strategy was interactional strategy. Repair strategy is one type of interactional strategies which was used when one corrected others' mistakes whether to the words used or to grammar. For example in their interaction, when a student said *cassava "kruk"* another student spontaneously said *cassava chips*.

CONCLUSION

Through corpus linguistic, video recording and its transcriptions it was found that the students used five types of formulaic expressions proposed by Biber, et al (1999). They are collocations, lexical bundles, inserts, idioms, and binomial expressions. The most frequent types they used are collocations and lexical bundles. They mostly used the types because in speaking 1 and 2, mostly the expressions, and the dialogues convey literal meanings even though in speaking 2 there were a number of idiomatic expressions but the students did not use them. The problems the students had in employing formulaic expressions were the students used formulaic expressions inappropriately and inaccurately because of different language systems. The last question of this research is about the strategy.

The students used 5 strategies to cope with communicative demands. They were

achievement strategy, avoidance or reduction, stalling or gaining time, self-monitoring, and interactional strategy. From this study, I would like to say that if the students in present study used a lot of formulaic expressions, their interactions will sound more natural and frequent. Students have to be introduced to formulaic expressions especially the larger lexical units to improve their speaking. One more thing is that native speakers mostly use progressive tenses in speaking therefore this area needs to get more attention as well as in teaching EFL students.

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