



## THE ROLE OF FORMULAIC SEQUENCES IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING FLUENCY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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### Abstract

Speaking fluency is widely recognized as one of the most important components of second language competence, but it still remains hard for many learners even though they have sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge. Recent researches about second language acquisition are increasingly focusing on the role of formulaic sequences, namely prefabricated, multi-word expressions stored holistically in memory and retrieved as unanalyzed chunks as the main factor of producing a fluent speech. This article reviews the theoretical approaches, empirical researches and pedagogical consequences related to the contribution of formulaic sequences to speaking fluency. Drawing on usage-based, cognitive, and lexical approaches, the article argues that formulaic language reduces cognitive load during real-time speech production, i.e., allows for faster retrieval from memory and minimizes the need to construct syntactic structure “on-line.” Empirical research shows that learners with a large repertoire of formulaic expressions tend to produce more fluent, coherent, and natural-sounding speech.

However, this review also acknowledges limitations such as overreliance on memorized units, contextual inconsistencies, and learner differences. The article argues that formulaic expressions are an important but often overlooked component of fluency development and that they need to be more systematically incorporated into second language teaching.

Overall, it is concluded that fluency is not only the result of grammatical competence, but also the ability to effectively and quickly access linguistic patterns stored in memory.

**Keywords:** Formulaic sequences; Speaking fluency; Second language acquisition; Lexical chunks; Automaticity; Formulaic language.

### 1. Introduction

Fluent speech is easily the most visible indicator of an individual's level of second language proficiency, but it has also been the most difficult skill for learners to develop. The greatest challenge to developing fluent speech is the



difference between what a learner can demonstrate on paper versus what he/she can demonstrate while speaking in “real time”. Many learners score high on a written test of grammar usage, yet they are unable to speak fluently, freezing up, pausing too frequently, or having difficulty linking words into grammatically correct sentences. The differences in performance indicate that knowledge of the rules of a language and ability to use them without effort are different. Traditional methods of teaching assumed that once a learner knew the appropriate grammar and vocabulary, then he/she would be able to produce smooth speech. Unfortunately, much of the experience gained through practice and study has demonstrated otherwise. In many cases, even very advanced learners will experience a mental bottleneck (cognitive barrier) when producing speech. They will often attempt to create each sentence using individual words instead of relying upon their previously acquired knowledge. Since speech production involves making decisions about what to say at the moment of speaking, selecting the appropriate words to convey those thoughts, and applying those rules for constructing grammatical sentences simultaneously, there is simply no way to process the amount of information involved.

To understand how to solve this problem, researchers have shifted their focus to “formulaic language.” As Pawley and Syder (1983) famously pointed out, fluent speakers do not constantly invent new sentences using abstract grammar rules. Instead, they rely heavily on a massive mental library of ready-made, multi-word phrases. These blocks of language—known as formulaic sequences—include common expressions like *to be honest*, *it depends on*, or *as far as I know*. Because these phrases are memorized and stored as single units, the speaker can pull them out of memory instantly, without needing to assemble them piece by piece. This means that this retrieval process significantly affects the brain while we speak. Prefabricated pieces of language used by speakers act as shortcuts for the mind. They reduce the load on working memory for processing. The speaker can use his or her remaining mental resources to think about what he or she wants to say (the content) and how they want to present their ideas (fluently). Therefore, when using these formulaic chunks of language, the speaker will generally be able to speak at a faster rate, have a smoother delivery, and sound like they are naturally communicating with the listener.

Although there has been a lot of research over many years demonstrating a strong relationship between knowing and using formulaic chunks of language and being fluent in speech, these types of research results continue to be almost completely ignored in typical classroom settings. In most classrooms, fluency is



considered something that develops through “accidental” exposure to grammar-based instruction, rather than through direct instruction and practice with the formulaic chunks of language themselves. This article reviews the theoretical and empirical evidence surrounding formulaic sequences, examines how they reduce cognitive load, and discusses how teachers can explicitly incorporate them into lessons to help learners speak with greater ease.

## **2. Formulaic Sequences: Theoretical Background**

Formulaic sequences are widely understood in second language acquisition research as prefabricated multi-word units that are stored and retrieved as whole chunks rather than generated through real-time grammatical assembly. Wray (2002) defines them as sequences that are “stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use,” emphasizing the idea that language production is not always a rule-governed process of novel construction, but often a process of accessing pre-assembled linguistic material. From a broader linguistic perspective, Sinclair (1991) similarly challenges the view of language as a system built primarily from abstract rules, arguing instead that much of natural language use relies on semi-preconstructed phrases that recur across contexts. This perspective is further supported by corpus-based research showing that fluent discourse is highly patterned and formulaic in nature rather than entirely creative at the moment of speech. In SLA research, formulaic sequences are typically understood to include a range of recurrent expressions such as collocations, lexical bundles, idiomatic expressions, discourse markers, and sentence frames (Schmitt, 2004). Although these forms differ in structure and function, they share the common feature of being retrieved as holistic units, which reduces the need for online syntactic processing during communication. This is particularly important in spoken language, where time constraints limit the ability to construct sentences word by word.

The theoretical importance of formulaic language becomes clearer within usage-based and lexical approaches to language learning. Ellis (2012) argues that language acquisition is driven by repeated exposure to meaningful chunks of input, which gradually become entrenched in memory and accessible for automatic retrieval. In a similar vein, Lewis (1993) proposes that fluency depends more on the command of lexical chunks than on the manipulation of grammatical rules, suggesting that language is better viewed as “grammaticalized lexis” rather than lexicalized grammar.

Overall, all of these approaches suggest that formulaic sequences represent an important part of language processes, and that they cannot be considered



marginal or ornamental aspects of language at all, but rather a crucial element of speech production which allows for minimizing the amount of mental effort devoted to speaking in favor of creating meaning.

### **3. Speaking Fluency in Second Language Acquisition**

Speaking fluency is one of the most widely discussed yet conceptually complex constructs in second language acquisition research. Although it is often intuitively associated with “smooth” or “effortless” speech, fluency is not a single ability but rather a combination of temporal, cognitive, and interactional dimensions that together shape how speech is produced and perceived.

In SLA research, fluency is commonly divided into different perspectives. One important distinction is between temporal fluency and perceived fluency. Temporal fluency refers to measurable features of speech such as speech rate, pausing behavior, and the frequency of repairs or hesitations. Perceived fluency, on the other hand, relates to how listeners evaluate the smoothness and ease of a speaker’s delivery, which may not always align directly with objective timing measures. As Segalowitz (2010) notes, fluency is not simply about speed, but about the efficiency and automaticity of language processing during real-time communication.

From a cognitive perspective, fluency is closely connected to the efficiency of language processing mechanisms in working memory. DeKeyser (2007) emphasizes that fluent performance depends on the automatization of linguistic knowledge, which allows speakers to access and produce language with minimal conscious effort. When linguistic processing is not fully automatized, speakers experience delays, pauses, and interruptions as they allocate cognitive resources to lexical retrieval and syntactic planning.

A further important dimension of fluency is its interactional nature. Speech is not produced in isolation but in response to communicative demands, requiring speakers to manage meaning, structure, and interaction simultaneously. Levelt’s speech production model, widely adopted in SLA research, highlights the parallel processes of conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, all of which must operate efficiently for fluent speech to emerge. (Levelt, 1989). Breakdown in any of these stages can result in disfluency, particularly when learners lack readily accessible linguistic resources.

In second language contexts, fluency is often constrained not only by grammatical knowledge but also by the speed and accessibility of lexical retrieval. Learners may possess adequate linguistic competence yet still struggle to produce continuous speech due to the heavy cognitive load involved in constructing





sentences in real time. As Segalowitz (2010) argues, fluency development is therefore closely linked to the proceduralization of knowledge, where language becomes increasingly automatic through repeated use and practice.

This understanding of fluency is particularly relevant when considering the role of formulaic sequences. If fluent speech depends on reducing processing demands and increasing retrieval speed, then the availability of pre-assembled linguistic chunks becomes a key resource for efficient communication. This connection provides the theoretical bridge to the next section, which examines how formulaic sequences contribute directly to fluency development in second language speech production.

#### **4. Formulaic Sequences and Speaking Fluency**

The connection between formulaic sequences and speaking fluency has recently gained considerable attention in research on second language acquisition from cognitive and usage-based perspectives. The foundation of the connection between speaking fluency and formulaic sequences lies in the shared premise that, in addition to being related to linguistic competence, fluency is associated with efficient processing. From this point of view, formulaic sequences emerge as one of the main means of achieving processing efficiency during communication. Processing economy is the explanation of the link between the two concepts that gets referenced most often. In using formulaic sequences, speakers employ pre-packaged sequences of language rather than build up sentences out of their constituents. This makes processing more efficient by relieving working memory of excessive workload so that it can be used more effectively in creating messages and managing interactions. Consequently, speaking becomes faster, more continuous, and less susceptible to disruption due to hesitation.

This view is strongly supported by usage-based accounts of language development. Ellis (2012) argues that repeated exposure to linguistic input leads to the entrenchment of recurring patterns in memory, which gradually become automatized through experience. In this regard, once these sequences are proceduralized, they will become accessible without much conscious effort. As a result, they will directly impact fluent performance. In other words, when using this model of speaking proficiency, it will be wrong to consider formulaic sequences as peripherally located in relation to linguistic competence. On the contrary, they should be treated as central to the functioning of the language processing system.



Another relevant explanation of the connection between formulaic sequences and fluency lies within the phenomenon known as chunking. Under this view, the language users' repertoire does not consist of words, which are stored individually, but larger units, which may be retrieved in chunks as single processing units. This chunking approach results in faster processing as compared to assembling grammar and vocabulary separately and under time pressure. In turn, such chunks serve as ready-to-use sequences for speech production. Empirical evidence from studies of second language speaking performance confirms that there is a significant correlation between formulaic sequence utilization and fluent performance. More precisely, the higher fluency is, the more often are used various formulaic sequences, including both lexical bundles and discourse markers. Such sequences facilitate speech structuring and organization, as well as provide a transition between different segments.

Moreover, one of the advantages of formulaic sequences is their role in managing hesitations and breakdowns in spontaneous speech. While searching for an appropriate phrase or grammatical construction, learners may be forced to make prolonged pauses that might negatively affect the perception of their speech performance. However, the use of ready formulas helps overcome this problem since it allows speech to go on while the concept is being thought out.

Nonetheless, in order to use formulaic sequences effectively, proper selection and application to specific contexts is required. Otherwise, excessive reliance on the fixed chunks may lead to artificial or even improper use of formulaic language. That is why learning formulaic language cannot simply mean expanding one's formulaic knowledge, but should also involve its application in an adaptable manner.

As it follows, it is evident that formulaic sequences have an impact on speaking fluency through efficient processing, automatization, and low cognitive loads when producing the language. Such theoretical considerations form a solid base to study ways to promote fluent speech through teaching formulaic language, which will be discussed below.

### **5. Empirical Evidence on Formulaic Sequences and Fluency**

A growing body of empirical research in second language acquisition has investigated the relationship between formulaic sequences and speaking fluency, generally providing consistent support for the claim that greater formulaic competence is associated with more fluent speech production. Although methodological approaches vary across studies, the overall findings converge on the importance of formulaic language as a predictor and facilitator of oral fluency.



One influential line of research focuses on the processing advantages of formulaic sequences. Conklin and Schmitt (2008) examined how native and non-native speakers process formulaic versus non-formulaic language and found that formulaic sequences are recognized and processed more quickly. This processing advantage suggests that formulaic language reduces cognitive effort during real-time comprehension and production, which is directly relevant to fluency development in spoken interaction.

In the context of speech production, Wood (2010) provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of how formulaic sequences contribute to second language fluency. His research on L2 learners shows that more fluent speakers tend to rely heavily on formulaic sequences, particularly lexical bundles and prefabricated chunks, which allow them to maintain speech continuity even when complex grammatical construction is required. Less fluent speakers, by contrast, often struggle with sentence construction at the word level, leading to increased hesitation and breakdowns in fluency.

Similarly, Foster (2001) highlights that fluent speech, both in native and non-native speakers, is characterized by the frequent use of routine expressions that help manage discourse organization and interactional flow. These expressions function as “planning devices,” enabling speakers to buy time while organizing their thoughts without interrupting the flow of communication.

Research by Boers et al. (2006) further demonstrates that knowledge of formulaic sequences is positively associated with perceived oral proficiency. Their findings suggest that speakers who use a wider range of formulaic expressions are often rated as more fluent and more native-like by listeners, even when their grammatical accuracy is not significantly higher. This indicates that formulaic language contributes not only to the mechanical aspects of fluency but also to its social and perceptual dimensions.

In addition, studies by Ellis (2012) reinforce the idea that formulaic sequences emerge through repeated exposure and usage, becoming increasingly entrenched in memory and therefore more readily accessible during speech production. This developmental perspective explains why more advanced learners tend to show greater fluency: they have accumulated a larger repertoire of automatized chunks that can be retrieved with minimal cognitive effort.

These empirical observations, taken together, strongly converge in providing compelling evidence for the importance of formulaic sequences in facilitating fluency acquisition. They help speed up processing, lower hesitation, help organize discourse, and even make speakers sound more fluent to listeners. What



is significant about this evidence is that it implies that formulaic knowledge is not just a consequence of becoming proficient but also a determinant in the process of acquiring fluency. While the empirical literature provides convincing evidence of the importance of formulaic knowledge for fluency, it also generates some pedagogical issues related to its teaching that will be considered in the next section.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

The growing evidence on the role of formulaic sequences in speaking fluency has important implications for second language teaching, particularly in contexts where the primary goal is the development of communicative competence. If fluent speech is closely linked to the availability and accessibility of prefabricated linguistic chunks, then instructional approaches that prioritize only grammatical accuracy and isolated vocabulary learning may be insufficient for developing real-time speaking ability.

One key implication is that formulaic sequences should be treated as an explicit component of language instruction rather than being left to incidental acquisition. While traditional approaches often assume that learners will naturally acquire such expressions through exposure, research suggests that explicit attention to formulaic language can significantly enhance both uptake and retention. Schmitt (2004) emphasizes that noticing and repeated exposure are essential conditions for the acquisition of formulaic sequences, particularly in instructed settings where natural input is limited.

From a classroom perspective, this means that teachers can intentionally highlight and recycle common lexical bundles, discourse markers, and sentence frames that are frequently used in spoken interaction. Instead of focusing exclusively on individual grammar rules, lessons can incorporate recurring chunks such as *on the other hand*, *what I mean is*, or *the main reason is that*, which learners can immediately apply in speaking tasks. Over time, repeated use of these sequences contributes to their automatization and improves speech fluency.

Another important pedagogical strategy involves input enhancement and structured repetition. Drawing on usage-based perspectives (Ellis, 2012), repeated encounters with formulaic sequences in meaningful contexts increase the likelihood that these expressions will become entrenched in memory. Activities such as dialogue practice, shadowing, and controlled speaking drills can help learners internalize these sequences as ready-to-use units rather than isolated lexical items.





Task-based learning also provides a useful framework for integrating formulaic language into communicative practice. In information-gap tasks, role plays, and problem-solving activities, learners are required to produce spontaneous speech under time pressure, which creates natural conditions for the use of formulaic sequences as processing shortcuts. In such contexts, learners often rely on memorized chunks to maintain fluency while managing content and interaction simultaneously.

In addition, raising learners' awareness of formulaic language can improve both production and comprehension. When learners recognize that fluent native-like speech often relies on recurring patterns rather than entirely novel constructions, they may become more attentive to chunks in input and more confident in using them in output. This awareness can also reduce the cognitive burden associated with sentence construction, particularly for lower-proficiency learners.

Finally, the integration of formulaic sequences into curriculum design can support more balanced language development. Rather than treating fluency as a natural by-product of grammar and vocabulary accumulation, curricula can explicitly include goals related to chunk acquisition, fluency development, and spoken discourse management. This shift aligns instruction more closely with how language is actually processed and used in real-time communication.

Overall, the pedagogical implications of formulaic sequences suggest a move toward a more usage-based and fluency-oriented approach to language teaching, where ready-made linguistic patterns are not peripheral additions but central tools for developing communicative competence.

## **7. Challenges and Limitations**

While numerous theoretical and empirical works suggest that formulaic language contributes to fluency development, it is important to consider various challenges and limitations in implementing this approach. Formulaic language is undoubtedly effective for enhancing processing fluency in speaking. Nevertheless, using such an approach can be quite complex in the context of second language acquisition. For instance, there is a risk of memorizing too many fixed expressions, which would hamper productive flexibility of students' speaking skills. Such an approach would allow speakers to become more fluent and confident when communicating using already learned expressions but will prevent them from expressing something new or specific for the discussed communicative context. In this regard, one needs to determine whether a





speaker's fluency always demonstrates his/her communicative skills or just indicates the ability to repeat memorized expressions.

It is necessary to note another issue associated with using formulaic language for developing speaking skills. It is related to contextual appropriateness, which requires understanding when and how certain formulaic sequences have to be used. It is obvious that if students memorize certain expressions without comprehending the circumstances of their usage, they might create inappropriate sentences. For instance, using discourse markers in inappropriate contexts can be considered unnatural and thus decrease communicative authenticity of students' speech. Consequently, formulaic sequences have to be taught along with their pragmatic characteristics and functions.

It should be highlighted that formulaic language influences different students in distinct ways depending on various factors. They include proficiency level, working memory capacity, amount of exposure to input, and learning strategies. Thus, one can say that while some students will rapidly gain fluency after training with formulaic sequences, others will experience considerable difficulties acquiring this type of language. In this way, one needs to understand that it is impossible to generalize formulaic knowledge in such contexts since each individual learner has peculiarities that have to be taken into account.

Apart from individual differences, it is necessary to speak about current challenges for measuring fluency and using formulaic language. For instance, fluency itself is often defined differently among studies. One researcher might define fluency in terms of speech rate and pauses frequency, while another author uses self-rating scales. Moreover, one has to determine what kinds of sequences belong to formulaic knowledge and should be practiced. It becomes particularly challenging to differentiate between context-sensitive and partially fixed formulaic expressions.

In addition, it is important to realize that formulaic language contributes to speaking development but is not sufficient for fluent communication. It is clear that other linguistic components have to be involved in this process, including grammatical competence, lexical diversity, and interactional skills. Formulaic language can therefore be considered one part of an overall speaking mechanism.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article has examined the role of formulaic sequences in the development of speaking fluency in second language acquisition by synthesizing theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and pedagogical implications. Across the



reviewed literature, a consistent picture emerges: fluent speech is not solely the product of grammatical knowledge and lexical range, but is also strongly shaped by the availability and efficient retrieval of prefabricated linguistic units.

Theoretical accounts of formulaic language (Wray, 2002; Sinclair, 1991; Ellis, 2012; Lewis, 1993) collectively suggest that language use relies heavily on stored chunks that reduce the need for real-time syntactic construction. These sequences allow speakers to process language more efficiently by shifting production from rule-based generation to holistic retrieval. In parallel, research on speaking fluency (Segalowitz, 2010; DeKeyser, 2007) highlights the importance of automaticity and processing efficiency, both of which are directly supported by formulaic competence.

Empirical studies further reinforce this relationship, demonstrating that learners who use a wider range of formulaic sequences tend to produce more fluent and more naturally perceived speech (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Wood, 2010; Boers et al., 2006). These findings suggest that formulaic language contributes not only to measurable aspects of fluency such as speech rate and pausing, but also to listener perceptions of smoothness and native-like proficiency.

At the same time, it should be noted that the conducted analysis revealed that the use of formulaic sequences should not be considered a standalone means of helping students become more fluent. Rather, the success of their use will depend on adequate implementation, contextual appropriateness, and the incorporation of formulaic sequences into communicative competence

Taking into account the results of the conducted analysis, one can speak about the need to implement more explicit and usage-based practices of the teaching of speaking in a foreign language when teaching formulaic sequences. It is believed that such an approach will make classroom activities more consistent with fluent speech performance in real conditions.

To sum up, it can be stated that the analysis of the use of formulaic sequences revealed their significance for the development of fluency in a second language. They make it possible to develop the processes of perception and speech performance that help to communicate more easily and quickly.

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