Research into the Role of Dialog Recitation in the Foreign Language Classroom—Its Effectiveness in Facilitating Memorization and Formulaic Speech Production

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Abstract

There is, in SLA and cognitive psychology, strong evidence that Formulaic Sequences (FSs) are stored in memory as independent units. This study aims to make a contribution to the understanding of FSs in L2 learning and to the potential effectiveness of memorization of FSs as a teaching/learning strategy. It reports on a project in which learners were given the task, over the course of a semester, of memorizing and reciting dialogs which had been written so as to include FSs that are likely to be useful to learners preparing to study abroad.

A formulaic sequence can be defined as a string of linguistic items where the relation of each item to the rest is relatively fixed, and where the substitutability of one constituent of the sequence by another of the same category is relatively constrained (Wray & Perkins, 2000). The phenomenon of FSs has been of interest to applied linguists for some time (e.g., Bolinger, 1976; Fillmore, 1979; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray, 2002), and is at the core of corpus linguistics (e.g., Sinclair, 1991) and various pedagogical approaches that can be called "lexical" (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Willis, 1990). One reason why they have attracted so much attention, and also have been difficult to define precisely, is the fact that they abound in language use. Collectively they make up a substantial and vital part of a person's lexicon, and perform an essential role in facilitating the understanding and expression of messages that could otherwise be misinterpreted. It is their pervasiveness in the language that makes them an important target for language pedagogy. Thus the question "How can they usefully be taught?" is of wide and lasting interest in the field of instructed language acquisition and pedagogy.

Chapter 1 discusses the background of the present study, touched on above, and specifies its focus as the investigation of text memorization approaches to the teaching of formulaic sequences in a foreign language (FL) context, specifically that of a Japanese university.

Chapter 2 examines the most important examples, for this study, of the wide range of characteristics of FSs that are found in the literature on formulaic sequences. This is followed by a characterization of the features of formulaic sequences appropriate for the present study. The chapter also looks at constructs of formulaic sequences, and endeavors to offer a more thorough account of how we process and acquire "chunks" of language. In concluding, the chapter establishes connections between formulaic sequences and language learning, especially in an FL environment.

Chapter 3 addresses the ways in which we process and retain linguistic information. The chapter begins by examining the different models for the processing and production of language. The chapter then moves on to discuss awareness and cognition in relation to memory. This is followed by further treatment of language processing in connection to memory, and its related components. Particular emphasis is given to how these issues relate to the experiences of L2 learners in a foreign language learning environment, taking into account the limited opportunities to acquire the language in a 'natural' way based on accumulated experience of authentic interactions in the target language. The chapter concludes by introducing an integrated model for language processing and acquisition in relation to memory, and outlines the features of this model.

Chapter 4 aims to introduce the background to the study conducted for this dissertation, with a discussion of three fundamental questions that were brought up in the review and synthesis offered in the preceding chapters. The three central questions are (1) *Should teaching practitioners focus on formulaic sequences in teaching in a foreign language context with the particular target population being adult learners?*, (2) *If they should, which formulaic sequences should they teach?*, and (3) *How should they teach the targeted items?* The first question is addressed by providing a number of reasons for the teaching of formulaic language to this particular target population. The second and third questions are addressed by drawing on principles and proposals discussed in the preceding chapters. This chapter then presents a review of studies on text memorization that help to clarify the rationale for the present study.

Chapter 5 poses five research questions. Research Question 1 asks if 'whole-text' and 'partial-text' recitation of a large volume of useful dialogs, prepared in advance of instruction, engages foreign language classroom learners in memorization over the course of one semester, including the further, embedded question of whether there is a significant difference between the two in terms of their facilitative effect. Research

Question 2 is to do with whether the 'whole text' and 'partial text' dialog recitation specified in RQ1 facilitates formulaic speech production, and again asks if there is a significant difference between the two in their facilitative effect. Research Question 3 asks if engaging foreign language classroom learners in the 'whole text' and 'partial text' dialog recitation specified in RQ1 facilitates speech fluency as measured by syllables spoken per minute. Again, the question of whether there is a significant difference between the two types of memorization is considered as part of the question. Research Question 4 asks whether these activities favorably affect the attitude of students toward text memorization as a means to develop their oral communication skills, and also compares whole- and partial-text approaches. Finally, the 5th Research Question, as a way of supplementing and enriching the data achieved with the first four Research Questions, seeks to see what variables may have been at play that can explain the differences in the performance of high and low achievers.

Chapter 5 then goes on to set out the rationale for the research study and to describe how it was conducted. A total of 35 university students in Japan, divided into three groups (Treatment Group 1 [TG1]: $n = 12$; Treatment Group 2 [TG2]: $n = 12$; Contrast Group [CG]: $n = 11$), participated in this study. A substantial set of model dialogs (3,182 words in total) was prepared for this study, with the key feature being that each dialog contained many FSs that will be particularly useful when studying abroad. Using this material, TG1 and TG2, taught by the researcher, spent a third or more of each 90-minute class time on 1) the researcher providing formal instruction on a set number of dialogs, 2) the students memorizing and reviewing a given number of dialogs, and 3) the students checking each other on the dialogs that they had memorized. The key difference in how the two courses were taught was that while the students in TG1 were instructed to memorize the dialogs completely, those in TG2 were only instructed to memorize parts of the dialogs with particular focus on those FSs. At the onset of the semester, the participants took a speaking test containing a few quasi-interview questions and filled out a questionnaire, and at the end of the semester they took another speaking test with quasi-interview questions and another questionnaire. The same tests and questionnaires were also administered to the CG, also taught by the researcher.

Chapter 6 presents the results of the speaking tests and questionnaires in numerical and graphic terms. First, for the memorization of the dialogs by the TGs, both

groups were found to have been effectively engaged in the task. Second, for Part 1 of the speaking test ('reading-aloud short sentences'), both TGs demonstrated significantly higher improvements than CG, and TG1 even outperformed TG2. Third, regarding Part 2 of the test ('short translations or directed responses'), while both TGs made significant improvements compared to CG in 'direct application' of the dialogs studied, it was TG1 alone that showed a significant increase in the 'appropriateness' of the responses. Regarding Part 3 of the test ('extensive oral production'), on the other hand, it was CG that was found to have displayed a significant increase in the use of FSs available in the dialog textbook. In terms of fluency of responses (as measured by syllables per minute) in Part 3, however, TG2 was the only group showing a significant advancement. As for the attitudinal items used in both Pre- and Post-Questionnaires, no significant variance was found with any group. Lastly, in regard to the reflective items used in the Post-Questionnaire, several significant differences were found, the most notable one regarding 'favorable change in attitude toward text memorization as a way to learn a variety of features.' In this case, TG1's score was significantly higher than those of TG2 and CG.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings in detail. With respect to Research Question 1, the results indicate that both types of classroom intervention were effective in engaging the learners in memorization over the course of one semester. The same could be said for RQ 2, but the results on the whole suggest that whole-text memorization facilitates formulaic speech production more than partial-text memorization. While the test results indicate an advantage for partial-text memorization for 'direct application,' whole-text memorization appears more effective except in the case of 'modified application.' The use of an additional n-gram analysis also shows, while limitations should be kept in mind, a significant improvement in 'extensive oral production' made only by TG1. An advantage, although a weak one, was found for TG1 on the level of appropriateness of production. For improvement of pronunciation, the results strongly indicate that whole-text recitation is more effective. With regard to RQ 3, the partial-text memorization group showed a significant increase in the number of syllables spoken per minute. What should be borne in mind, however, is the possibility that the whole-text memorization group may have been unintentionally invited to pay more attention to details at the expense of fluency. As for RQ4, TG1's attitude toward text memorization became more positive, which suggests another advantage of adopting a whole-text

memorization approach. Lastly, for RQ 5, an analysis of high and low achievers of the speaking tests with reference to their responses to the quasi-interview questions indicate a number of other variables potentially affecting their performance in the tests and responses to the questionnaire items. Overall the study raised many interesting questions, and implications for teaching and areas for further research are discussed.