

# Cross-linguistic Influence in Chinese EFL Learners' Use of Formulaic Language

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**ABSTRACT:** For Chinese EFL learners formulaic input is favorable due to the lexical features of Mandarin Chinese verbs. Think-aloud study concluded that formulaic input built up a prefabricated strings storage in the learners' mental lexicon. Holistic processing relies on this storage in memory then enhances frequency and idiomaticity of translation output.

**KEYWORD:** formulaic input; Chinese EFL learner; think - aloud

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Besides grammatical correctness and contextual coherence, multi-word expressions can ensure a text's idiomaticity and complexity. The multi-word expressions here refer to native speaker's preferred combinations of words. The meanings of component parts of collocations are fused, in other words, they have unitary meanings, which suggest that they are formulaic, and, presumably, easily retrieved. The main argument of this paper is that for Chinese EFL learners formulaic input is favorable due to the lexical features of Mandarin Chinese verbs. Formulaic input (Wray, 2002) refers to multiword expressions that the learner should be encouraged to learn as form-meaning mappings or meaning units.

The first part of the paper discusses some voices of formulaic language. With an eye to evaluating what views of formulaic language would best serve the learners, some definitions from a varying perspectives are brought to light. In order to meet the needs of Chinese EFL learners, I propose an alternative view that the conception of formulaic language is subtly associated with the lexical features of Mandarin Chinese verbs. The second part proposes a hypothesis that it is more effective to adopt the method of taking formulaic language as an input unit than the way of individual word as a unit, for a cognitive context is constructed, which is compatible with the Chinese adult English learners' internal language cognitive context. Taking formulaic language theory as reference, an experiment think-aloud study was conducted by focusing on Chinese English learners' vocabulary acquisition and taking the verbs of compliments as an example.

## 2 SOME VOICES OF FORMULAIC LANGUAGE

### 2.1 *Formulaic language and nativelike selection*

The notion of mental storage is voiced by Bolinger as early as the mid-seventies: "Speakers do at least as much remembering as they do putting together"(1976:2). According to John Sinclair's idiom principle (1991:110), we tend to store and retrieve a large number of complex items that constitute single choices. The definition of formulaic language is expressed by Wray: "It is the accessing of large prefabricated chunks, and not the formulation and analysis of novel strings, that predominates in normal language processing" (2002:101). Pawley & Syder (1983) view there is no necessary link between grammaticality and naturalness of expression, meaning that grammatical correctness does not imply naturalness of expressions. Pawley & Syder may have been the first linguists to call attention to questions concerned with what is nativelike in a language. In an attempt to do this they make a distinction between nativelike fluency and nativelike selection. Nativelike selection is defined as "the ability of the native speaker routinely to convey his meaning by an expression that is not only grammatical but also nativelike" (1983:191). In other words, nativelike selection, at work in the production of collocations, ensures nativelike fluency.

Collocations are a heterogeneous group of multiword expressions and can take many different forms. Although collocations differ in form, as unitary meaning units, they cut across languages and cultures. In language users' mental lexicon, strings of prefabricated collocations built up a inner

cognitive context in which form, meaning and function mappings are stored holistically.

## 2.2 Inherent formulaic features of Chinese verbs

The morphological structure and grammatical feature of Mandarin Chinese are reflected in phrases which is a typical unit of meaning. In Mandarin Chinese, the constructive principles of phrases are always corresponding to that of sentences. Phrase or collocation, with a unitary meaning and function in a certain context of situation or frame, is the core unit of grammatical structure. Some grammarians regard phrase as a basic meaning unit in Mandarin Chinese system (Zhu, 1985; Lv,) They argue that the inner logical relationships of both phrase and sentence are usually displayed on a similar basis. The boundary between phrase and word as a meaning unit seems to be obscure. In this sense, it is worth noting that there are inherent features in Mandarin Chinese.

Many verbs as a single-form word in Mandarin Chinese demonstrate multi-meaning, e.g. “da” and “chi” (Xue, 2014). The collocation forms of these verbs show unitary trend. Verb- direction construction and resultative construction are two typical types, e.g. “da qi lai” and “da de ying”. Chinese verbs contain inherent formulaic features.

## 3 THINK ALOUD STUDY

### 3.1 Aim and procedure

Different verb input processing, single-word input and verb collocation input may take varying effects on learner’s output regarding the inherent formulaic features of Chinese verbs. Can the different input approaches activate learners’ cognition in different way? The think-aloud study demonstrates learner’s attempts.

A group of verbs of compliments is taken as

classification in terms of meaning, including *praise, boast, commend, compliment and flatter*. *Compliment* is a noun, but it contains behavioral meaning. Researcher adopts different ways to teach this group of verbs of compliments to experimental group subjects and control group subjects respectively. Then a Chinese – English translation test regarding these verbs of compliments is conducted and the think-aloud study is taken simultaneously. The subjects are Chinese EFL learners on intermediate level. There are 30 people in each group.

### 3.2 Hypotheses

The hypotheses are:

1. During the intermediate period of vocabulary input it is more effective to adopt the method of taking formulaic language as an input unit than the way of individual word as a unit, for a cognitive context is constructed, which is compatible with the Chinese adult English learners' internal language cognitive context.

2. The experimental group tends to produce more idiomatic output.

### 3.3 Results and discussion

The cognitive context alternation quantity can reflect the extent of activation of formulaic input on learner’s cognitive context. The cognitive context alternation quantity is based on the number of utterances transcribed from think-aloud study in the process of translation implying activation of formulaic input.

In order to ensure the validity of think –aloud study, an additional review interview is conducted. The cognitive context alternation quantity in both of the two studies is listed in the following chart.

Correlations

Table 1 Mean value and correlation of cognitive context alternation quantity in think-aloud and retrospective interview

cognitive context alternation quantity in think-aloud study	Pearson Correlation	1	.938(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	10	10
cognitive context alternation quantity in review interview	Pearson Correlation	.938(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	10	10

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Correlation between the two cognitive context alternation quantities in both of the studies is 0.938, showing the positive correlation. The statistics testifies validity of think –aloud data analysis.

A qualitative study is conducted and the result shows that during the cognitive process of translation the biggest difference between experiment group and control group is reflected on the option of language unit. Subjects switch to a

different language code and they extract specific meaning units from their mental lexicon. The experiment group obviously displays cognitively unitary features on this aspect while the control group tends to be analytical due to the different vocabulary acquisition strategies.

It is concluded that formulaic input activates subjects' inner cognitive context. They tend to extract formula or lexical chunks from their mental lexicon promptly and attach some usages to the established grammar rules in their minds. In such case, idiom principle takes effect. The control group relatively spends longer time to extract individual word and compare then match them together based on the rules. The experiment group is relatively fluent and their target production is relatively idiomatic. In addition, formulaic input of verbs of compliments in this study built up a prefabricated strings storage in the learners' mental lexicon. Holistic processing relies on this storage in memory then enhances frequency and idiomaticity of translation output.

#### 4 OVERALL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

This paper addresses formulaic language input from three perspectives. First, formulaic language has the established form, meaning and linguistic context as a whole, which corresponds to the salient feature of Chinese --- lexical collocation establishing holistic structure and semantic meaning. This feature of Chinese has been an implicit cognition in the Chinese adult learners' internal cognitive context. Once it is activated by the method of formulaic input there will be an optimized relevance in Chinese English learners' cognitive context in which the process of understanding, memorizing, storage, intake, selecting and use lexical chunks can be simplified. Second, A lexical teaching experiment

was designed and the result proves the effectiveness of formulaic input, that is, the "big word" unit. Then the think-aloud experiment data verified the proposed formulaic language context constructing function hypothesis. Third, the formulaic language context constructing function is proposed within the vocabulary teaching framework. The abstract grammatical meaning, realistic discourse meaning as well as the pragmatic function are involved in this context in which the formulaic verbs carrying "meaningful grammar" and "realistic meaning" are processed as a whole and stored in memory holistically, then are activated in a certain rhetoric context. Thus the language processing is optimized and the learners' output accuracy and complexity are improved.

#### 5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work is supported by National Natural Science Foundation (NNSF) of China (Grants 61263002 & 61374054)

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