A Study of the Formulaic Sequences in Three English Textbooks Designed for Chinese Junior School Students

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Abstract: The present study analyzed frequency and features of the FSs in three Chinese junior school English textbooks, based on empirical studies and research from the corpus. The results suggest that the FSs are given less focus in English textbooks than the individual words and are mainly being taught through discourses. FSs have important functions to the improvement of language proficiency. In particular, in terms of the interpersonal function of achieving communicative goals and increasing speech fluency, there are also some implications for textbook design and FSs teaching to develop Chinese junior students' pragmatic competence in English.

1. Literature review

1.1 Definition of FSs

According to Conklin & Schmitt (2008), FSs are an essential component of language use since language production and processing are largely based on a holistic retrieval of word sequences as a single chunk instead of a creative formation of utterances in light of grammar rules (Martinez& Schmitt, 2012; Wood, 2006). Wray (2000) defined formulaic sequences as following words:

'a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar.'

According to the statement, formulaic sequences are different from single words in conversation. For instance, "when will the party take place", the phrase "take place" here is the formulaic language in this sentence. From previous studies, a number of terms have been used to define formulaic sequences from different research focus or contextual conditions, such as "phrasal expressions" (Martinez, R. & Schmitt, N., 2012) and "multi-word sequences" (Butler, C.S., 2003). Yan&Ding (2011) suggested the FSs can be identified as any word combination with a complete syntactic structure and semantic meaning that can be found in an authoritative dictionary. In this paper, FSs refers to those continuous or discontinuous sequences of words contained in the English textbook's word list, with a syntactically and semantically well-formed structure, which can be stored and produced holistically.

1.2 Classification of FSs

Compare with single words, there has been a lack of frequency lists for FSs, one possible reason might be the classification of formula languages is concerned to be more complex. Shin & Nation (2008) presented a list of most frequent collocations of spoken English, criteria used to classify the FSs in this study is the frequency, the grammatical well-formedness, and meanings. Focused on academic speech and writing, Simpson-Vlach & Ellis (2010) post the academic formulas list, based on frequent recurrent patterns in corpora of written and spoken language, the FSs are classified according to their predominant pragmatic function for academic purposes instruction. Another Phrase List of FSs was provided by Martinez & Schmitt (2012), which was created using the 100 million word British National Corpus (BNC). Selection criteria for this list based on the frequency, meaningfulness, and non-compositionality.

Following Halliday's (1994) functional grammar, Butler (2003) grouped FSs according to their meta-functions, suggested three types of function to classify the FSs. The first is interpersonal function, relating to speech acts being conveyed or the attitudes of the speaker, such as the expression of thanks(e.g. thank you very much, that would be very nice); speaker agreement or disagreement(e.g. agree with); assessments of probability(e.g. it seems to me that, the truth is that, with or without negative); point of view(e.g.from the point of view); as well as other speaker comments(e.g. and I said well, let's/we'll see if/whether). The second is textual function, refers to information management in the text, meaning that information which could have been specified is being added in general terms to that which has already been provided (e.g. that sort of thing, and so on), or giving emphasis to particular elements of the message (e.g. the thing is that, that's what, in the sense that, and therefore). The last is the ideational function, which concerned with building and maintaining a theory of experience, such as the processes, entities, qualities described in the text (e.g. in the House of Commons), or expressions of time and place (e.g. at the end/beginning/bottom of the, in the middle of the, and at the same time, when it comes to, at the time of).

Since this paper aims to analyze the features, especially the functional features of the FSs in English textbooks, Butler's system would be suitable to categorize the FSs into different type of functions to investigate their features. This system is clearly classified and easy to operate, as well as conforming to the context of the research objects.

1.3 Empirical studies of teaching FSs to Chinese ESL learners

A range of corpus-based studies focus on Chinese ESL learners found that native speakers outperformed Chinese ESL learners in FSs use and high-level Chinese ESL learners outperformed low-levels learners(Wei＆Lei,2011), which indicated the importance of FSs in English teaching. However, only a few of studies over the past several decades related to teaching Chinese ESL learners FSs in textbooks. Haiyan, M.(2014) explored the distributional and acquisitional features of FSs in multimodal Chinese college English textbooks, found the frequency of FSs in the listening-speaking textbook is significantly higher than that of the reading-writing textbook but Chinese English learners are generally not sensitive to these FSs. In order to increase Chinese ESL learners' comprehension of FSs, Wenhua Hsu, (2014) identified the most widely used FSs in college textbooks for non-English majors, created a semantically non-transparent subset of formulaic language for ESL undergraduates for receptive use. There is still a lack of research on analysis of the FSs in junior high school English textbooks, hence this study will fill the current gap in related fields.

2. Rationale, Research Questions, and Methods

2.1 Rationale and research questions

Compared with individual words, FSs convey more functions of social interaction. It provides strong evidence that more research into teaching FSs in textbooks is urgently needed for suggestions of the development of language teaching and learning. In particular for language teachers, to get more understanding of the distribution and features of FSs from the textbooks could assist them to modify or adjust their teaching to build students' communicative ability in English. From this purpose, the paper aims to discuss two main questions:

(1) What is the frequency of the FSs in the word list in three Chinese junior English textbooks?

(2) What are the general features of the FSs in three Chinese junior high school English textbooks?

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Research objects

This assignment attempts to analyze the FSs in the word list in three English textbooks named *Go for It*, designed for Grade 7, Grade 8 and Grade 9 students in Chinese junior middle school.

2.2.2 Data collections

The formulaic sequences which contained in the word list will be collected from the three textbooks. Due to the number of FSs in textbooks being relatively small, all of the FSs in the textbook's word list will be collected for analysis.

2.2.3 Data analysis

For question 1, the frequency of FSs indicates the number of FSs divided by the total number of words in the word list, the result will be presented in percentage. For question 2, as explained in the literature review above, this paper employed Butler's (2003) Multi-word sequences model as classification standard to categorize the FS. The data will be divided and encoded into three different function categories: textual, interpersonal, and ideational.

3. Results

3.1 Frequency of the FSs in the word list in three Chinese junior English textbooks

The data demonstrates that compared with individual words, the frequency of the FSs contained in the word list is much lower. The grade 8 textbook contains the most FSs in the word list, accounting for 19.3% and surpassed the average percentage (16%). The other two textbooks have the similar percentage of frequency, textbook grade 9 contains an approximative number of FSs with grade 8, but it also has the largest number of words.

3.2 General features of the FSs in three Chinese junior high school English textbooks

3.2.1 Ideational FSs and Textual FSs occupies most dominant and lowest position respectively throughout the FSs learning

3.2.2 The enhancing interpersonal function

3.2.3 The mastery of FSs based on discourse practice.

Despite the little ups and downs of the interpersonal FSs number, in higher-grade textbooks, the given conversations which contained with the related FSs, become increasingly complex and longer. Students are gradually required not only learn the meaning of FSs but also try to use them to express their views and attitudes on specific circumstances.

4. Discussion

4.1 Frequency of the FSs in the word list in three Chinese junior English textbooks

As can be found from the findings, the frequency of FSs contained in the word list of three junior high school English textbooks is much lower than the single words.　This result is not surprising because most ESL learners even teachers still tend to think of vocabulary acquisition as the learning of individual words, although it has been estimated that FSs make up between 20 and 60% of spoken and written English discourse (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012).　Such lack of awareness might influence the textbooks design, which could not give enough attention to the selection of FSs. Another possible reason for this phenomena is that L2 learners, even at the high levels of language proficiency, know and use fewer FSs than native speakers.　In fact, as Swan (2006) rightly points out, "the size of the FSs makes it totally impracticable to take native-speaker phraseological competence, as a realistic target for L2 learners".　It is true that for the majority of L2 learners, trying to remember as many FSs as possible cannot be the most effective way to learn English.　In related fields, Wible's (2008) finding stated it could be particularly challenging for EFL learners to notice and acquire FSs if their primary source of second language input comes as text.　Perhaps this view was also taken into account in the selection of FSs for Chinese junior high school students' English textbooks.

4.2 General features of the FSs in three Chinese junior high school English textbooks

According to the results, firstly, in Go For It textbooks, the ideational FSs and the textual FSs occupies most dominant and least position respectively throughout the FSs learning.　This finding to some extent matches Yan and Ding's (2011) study of Chinese EFL learners' FSs usage, which ideational FSs also being the largest category.　They suggested that progress in L2 learning was more marked in the use of meaning-driven nominal groups, but there lacks sufficient evidence to support this claim.　As for the textual FSs, according to Halliday (1994), the textual function is different from both ideational and interpersonal functions because its object is language itself.　The textual FSs convey meanings from the other two modes and combine a new coherent text.　For Chinese junior high school students, the main purpose of learning FSs is to increase their vocabulary, they do not have sufficient language ability to make various organized texts with textual FSs, perhaps that could somehow explain why the number of textual FSs takes the least position in the textbooks.

Secondly, the interpersonal function of FSs generally enhances as the language level improves. This probably related with the role of the FSs in language use.　An essential role of FSs in language

use, is in achieving communicative goals, which points to the interpersonal function of the FSs. In fact there is no doubt that a lot of speech acts can be achieved by using FSs, such as expressions of thanks, apologies, requests, compliments, and greetings. Beside this, another role of FSs is to increase speech fluency or decrease processing effort since they appear to be stored in the long-term memory as single memorized units and can, therefore, be processed and accessed more quickly and easily than the same sequences of words when generated creatively. This statement has been supported by several studies (Jiang & Nekrasova, 2007) and can be used as a theoretical support for the role of FSs in enhancing interpersonal functions. Thirdly, in this three junior high school textbooks, the mastery of FSs is mainly based on practicing through discourse. This method of learning FSs is supported by Ohlrogge's (2009) findings, which identified that judgments of L2 proficiency increased when learners used more formulaic language. It is worth noting that Martinez and Schmitt (2002) have already found FSs are widespread in language use and are able to improve the overall impression of L2 learners'language production. The dialogue practice could facilitate learners' realization of the meanings and functions of FSs, processing advantages. At the same time, it can be seen as a review. The importance of reviewing FSs can be found in Alali and Schmitt's study(2012), it confirms a result obtained in virtually all other research into L2 vocabulary: that learners have to engage with words numerous times in order to learn them. The above findings all indicate it is effective to learn FSs by discourse practice.

4.3 Implications

4.3.1 for textbook design

The finding from the study indicates the FSs are given far less focus in THE THREE English textbooks than individual words, which might provide some implications for textbook designers. Firstly IT HELPS to select the appropriate formulaic sequences to teach with, which must be frequent in both general and specific English of use to the learners. From this point of view, some research which has been mentioned in the literature review, carried out to develop useful lists of FSs and could be helpful to the textbook design, for instance, the PHRASE List created by Martinez and Schmitt (2012). The pedagogic purposes are to focus on the most frequent FSs in British written English. Therefore the top 10 FSs from the total of 505 items might be considered to select for teaching(they are: have to, there is/are, such as, going to, of course, a few, at least, such a(an), I mean, and a lot). Obviously, the other lists also have great implication and a reference value, such as The Academic Formulas List (AFL) developed by Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010), can be helpful especially in an EAP course since it illustrates the formulaic expressions occurring most frequently in academic discourse, compiled from both spoken and written corpora. For spoken English, Shin & Nation's (2008) list of most frequent collocations can be taken as reference. When using these lists, designers need to be cautious about the size and representativeness of the corpus or corpora on which such lists are based.

4.3.2 For FSs teaching

Conzett (2000) made a comment in this area that the most important thing for teachers is to shift their and their students' focus away from individual words to FSs because they improve the fluency and accuracy of the English students produce. It reminds us to raise awareness of and interest in FSs and to teach them effectively in the EFL classroom.

4.4 Limitations

There are some limitations of this study, the first one is the identification of FSs. The concept of

FS is far more complicated and encompasses more aspects than those been analyzed in the paper. Therefore, this analysis can only represent part of the total stock of FSs.

Other limitations concern methodological constraints, such as the research objective, since the word list analysis in textbooks is largely product-oriented, it is unable to examine the process of FSs learning from psychological and cognitive perspectives. Related research in the future might require more attention to students' interaction and the goals of the language classroom.

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