Formulaic time buyers for young foreign language learners

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Multiword units of language, known as formulaic sequences, are pervasive and essential in communication (Wray, 2008). Although issues related to formulaicity have been under investigation in a number of research studies (e.g. Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Wood, 2006), the present study is different in investigating the functions of formulaic sequences in the oral language production of young learners in the context of English as a foreign language. A class of 11 students (aged 9 to 11) was observed and video recorded for 16 sessions (90 minutes per session). Following transcription of selected speech samples, formulaic sequences were identified based on pre-established criteria. Analysis enabled categorisation of a range of functions for formulaic sequences in learners’ oral language production. Results revealed evidence that formulaic sequences performed a variety of roles in the learners’ language production. These sequences helped young language learners to improve their fluency, to economize effort on processing and also to buy time for processing. A significant novel finding of this study was evidence that language users might introduce dis-fluency in the production of their sequences in order to buy time for further processing.

Keywords: formulaic sequences, early foreign language learning, time buyers, oral language production

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language in a classroom context might introduce various challenges for language learners. Learners receive a limited amount of exposure to the target language and have few opportunities to practice their language production. Due to restricted input, foreign language learners have a limited repertoire of the frequently used set-Phrases to be able to produce fluent language. This may
limit learners’ ability for effective and fluent communication in the target language (Pinter, 2006).

Many scholars have discovered the significant influence of prefabricated phrases, also known as formulaic sequences (FS), in language learning which came as a counter argument to the concept of Universal Grammar (Beckner et al., 2009; Chomsky, 2004; Sinclair, 1991)). FS have been identified as a foundation for spoken discourse making up a large proportion of discourse (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Erman & Warren, 2000). Research findings on psycholinguistic processing of FS have confirmed that, since FS are stored and retrieved from the memory as a single unit, they are processed more quickly and hence function as essential tools to reduce the time for online language processing and increase fluency (Biber et al., 2004; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wong Fillmore, 1976; Wood, 2006, 2010). In addition, Carrol & Conklin (2020) have proposed that frequency of a phrase can lead to processing advantage for a language learner; that is, recurrent sequences are processed faster compared to novel phrases. Thus, FS could be of substantial value for foreign language learners.

These factors are particularly pertinent for young learners learning a foreign language in classroom settings, where they may experience a number of challenges. Significantly, the very ‘foreignness’ of the language may present a challenge in the sense that, as Cameron (2001) suggests, the language “belongs to people in a distant and strange culture” (p. 241). While this sense of ‘foreignness’ may present difficulties for children, it is less likely to be experienced so acutely by adult learners, who may already have some exposure to English in their lives given the pervasive presence of English in digital media and popular music in many parts of the world today (Azkarai & Oliver, 2018; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2017). In the case of Iran however (the focus of this study), such access tends to be more limited and children rely substantially on their teacher and the classroom input for moving their learning forward. The additional factor of the linguistic differences between Farsi (an Iranian language employing a modified version of Arabic alphabets) and English may also present difficulties for young learners given their reliance on holistic ways of language learning grounded in their focus on communicating meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). In contrast, the greater analytical capacity of adults, attributable to cognitive maturity, facilitates explicit learning which may enable more rapid progress in foreign language learning (Ellis, 2008).

The present study was inspired by mounting evidence regarding the significance of FS in language learning (Mitchell & Myles, 2019; Wood, 2015; Wray, 2008). However, as Wood (2015) states, there is still very little understanding of the role of formulaic language in spoken communication. This research gap is particularly evident in respect of young foreign language learners use of FS in classroom contexts.
In this paper we will investigate issues regarding early foreign language learning and the role of formulaic language. Drawing on evidence, which confirms that FS are a frequent and pervasive aspect of language, this study investigates the production and usage of FS by young foreign language learners who learn English mainly in a classroom context in Iran.

2. Background

In this section we define the key concepts and review the theoretical background and empirical studies on formulaicity in second/foreign language learning. It is essential here to clarify the distinction between second and foreign language. Second language is acquired through implicit, informal or natural exposure to the language in a setting in which the language is spoken or taught in the local community. In contrast, a foreign language is generally not spoken in the local community and in most cases is learned in a formal language instruction setting (Cameron, 2003). According to this model, the present study focuses on foreign language learning. However, in the following literature review the term second/foreign language (L2/FL) will be used since, sometimes there is lack of clear division in the literature on the distinction between these two. Where significant, the distinction will be indicated.

2.1 Definition and identification of formulaic sequences

Adopting a psycholinguistic perspective, Wray (2008) encourages viewing formulaicity as the way a certain sequence is handled by a particular individual (learner internal approach), rather than attributing formulaicity to sequences in the language (learner external approach). The rationale for her argument is that a sequence which might be formulaic for one language user, for instance for the speaker, need not be formulaic for another, for instance for the listener. Introducing the term processing unit Myles and Cordier (2017) define a learner internal sequence as “a multiword semantic/functional unit that presents a processing advantage for a given speaker, either because it is stored whole in their lexicon or because it is highly automatised” (p.12). Further, they emphasise that when investigating psycholinguistic validity of a particular sequence for L2 learners, studies should consider sequences that are relevant to the L2 context. L2 learners might produce some non-native like utterances which still can be categorised as formulaic sequences. During the process of second language learning, a sequence might be stored and retrieved as a whole unit with some features misperceived, for instance thanks god instead of thank god (Wood, 2006). This study was conducted
in a foreign language context (Iran) where the learners have limited contact with English outside the classroom and/or with English native speakers; hence, the sequences that these learners use frequently can differ from the frequent sequences that native speakers use in a natural context. In this study we adopt a psycholinguistic approach with a focus on the individual learner (learner internal approach). One of the most widely used definitions of FS is presented by Wray (2002), who defines FS as:

A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other 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.  

(Wray, 2002, p. 9)

Wray’s definition is used for the purposes of the present study. However, as Wray (2004) notes, this definition is not enough for the identification of FS in a set of data since it cannot be directly operationalized in an empirical study. The solution proposed by a number of researchers (e.g. Myles, 2004; Wood, 2010; Wray, 2008) for the identification of FS in a data set is the application of criteria checklists that combine features typically associated with formulaic language. Likewise, for the purpose of this study we adopted a checklist presented by Wray and Namba (2003) (see Section 3).

2.2 Formulaic sequences in second/foreign language learning

During the past decades, a number of applied linguists have highlighted the considerable values of the omnipresent prefabricated sequences in language instruction and acquisition. This argument introduced a challenge to the traditional view of lexis. Traditionally, lexis was seen as individual words and language teaching which centred on the teaching of these individual units as the most basic language elements (Schmitt, 2010). The approach was partly inspired by a rule-based paradigm of language acquisition which emphasised the power of syntax to create novel utterances (Weinert, 1995). However, Wray (2002) suggests a compromise between a rule-based system where language is subject to generation and analysis and a holistic system where sequences are “stored and retrieved whole from memory” (Wray, 2002, p. 9). She stresses the rule-based system is crucial for language to avoid lack of novelty and creativity while, without the holistic system, language would sound “unidiomatic and pedestrian” (p.183). According to Wray’s (2002) model, FS have considerable value on the grounds of their effect on interaction and the processing advantages for language users. The diversity of uses appears to depend upon several factors, including “maturational level, language knowledge, and personal interactional need” (Wray & Perkins, 2000, p. 9).
In a more recent study, Wood (2010) conducted an exploratory investigation on the role of FS on adult learners’ speech fluency development. The participants were eleven international learners in a programme for English as a second language at a Canadian University. The study involved watching and retelling three silent movies twice, with a three-month interval between the viewings. According to the findings of his study, Wood (2010) proposed that adult second language (L2) learners might rely heavily on the application of FS to extend the utterance and avoid pausing, which might help them to create an illusion of increased fluency (note: this may also apply to FL learners). In situations learners could apply FS as fillers in order to buy time to formulate the next stretch of speech. Wray’s (1999) broad survey of the literature on formulaic language revealed that the use of FS to extend the run in conversation is more prevalent in adults (assuming they have no specific language difficulties) than in children. This finding relates to both native and non-native speakers of the L2/FL. In addition, it is suggested that L2/FL learners are more likely to rely on immediate repetition as time buyers. Thus, the learner uses these “prefabricated time buying sequences” to promote fluency and protect the turn during planning (Wray, 1999; Wray & Perkins, 2000, p.17).

2.3 Formulaicity and young language learners

According to McKay (2006) the term *young language learner* can be applied to those who learn a second or foreign language during the first six or seven years of formal schooling. Some researchers such as Pinter (2006) use the term to refer to children from “five to fourteen years of age” (p.1), while McKay (2006) considers the learners between the age of “approximately five and twelve” (p.1). In the context of the present study, the term ‘young language learner’ refers to children aged 9–11.

Young language learners differ from adult learners with reference to the approach towards the analysis of linguistic aspects. According to Pinter (2017) children are more holistic learners who focus on meaning and the whole message delivered rather than on analysing the structure of the language. They are keen on the immediate use of language and can use language before they learn its rules (Cameron, 2003; Lázaro Ibarrola, & Ángeles Hidalgo, 2017; Mitchell & Myles, 2019; Pinter, 2017). Hasselgreen (2000) also refers to young language learners’ limited attention span and points to their particular need for play and fun. These attributes may be particularly relevant when considering their use of FS with regard to the different functions of formulaic sequences (mentioned in Section 3).
2.4 Functions of formulaic sequences

Since a discussion of the functions of formulaic sequences evolves around the concept of ‘function’ as such, an understanding of this notion seems essential. Scholars have accorded various definitions to the term language function. Cook (1985) considers language function as the purpose for which people use language; while Thomas (2009) defines language function as the communicative functions involved in an oral, interactive, or discursive interchange; whereas Green (2012) asserts that language functions are social actions that people intend to accomplish through the use of language. In this study function refers to what learners do with formulaic sequences as they engage with content and interact with others. That is functions represent the active use of sequences for a specific purpose.

Wray & Perkins (2000) developed a set of categories of functions of FS, with sub-categories including such items as time buyers (fillers, turn holders...).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation of others</td>
<td>Satisfying physical emotional and cognitive needs</td>
<td>Commands, requests, politeness markers, bargains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asserting separate identity</td>
<td>Being taken seriously</td>
<td>Storytelling, turn claimers and holders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asserting group identity</td>
<td>Overall membership</td>
<td>Rituals, threats, group chants, forms of address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devices of social interaction</td>
<td>Place in hierarchy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing shortcuts</td>
<td>Increased production speed and/or fluency</td>
<td>Standard phrases, standard ideational labels with agreed meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-buyers</td>
<td>Vehicles for fluency, rhythm and emphasis</td>
<td>Standard phrases with simple meaning, fillers, turn holders, discourse shape markers, repetitions of preceding input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation of information</td>
<td>Gaining and retaining access to information otherwise unlikely to be remembered</td>
<td>Mnemonics, lengthy texts one is required to learn, rehearsal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This list is regarded as a comprehensive list of functions of formulaic sequences which is also used as a framework for the purpose of the present study.
2.5 Empirical studies on the role of formulaic sequences in second/foreign language learning

Classroom research studies have demonstrated that FS are ubiquitous in the language production of L2/FL learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002; Boers et al., 2006; Girard & Sionis, 2003; Myles et al., 1998, 1999; Taguchi, 2007; Wible et al., 2011; Wood, 2010). One of the most comprehensive and leading studies of FS in child second language acquisition is Wong Fillmore’s (1976) study of five Spanish-speaking children (5–7 years old) during the process of their integration into a school in the United States (English medium of instruction). Over a one-year period of classroom observation Wong Fillmore found that children applied FS to establish and sustain social relations and also to use them as basic materials to feed their developing linguistic system. They applied FS to start speaking the language before they knew the underlying structures. They memorized and used certain sequences such as “wanna play?” to interact with their English-speaking peers who could then provide further useful sequences in the context. Wong Fillmore concluded that the acquisition of FS is central to learning of the second language and that formulas provide the basis for further analysis and grammatical development.

Myles et al. (1998) investigated the role of FS in the development of emerging grammatical competence by tracing the development of certain FS in the language production of 16 foreign language learners of French at the age 11–12, in a British school. The findings provided positive evidence of a developmental link between formulaic language and grammatical productivity; the classroom context could provide input that was conducive to formulaic intake, use and subsequent analysis. The researchers observed variation among the learners in the study ranging from those who never managed to break down the sequences to those who succeeded in doing so.

In another study, through a qualitative analysis of adult learners’ speech samples Wood (2010) identified some functions of FS which improved the development of speech fluency. According to the findings of his study, FS helped the learners to extend the utterance and avoid pausing. FS were employed by the learners as fillers in order to buy time to remember the events and to formulate the next stretch of speech. Learners could repeat a sequence, or use multiple sequences in one utterance, to lengthen their utterance.

The aforementioned studies are among the ground-breaking research in the field of formulaicity due to their focus on some significant issues with regard to formulaic language in different contexts and with learners from different age groups.
The present study is distinct from the above-mentioned research with regard to the age of the learners, context of study and also the research design and aim. Both the age of these learners and the context of the study (foreign language learning context) are also different from most studies on formulaicity in second language acquisition since they have generally been carried out in naturalistic contexts.

2.6 Summary

The review of the literature has revealed that, despite the mounting interest in different aspects of formulaicity, the limited research into the teaching and learning of FS has left many questions unanswered. Many of the studies concerning formulaicity to date have tended to focus on adult advanced learners, mainly in immersion programmes. However, very little is known about formulaic language in a foreign language context (Wood, 2015). Moreover, there are limited accounts of formulaicity usage by young foreign language learners who are not exposed to real communication in the foreign language outside the classroom. In sum, as Wray (2002) underlines, we “miss some striking differences in the patterns of form and function between different types of learner” (p. 145). All in all, this study is distinctive in two respects: First, the learner characteristics, namely age (young language learners, 9–11 years old) and first language background (Farsi), and second, the learning context (foreign language context). This study therefore sought to answer the following research question:

- What are the functions of FS in the oral language production of young foreign language learners?

3. Method

The study drew on a convenience sample of 11 young language learners (aged 9–11) who had been studying English for about three years in a private language school in Iran. According to the teacher, the learners’ level of proficiency could be estimated approximately at A2 level. Both the teacher and the learners were Farsi native speakers and English was their foreign language. Based on the results of the parents’ survey, the learners had little or no exposure to English beyond the classroom.

The data of this study were collected using observation, video and audio recordings of a total of 16 lessons, conducted in the classroom setting. Observational field notes were collected during the sessions where the researcher had
a non-participant role, taking notes of the setting, actions, and conversations. Lessons were also video recorded with a camera set in a fixed position. Additionally, three voice recorders were positioned around the classroom with the aim of effectively capturing learner language. The data collection period of 2.5 months included a total of 16 × 90 minute sessions. The observations, video and audio recordings led to approximately 1,440 minutes of recordings, together with observational field notes for each session.

Following data collection, all recordings were reviewed and ten sessions identified for full transcription. The selected sessions (total duration 900 minutes) were considered most likely to contain significant evidence of FS in use, since there were more instances of learners’ oral language production in those sessions. In addition, observational field notes prepared during data collection provided full accounts of the selected sessions.

Based on the review of previous studies, a list of criteria was prepared for the identification of FS in this study. A proponent of the use of such checklists was Wray (2002) and later Wray and Namba (2003) presented a checklist consisting of 11 criteria. This checklist was adopted and developed in a number of groundbreaking studies in the field (e.g., Myles, 2004; Wood, 2010). In keeping with this, the following checklist was adopted for the purposes of this study, based on a synthesis of the checklists referred to in the above-mentioned studies. It should be noted that these studies suggest that it is not necessary for each of the sequences selected to meet all of the criteria in order to be considered formulaic. Hence, in this study some sequences can be distinguished as formulaic if they meet one or two criteria.

- Well-formedness of a sequence compared to a more creative language production (A sequence beyond the speaker’s current knowledge of grammar)
- Odd syntactic or semantic function in the sentence
- Phonologically coherent utterance (fluently articulated, non-hesitant)
- A sequence used repeatedly in the same form
- A particular formulation, which is the one most commonly used by the individual speaker when conveying a specific idea (i.e. individualised sequences which learners use repeatedly).
- A sequence associated with a particular situation (e.g. during a game: it’s my turn)
- Community-wide in use (shared classroom knowledge; sequences that learners use frequently in their class, e.g. may I go out)
- The repetition of the previous utterance (e.g. I think, I think, I think we need this)
Combined with other language units without applying necessary change. (e.g. I love you horse)  

In summary, for operational purposes, the general consensus among scholars in the field of formulaicity is that phonological coherence of FS should be regarded as a crucial distinctive feature (Bybee, 2002; Hickey, 1993; Mitchell & Myles, 2019; Myles et al., 1998; Wood 2010; Wray, 2008). As an example, when analysing the data, we observed an instance when a learner who produced a sequence (“I don’t know”) fluently and frequently, had problems producing the utterance (“I know”) during the same session. The learner who was searching for the word “know” asked the teacher in Farsi for help. The discrepancy between the application of the well-formed sequence “I don’t know” which was produced fluently and the learner’s hesitation/not remembering the word “know” could be a clear indication that the sequence “I don’t know” was stored and retrieved as a whole and could be considered as a formulaic sequence. Similarly, there were sequences such as “may I go out” which were produced frequently and fluently by all 11 learners of the study; hence, this community wide in use utterance was considered as a formulaic sequence (see Section 4).

Despite this pre-established list of criteria, it was still sometimes problematic to mark what exactly could be defined as formulaic. However, several factors contributed assistance in addressing this challenging task. First, the context of the study was a foreign language setting where the learners learned the language mainly in the classroom. Thus, learners’ language repertoire was limited and also it was possible to trace the input that they received. Additionally, familiarity with the context, learners’ first language and the usual classroom routines were helpful. A further effective source of information was the notes from the post-lesson reviews with the teacher. The learner-internal approach adopted in the study for the identification of FS meant that a thorough familiarity with the learners’ language practice and knowledge was essential. Observation of all 16 sessions during the data collection provided a comprehensive overall knowledge of classroom events and of the individual learners’ language repertoire. In addition, the recordings were revisited several times before and during transcription. This intense familiarity with the data facilitated the recognition of FS; for instance, the researcher was easily able to recognise many sequences used in the community, such as: May I go out; good bye, see you later. It should be noted that all the sequences were identified based on the checklist criteria. All the identified sequences met at least one or two criteria from the checklist; however, one unexpected phenomenon was identified which was not in the checklist (see Section 4.4).
The functions of formulaic sequences were classified based on the categories provided by Wray and Perkins (2000) (see Section 2.4). According to Wray (2013) FS can have different functions and meanings in different contexts. Therefore, for the task of classification of the functions, the context where a FS was used plus the knowledge about the learners’ approaches and language repertoire were helpful.

Triangulation was established through checking both the intra-rater and inter-rater consistency. The repeated review of the data secured the intra-rater reliability and the inter-rater reliability was assessed with the assistance of an external expert reviewing a selection of the identified FS and their recognized functions. In addition to the two authors of the study, a young language learner specialist from Umeå University reviewed the sequences. Agreement between the raters (98%) confirmed reliability. With instances of disagreement, further analysis of the data was conducted and followed by elaborated discussions between the raters. For instance, on the case of disfluent sequences the raters did not agree on considering the disfluent utterances (e.g. may I:: dri::nk water) as formulaic; however, after reviewing and analysing the data in more depth and seeking advice from a second external rater (a university professor), all raters agreed that the utterances could be considered as formulaic. Utterances were accepted as formulaic if two or all the raters were in agreement.

4. Results

In the analysis of the data the main set of categories of functions was adopted from Wray and Perkins (see Section 2.3). Although a number of categories and subcategories relevant to the functions of formulaic sequences were identified in this study, due to the limited space, this article mainly presents, the results with regard to one specific function of FS: compensatory devices for memory limitations and the relevant subcategories. The young learners’ classroom language productions were examined to determine the possible functions of FS. The data revealed learners’ tendency for employing FS as a speech strategy in their oral language productions, trying to use particular sequences to fill gaps in communication and avoid long pauses, where possible. Learners applied different types of time buyers such as fillers, repetition and utterance launchers in their utterances. Presented below are the descriptions and examples of each category of functions of FS. Participants are identified by pseudonyms. For the transcription codes refer to Appendix A.
4.1 Fillers

Many of the long utterances produced by young language learners in this study could be identified by the presence of a single phrase or formula which was repeated during an utterance. The function or meaning of these sequences could vary substantially. Sometimes they carried meaning and at other times they appeared not to convey a propositional meaning at all. In some instances the learners added these sequences to their utterances as fillers, which helped them to maintain the fluency of their speech. This evidence reflects the findings of Wray and Perkins (2000) who introduced fillers as one of the subtypes of time buying formulas which offer “planning time without losing turn” (p. 16).

Some of the common fillers used by the learners of this study included, “like this”, “I think”, “and then” and “I don’t know but”. The following examples illustrate some of the many occasions on which this feature was employed. For clarity, the relevant sequences are underlined.

(1) (During a role play about summer holidays)
   **Anita:** I go to the ice cream shop(.) and(.) my friend have a one bowl(.) like this(.) have a ice cream(.) and have smarties, like this(.) was very good

(2) (Referring to a picture in the book)
   **Teacher:** What are they wearing?
   **Mobina:** teacher(.) I think(.) here is(.) pink(.) I don’t like it… I think(.) red and white T-shirt is good

(3) (Summarising a story)
   **Hiva:** … giant is very selfish(.) and(.) very angry(.) and(.) and then(.) one day at the winter (0.2) one day at the winter(.) children one- ma-find a one hole at the wall(.) and then (0.2) going to the garden and play

(4) (Discussing a picture in a story book)
   **Hiva:** … she(.) its a selfish(.) and say it’s for me… (0.2) and(.) going to the(.) going to the under the table(.) and (0.2) I don’t know but(.) is a(.) cassette player(.) like this(.) on the table.

These examples demonstrate learners' reliance on sequences such as “I think” and “like this”, which are sometimes combined with short pauses. It seemed that this strategy has helped the learners to gain time to compose the subsequent part of their utterance. The learners were applying these formulas to enhance their fluency, extending the run without long pauses, apparently with minimal effort.

Extract (4) provides a particularly interesting example, since the meaning of the sequence “I don’t know but is not clear”. This sequence has occurred in other similar situations (in total three times in the whole data and only produced
by Anita and Hiva). Probably the learners have picked up this four/five-word sequence as a whole unit without having a clear or correct knowledge of its meaning and/or function.

Fillers were only found in the language production of four learners. Each of these four learners showed an individual preference for particular fillers, mainly using only one or two of the mentioned fillers. Those learners who did not use fillers as time buyers in their speech instead used other strategies such as repetition of a sequence to buy time.

4.2 Repetition

One of the most common strategies that the learners employed to fill pauses in their speech was simply repeating a sequence consecutively within a run. See below for examples of using repetition operating as time buyers.

(5) (Discussing a text about farms)
Teacher: And in the farm, they say don’t-
Tina: -in the farm (0.2) me and friend (0.2) me and friends in the farm (.) me and friends in the farm (.) don’t touch the animals

(6) (Discussing a picture story)
Anita: I think (.) when they are little (.) they are little (.) the Polly don’t (0.2) the Polly don’t (.) [L1; born?]
Teacher: He was not born

(7) (A general chat during the lesson)
Dornaz: Miss, one day (.) I go to the (.) wedding party (.) and I go to the wedding party and (.) what is (0.2) [L1; camera]

Example (5) illustrates an instance when the teacher refers to the text in the book and initiates the description of the rules on a farm. Tina who seemed excited to recall the rules interrupted without having much time for planning her utterance. She used a strategy of repeating sequences several times while planning her utterance and providing the farm’s rule; as identified by other researchers (e.g., Wood, 2010), here repetition is acting as a FS.

Examples (6) & (7) indicate cases where repetition of a sequence was followed by a question. In this instance, the learners (Anita and Dornaz) were looking for a word to complete their utterance. While processing their statement, they repeated a sequence in order to buy time and in the meantime to prevent a long pause and consequently to avoid losing their turn. Since the learners in this class were encouraged not to use Farsi, they were trying to buy time to find the word in English, and when they could not find it, they finally asked the teacher in Farsi.
The data offered some examples revealing the possible benefits of this strategy for the learners. The following extracts show instances when learners who applied the repetition of a sequence as time buyers for their further processing were successful in finding the element they were looking for. They could produce their statement without a break or long pause.

(8) (Discussing pets)
   Darya: miss, I like every dog (.) like every dog (0.2) what’s meaning of (0.2)
   emotion:: (.) ANGRY (.) angry (.) just angry dog (.) every dog

(9) (The teacher is speaking, Tina is playing with a friend’s pencil case)
   Teacher: Tina, look at the picture, and ask Hiva a wh question
   Tina: Umm::
   Anita: What’s she doing?
   Tina: what:::t’s she doing? (looking at the pictures to choose one)
   Hiva: she doing (0.2) she doing (0.2) she is reading (.) a invitation card

In Extracts 8 and 9 both Darya and Hiva repeat a sequence, buying time to remember the subsequent word or phrase. This strategy helped them to lengthen the run to recall the language units that they were looking for without a long silent pause in their utterance. Also, the learners could avoid using Farsi or losing their turn.

Although the majority of these learners were found to use time buyers frequently in their production, there were three learners in the class who did not employ this strategy at all. Interestingly also, on some occasions when the learners did not apply time buyers, the statements could contain long pauses. In the competitive atmosphere of the classroom a long pause could lead to the loss of turn. The following extract provides an illustration of a competitive situation where a learner (Behnaz) lost her turn because of pausing in mid-sentence.

(10) (During a ‘guess the mime’ activity)
   Teacher: Behnaz, what is she doing?
   Behnaz: she doing (0.3)
   Darya: cooking (.) she cooking
   Hiva: cooking pizza
   Mobina: I love pizza
   Anita: miss, I like pizza but (.) I don’t like (pointing to a picture of mushrooms)

This example can be compared to the Example (9) presented earlier. In both instances, the learners (Hiva and Behnaz) were asked a question for which they
could not provide an immediate answer. Both the learners started their utterance with a sequence borrowed from the previous statement ("she doing"). In Example (9) Hiva employed the strategy of repeating the sequence while she was processing the rest of the utterance and eventually she could answer the question. However, in Example (10) Behnaz, who also started by repeating part of the previous utterance ("she doing"), paused after the sequence. This pause gave her peers the opportunity to intervene and consequently she lost the turn.

4.3 Utterance launchers

A typical feature of many of the learners’ speech was to use certain formulas to start their statements. Sometimes these sequences carried meaning and sometimes they seemed not to convey a propositional meaning but were used to elicit attention or as a technique for taking over the turn and launching their utterance. The most frequent sequences found in the data from the ten sessions, are presented below:

- *For example* (13 times)
- *Miss, I think* (8 times)
- *Excuse me miss* (6 times)
- *Miss, I have a question* (4 times)

The following cases illustrate instances where the learners used the sequences in the correct context.

(11) **Hiva:** Miss (.) *I have a question* (.) my friend (.) going to the (.) class (.) and say (.) we watch (.) we watch (.) animation (.) do you animation?

**Teacher:** Yes (.) we will also watch a short movie

(12) (Clarifying some new words from the book)

**Teacher:** Leave (.) you know this word?

**Dornaz:** Miss (.) *for example* (.) I’m (o.2) tennis class is finished (o.2) the time is eleven (.) time is eleven (.) and (.) I’m go home

(13) (Discussing a text in the book)

**Teacher:** Look at the picture (.) it is Billy’s birthday-

**Anita:** - *I think* (.) Billy like cars (o.2) because the gift is car

Examples (11)–(13) present three instances where both the meaning and function of the sequences are suitable for the context in which they were used. However, there were some other cases when the meaning of the sequences did not agree with the context in which they were used.
(14) (Discussing a picture story)
Teacher: picture three (.) what is he doing?
Anita: miss, I have a question
Teacher: what’s your question?
Anita: it’s a wedding party (.) and (o) they have a (0.2) baby 😊

(15) (A general chat during the lesson)
Teacher: do you like ice cream?
Anita: miss, for example (.) one day (.) I go to the one (.) go to the one (o.2) what is [L1, ice cream shop?]
Teacher: ice cream shop?
Anita: I go to the ice cream shop (.) and (.) my friend have a one bowl.

In the Examples (14) & (15), the sequences used at the beginning of the utterances do not carry their regular propositional meaning. Learners seem to be using these initial sequences to gain possession of the turn and to seek the teachers’ attention in order to be able to make a statement. For instance, in the Example (14), Anita is using the sequence “miss”, “I have a question” to seek the teacher’s attention in order to indicate her surprise (In Iran it is not common for couples to have a child before they are married). Also, in Example (15), Anita is not presenting an example of something. It seems the teacher’s question about ice cream reminded Anita of her experience at an ice cream shop and in order to take the turn she used the sequence “for example” to be able to tell her story.

As the examples indicate, these children were prompted by what they had heard or seen (at that specific moment) and their statements seemed somehow to be an impulsive reaction. Hence, they might be using the sequence as a mechanism to provide them with planning time to prepare what they wanted to say.

4.4 Non-fluent sequences

Analysis of the data revealed some examples of learners’ reliance on time buyers, which has raised fundamental issues with the existing definitions of formulaic language.

In the data there were some occasions when learners paused in the middle of their sequences, or they lengthened a syllable in the sequences. This dis-fluency within the sequence introduces a challenge to the arguments in the literature that FS are produced fluently and smoothly (e.g., Myles, 2004; Wood 2010; Wray, 2008). This rather surprising observation raises the question:
Can we say that the non-fluent sequences were composed from individual units and that they should not be defined as formulaic?

According to the definitions of FS, these utterances, which were not fluent, would not count as formulaic. However, they could be classified as FS according to some other criteria; for instance, the sequences were frequently-used classroom commands. These sequences were generally produced fluently without any pauses or hesitations. However, there were several occasions when learners paused in the middle, or lengthened a syllable within these sequences, while working on the planning of the subsequent part of their statement. Considering the high frequency of occurrence and fluency of production on some occasions it is proposed that these sequences acted as FS for these speakers.

An illustrative example of this situation can be identified in the Example (9) mentioned previously, repeated in (16) for clarity.

(16) (The teacher is speaking about the textbook material. Tina is playing with a friend’s pencil case)
Teacher: Tina, look at the picture, and ask Hiva a wh question
Tina: Umm::
Anita: ‘What’s she doing?’
Tina: wha:::t’s she doing? (looking at the pictures to choose one)
Hiva: she doing (0.2) she doing (0.2) she is reading (.) a invitation card

In this example, the teacher asked Tina to ask her friend Hiva a question about the book illustrations. Tina, who was distracted with her friend’s pencil case, seemed confused and could not produce an instant response. In order to help Tina, Anita provided her with a sample question (“what’s she doing?”) which was a frequently-used question during the previous and the present session. Although she had not chosen a picture yet, Tina started to produce the question. Consequently, she lengthened the word “wha:::t’s” while she was looking at the pictures and deciding which picture she was going to refer to. By the time she had decided on the picture the intonation contour had become fast and fluent.

The other case when a non-fluent formula was produced refers to the sequence “what’s the meaning of”. This sequence was found as a high-frequency sequence in the data set (34 times in the whole data). The data revealed that the majority of the learners (9 out of 11) had not learned the sequence fully and they had dropped either the article “the”, or the verb “is”. Consequently, three varieties of the sequence were produced by the learners. Some of the learners had fossilized the sequence “what the meaning of” and some produced “what’s meaning of” and only two learners used the sequence in its correct form “what’s the meaning of”. Here, they used this sequence followed by the word in Farsi in order to minimise
the use of Farsi in the question ("what’s the meaning of”) +L1). In some instances learners also used it to ask for the meaning of an English word or phrase. On occasions when learners asked for clarification of an English word or phrase the question “what’s the meaning of” was produced fast and fluently without any pauses or hesitations during the production of the sequence. Whereas in other situations, where the learners needed to use a Farsi word, the question was asked with some hesitations, pauses or lengthened syllables. Below is one of several instances when learners paused or lengthened a syllable within the sequence “what’s the meaning of”. It should be noted that throughout the data collection process Dornaz produced this sequence as “what is meaning of”; that is, she had dropped the article ‘the’.

(17) (Reviewing names of countries)

**Dornaz:** My (.) my cousin (0.2) miss, what is (0.2) meaning of: [°L1; two years ago°]?

**Teacher:** Two years ago

**Dornaz:** Two years a (.) two years a (.) go Australia

In Example (17), Dornaz seemed to be hesitant to use the word in Farsi. She tried to get enough time to recall the language unit she was looking for through a short pause and lengthening the production of the sequence. When she could not find the suitable element, she seemed shy and produced the Farsi word in a low voice.

Another example illustrating dis-fluency within a sequence was related to the other very frequent classroom command “May I drink water” which was introduced to the learners in the very early stages of their language education. Analysis of the data provided evidence that the learners produced the sequence fluently and frequently in the classroom. During the second session, the teacher asked the learners to bring a bottle of water to the class so they would not need to leave class to drink water. This request from the teacher resulted in modification of the sequence “may I drink water” by the learners. They started to produce sequences such as “may I drink water in (the) class”, or “may I drink water downstairs”, etc. Nevertheless, the sequence “may I drink water” was used as the initial fragment of the statement followed by the addition of a new element. In some instances it appeared that adding a new element to the sequence was challenging for the learners and demanded more processing. The cases below exemplify such instances.

(18) Session 1

**Hiva:** miss, may I drink water?

Session 2

**Hiva:** miss, may I: (.) drink water (.) out of a class
During the first two sessions Hiva produced the sequence “may I drink water” three times. On all three occasions, she articulated the sequence fluently with no hesitation. After the teacher’s request for drinking water in the class Hiva started to produce the sequence “may I drink water” with an additional element attached (“may I drink water” + “out of a class”). This time Hiva lengthened the word “I” followed by a short pause. Since this was the first time she had added the additional element of “out of a class” to her sequence she might have required some time to process it.

Similarly, in Example (19) Dornaz wanted to ask permission to drink water downstairs where the water dispenser is located. She was preparing her utterance before producing it to the teacher and was looking for the word “out”. When she heard the word “out”, “outside”, she paused for a minute. It might be that, given the teacher’s request to drink water in the class, she wanted to imply that she did not have a bottle and needed water from the water cooler downstairs. Hence, she wanted to produce the utterance “may I drink water” + “downstairs”. In this case the sequence “may I drink water” was not articulated fluently as it had been previously; instead, Dornaz lengthened the word “I” and also the word “water” followed by a short pause before she produced the word “downstairs”.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the young language learners used FS as a strategy to economize effort on processing and also to buy time for processing, thus simulating speech fluency by filling the potential pauses. The processing of language includes “the struggle to retain fluency, and the sustaining of output while planning what to say next” (Wray, 2002, p. 75). Hence, when under communicative and/or cognitive pressure, language users may apply FS as time buyers to promote fluency and protect the turn while processing the rest of their utterance (Wood, 2010, 2015; Wray, 2002; Wray & Perkins, 2000).

In this study, there were only a few learners who relied on particular FS such as “I think” as fillers during their language production. The majority of the learners used the strategy of repeating the previous sequence to buy time or extend their utterances. Learners seemed to use FS as a strategy to avoid long pauses or
breakdown in order to keep their turn, while working to formulate the subsequent part of the utterance. In a study of the adult L2 learners, Wood (2006) observed the same approach of repeating a sequence several times to buy time or avoid long pauses. Based on his observations, Wood concluded that it might be due to the "nature of formulaic language retrieval" that a formulaic sequence can be stated several times consecutively more or less effortlessly (p. 25). It was interesting that the young language learners of this study show the use of the same strategy that the adult language users seemed to apply in Wood’s (2006) study. Along with the similarities, there were also some differences between the results of these two studies. In this study the young language learners employed formulaic sequences to buy time and avoid long pauses not only to enhance their fluency but also to be safe in the competition between peers related to taking possession of a turn or holding onto a turn. Wood’s (2006) study focused on adult L2 learners who performed an elicitation task individually and therefore probably they were not required to apply strategies to keep the turn. On the other hand, the adult learners in Wood’s (2006) study relied on rhetorical devices to extend the length of utterances. This strategy was not as frequent among the young learners of this study.

In addition to the use of fillers and repetitive sequences, these learners sometimes employed certain FS as conversational devices to launch their utterances. These utterance launchers may have served the purpose of helping them to take away the turn from the previous speaker or to provide them with some planning time to prepare the rest of their utterance. This argument is in line with the findings of Biber et al. (1999, p.1073) who suggest that since the beginning of an utterance is a major planning point, these expressions might “provide the speaker with a planning respite, during which the rest of the utterance can be prepared for execution”. The application of sequences such as “I think” in utterance launching positions was also observed among adult learners in Aijmer’s (2011) study. However, the young learners of this study applied only certain limited sequences as utterance launchers. The findings of this study corroborate those of Wong Fillmore (1976) who observed that sometimes the young learners tended to overuse some FS in “semantically empty ways” (p.494). However, the results of the present study suggest that although sometimes FS were used in ‘semantically empty’ ways, they were playing a critical role in enhancing fluency while providing learners with planning time.

One of the more striking observations to emerge from the current study is the evidence that FS are not always produced fluently. This finding is contrary to the previously established consensus on the nature of formulaicity, regarding phonological coherence as a crucial distinctive feature (see Section 2 above). The findings of this study have revealed a number of instances where a FS was produced with internal dis-fluency (pauses or hesitations within sequences). Although these
utterances were not always produced fluently, they could be identified as FS based on certain other criteria such as high frequency. For example, we can refer to the sequence “May I drink water” which was produced with internal dis-fluency on some occasions, but not on others. The dis-fluency could suggest that the utterance was not a FS. Alternatively, this sequence could be categorised as a FS based on other criteria such as:

- Used repeatedly in the same form when conveying this idea
- Community wide in use (shared classroom knowledge)
- Associated with a specific situation/genre

The observed dis-fluency within some sequences might be the learners’ strategy to buy time for their processing. A possible explanation for this might be that since FS are prefabricated, the language user can retrieve the sequence more or less effortlessly and skip the processing of individual units and the structure of the sequence and hence can think ahead to plan for the following elements of the utterance during this ‘borrowed’ processing time. By lengthening a syllable or pausing in the middle of a sequence, which was previously produced fluently and accurately, the speaker could signal to the listeners that they should not interrupt and should wait for the completion of the sequence. This is an interesting technique which could provide the speaker with time to think about the subsequent words to be produced without losing ownership of the turn. In this process the predictive nature of FS signals to the listener that the statement is not yet finished and hence the speaker buys time to process the rest of the utterance without being interrupted.

6. Conclusion and implications

Taken together the findings of this study have revealed that, when the occasion demanded that the learners needed to produce fast spontaneous utterances and/or when they needed planning time to process their utterance, they resorted to certain prefabricated sequences.

By uncovering some significant features of formulaicity used during early foreign language learning the findings of this study may contribute to the development of an appropriate pedagogy for teaching a foreign language to young language learners. The findings of the study disclosed a number of facilitative functions that FS provided for young language learners. Raising teacher’s awareness regarding the role of FS could valuably contribute to their effectiveness in implementing appropriate responses in the classroom situation. Equipped with this knowledge, teachers may be able to teach and encourage the facilitative func-
tions of FS. It seems likely however that teachers will need to carefully consider which type of formulaic sequences would be suitable for the learners to help them in their language development at any point in time. In addition, the teacher might need to decide how best to create contexts in which certain functions arise and provide opportunities for learners to activate their knowledge of FS. Moreover, the findings disclose the potential benefits of an increased focus on the teaching and learning of FS embedded within the social context of the classroom learning environment. Both teachers and materials developers could present some contexts and merge useful FS within the input addressed to the second language learners.

An important implication of the present study is the evidence suggesting that in contrast to previous findings, FS are not always produced fluently. This finding has significant theoretical implications for the field of formulaicity. Researchers in the field of applied linguistics have consistently referred to the phonological coherence of FS as a significant defining feature and concluded that FS are produced fluently without hesitations or pauses (Bybee, 2002; Hickey, 1993; Mitchell & Myles, 2019; Myles et al., 1998; Peters, 1983; Wood, 2006; Wray, 2002). However, the findings of this study revealed a number of instances when certain non-fluently produced utterances could be categorized as FS based on some of the other criteria contained in the checklist. It can be concluded that in order to distinguish FS from a learner-internal perspective we need to gain detailed knowledge about the language repertoire and practices of the individual learner. In the longer term, this is a more significant finding, since it challenges the accepted views on this topic.

In conclusion, it is important to note the limitations of this study. Given its small scale (a study of one class) and specific context (Iran), we cannot hope to draw any generalisable conclusions. However, the qualitative approach of the investigation has allowed us to explore the nature of FS in some depth, adding to the limited body of research on FS used by young foreign language learners in school contexts. It is to be hoped that future research will investigate this across a wider range of contexts providing professionals in the field of early foreign language learning with evidence-based understandings on the role of FS. A further avenue for future investigations might be to quantitatively measure speech fluency of young language learners to see whether it is affected by FS.

References


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**Appendix A. Transcription codes**

The following codes have been used in the transcriptions in this text:

- **X:** name of the speaker (anonymised)
- **L1:** indicates language production in first language (Farsi)
- **[play]:** brackets are used for speech in first language
- **( ):** pauses are shown in second in brackets, one second is shown by a point (.) and 2 seconds is shown by (0.2) and so on.
- **Go:::** one or more colons indicate extension of the preceding sound or syllable.
- **no bu- :** a hyphen indicates an abrupt cut off of the prior word or sound.
- **(text):** parentheses are used for transcriber’s comments including description of non-verbal behaviour

**Text:**
- **bold** indicates marked stress
- **TEXT:** capitals indicate increased loudness
- ***thanks*:** degree signs indicate decreased volume.
- **↓↑** arrows indicate shifts in high or low pitch
- 😄 smiley face indicates laughter
- **text:** the stretches of transcript identified as formulaic are underlined

In some instances the transcriptions are more affected by the phonological features of the language produced by the learners (e.g. escuse me for excuse me).
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