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New Perspectives into formulaic competence in a second language:

Formulas in a stockroom and in a flowing stream

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Abstract

Formulaic language is as important as vocabulary and grammar. Formulaic expressions abound along with free expressions. Second language teachers are aware that more and more pedagogical attention should be paid to the area of formulas. In other words, formulaic competence is another competence, which should be added to lexical and grammatical competences to describe the L2 learner's language resources fully. This paper provides the notion of formulaic competence with two new points. One point is related to the stockroom view, and the other point, to the flow view. We argue that when the second language learner develops formulas in his or her stockroom, the stock should not be a random list of expressions. It should be organized into a network. This is the first point. A vast stock of expressions does not, however, fully explain the language user's formulaic competence. We claim that the flow view of formulaic expressions should be considered. With the flow view, which sees the use of formulas in a flowing stream of communication, we can identify four primary functions of formulaic language: expressive optimality, constructive easiness, discourse navigation, and formulaic chaining as a communication skill. This is the second point. Overall, this paper explores into the nature of formulaic competence in a second language, and suggests a possibility of teaching formulas in a more principled way.

Key Words: formulaic competence, second language learning, the stock view, the flow view

## 1. Introduction

We generate sentences with the use of words and grammar. Such newly produced sentences are called “free expressions” (Jespersen, 1924), which demonstrate that we use our language in a creative way. However, we do not simply produce novel sentences every time we try to express our ideas. Much of cognitive burden is saved by using routinized, conventional expressions, which are often called formulas or formulaic sequences. In fact, Jespersen (1924) claimed that language works as an interplay of free expressions and formulas, with the two being the both sides of a coin. Generative linguists highlight the side of free expressions, while cognitive linguists focus on the other side. It is our position that both free expressions and formulas are indispensable in the workings of language, as Jespersen

pointed out.

Idioms or formulas are pervasive in any language. More recently, the emergence of computer-based corpus linguistics allows us to assess the amount of formulas in the use of everyday language. According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan (1999), about 30 percent of the words in their conversational corpus was formulaic. The following is a sample of conversational data we collected. The participants, S, G, and L, are all native speakers of English.

Sample conversation

S: Why can't you change your job easily in Japan?

G: Well, for one thing, they have a bonus system. And the bonus system has a good point and bad point. The good point is you get the bonus and you get the money. But the bad point is it keeps you in the company, because you feel you can't quit. That's just one of the reasons.

L: Feeling of obligation.

G: Right. How about some other reasons?

S: Well, the, uh, I think the main reason, like you say, is the bonus system. It gives that incentive to stay there. Plus the fact that you're, many people when they get out of college, their life seems to be very planned, in terms of knowing where you're going to go. If you get into a good company, then that's it. For the next twenty, thirty years, you can plan your life, you can get the, you get the, the low-interest housing loan, you get the medical care, you get all the comforts.

G: And dormitory.

L: If you're going to change your company in Japan, it seems as though you've, you've got to start at the bottom again, I mean, the people you're going to be competing against, perhaps, are going to be the younger people straight out of , straight out of university.

S: That's right.

G: How about in the United States? Is it different?

The underlined parts are considered all formulaic. This sample of conversation illustrates how often we use formulaic expressions in daily conversations. Analyzing the average proportion of formulas or prefabs in texts, Erman and Warren (2000) showed that more than 50 percent of the language they analyzed was formulaic (58.6% in spoken texts and 52.3% in written texts).

Obviously, formulaic competence is a key to communicative language competence. In the field of second language education, an increasing number of teachers use terms such as chunks, collocations, idioms, multiword units, prefabricated constructions, formulaic sequences, routines, and phrasal verbs (Hinkel, 2016, 2017), and they claim that these expressions, which are collectively called formulas or

formulaic language, should receive more systematic attention from language teachers (Lewis, 1993, 2000). However, something still seems to be missing: in our opinion, what is missing is the adequate (or pedagogically valid) definition of formulaic competence. The phrase “formulaic competence” appears in the literature of second language acquisition, and yet, as far as we know, there are no attempts to topicalize formulaic competence itself and define it in a pedagogically useful manner. There is no way of helping students develop formulaic competence when the definition is lacking. The aim of this paper is thus to give a useful definition of formulaic competence. To advance our discussion, we take it that pedagogical validity obtains only when the teacher feels that formulas are teachable, and the learner feels that they are learnable, and usable.

## 2. Significance of formulaic language

Cognitive burden is small in processing formulaic expressions: they can be processed more quickly and easily than the non-formulaic counterparts. As Langacker (1987) states, “knowing them [conventional expressions] is essential to speaking it [the language] well. This is why a seemingly perfect knowledge of the grammar of a language does not guarantee fluency in it; learning its full complement of conventional expressions is probably by far the largest task involved in mastering it” (pp.35-36).

In the field of second language acquisition, research on formulaic expressions is on the increase (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Yorio, 1989; Howarth, 1996; Wray, 2000, 2002; Schmitt & Carter, 2004; Conklin & Schmitt, 2012). Pawley & Syder (1983) suggest that the use of formulas helps individuals to be fluent in the target language. Fluency is a necessary condition to meet in a time-constrained interaction. Schmitt & Carter (2004) add that people use formulaic expressions to express a message or idea efficiently, realize daily functions (e.g., requesting, suggesting, thanking), and signal discourse organization (e.g., use of “on the other hand” meaning “conversely”).

Recent studies clearly showed that formulas are not subordinate to free expressions. Formulas and free expressions are equally important when we teach a second language. Simply put, formulaic expressions “provide a platform for fluent and accurate output” (Conklin & Schmitt, 2012, p. 47).

From a language learner’s point of view, formulas or idioms are important but they are difficult to learn and use. All learners can do is to memorize as many idioms as possible as they encounter them. They stock formulas in a random order, and yet, the stock remains unused.

## 3. Classification of formulaic language

In order to capture the notion of formulaic competence, we need to understand the target we are trying to define. Formulaic language is an extremely broad concept which covers numerous types of conventional expressions, including the following:

be willing to      after all      look down on      give off      if it were not for      owing to  
 can't help doing      speak ill of      what about ...?      why don't you ...?      a lot of  
 have something to do with ...      Count on me.      So what?      Time flies like an arrow  
 be that as it may ....

There are thousands of formulas in English. An unabridged idiom dictionary lists a large sample of the existing formulas alphabetically. In the context of second language learning, important, and frequently-occurring idioms are contained in a so-called “idiom book,” in which idioms of different kinds are listed in a mixed manner.

As we can see from the above list, formulas are diverse. Listing does not help much when we help learners develop formulaic competence. So the first step we have to take in order to approach formulaic competence should be to classify them into several categories.

There are some attempts to categorize formulas or prefabs. For example, Erman and Warren (2000) made a 4-way distinction between lexical (e.g., out of date, at the time, so far, permanent job), grammatical (sort of, a little bit, there is, here goes, would rather), pragmatic (e.g., well, you know, I mean, I must say, the thing is that), and reducible prefabs (e.g., I'm, she doesn't, shouldn't, let's), and explained the specifications in detail. We propose an alternative framework of idiom grouping, which may look intuitively more pedagogical:

- ① Functional chunks : Why don't you ...? , Could you ...? Don't forget to ..., You are supposed to ..., I'm sorry, I agree to a certain point, but ..., etc.
- ② Whole-phrase chunks: Give me a break., Here we go., Forward march., Way to go., That's the spirit., Lucky you, So what?, I mean it, Hi there, Hold your horses, etc.
- ③ Grammatical construction chunks: had it not been for ....., nothing is more A than B, it goes without saying that, cannot help but ..., I'd rather, in such a way as to ..., if it were not for, it's not so much A as B, it's no use doing, in such a way as to, that's how..., etc.
- ④ Phrasal-Verb chunks : take up, give off, keep in, carry away, hold back, run out, give in, add up to, put up with, catch up with, etc.
- ⑤ Adverbial chunks : in the end, as a result, in other words, by and large, for example, at the moment,

on the whole, generally speaking, to my regret, to make the matters worse, etc.

- ⑥ Verbal chunks: beat around the bush, look forward to, call a spade a spade, speak ill of, give an ear to, turn over a new leaf, give a person the benefit of doubt, etc.
- ⑦ Adjectival chunks : clean as a whistle, poor as a church mouse, silent as a clam, quiet as a mouse, cleaver as a fox, pretty as a picture, etc.
- ⑧ Prepositional chunks : with respect to, in spite of, in terms of , in light of , in front of, in back of, on the other side of, to the left of, etc.
- ⑨ Quantificational chunks : a great amount of, a little bit, a large number of, a slice of, a chunk of, a good deal of, etc.
- ⑩ Proverbs & Sayings: Too many cooks spoil the broth, An early bird catches a worm, You're barking up the wrong tree, A wall has ears, Strike the iron while it is hot, It takes two to tango, etc.

If thousands of formulas are to be classified into 10 groups or domains, then, we will be able to teach formulas incrementally by focusing on each domain. This is better than memorizing formulas in an alphabetical order. However, each domain still contains an enormous number of formulas, and learning them falls into rote learning, when a learner attempts to memorize formulas even within a domain. In other words, domain-specific learning (e.g., learning formulas within the whole phrase chunk) may be a little better than general-domain learning (learning formulas in the English language), and yet, both are essentially the same in terms of memorization. Each formulaic expression stands alone in isolation of a meaningful context.

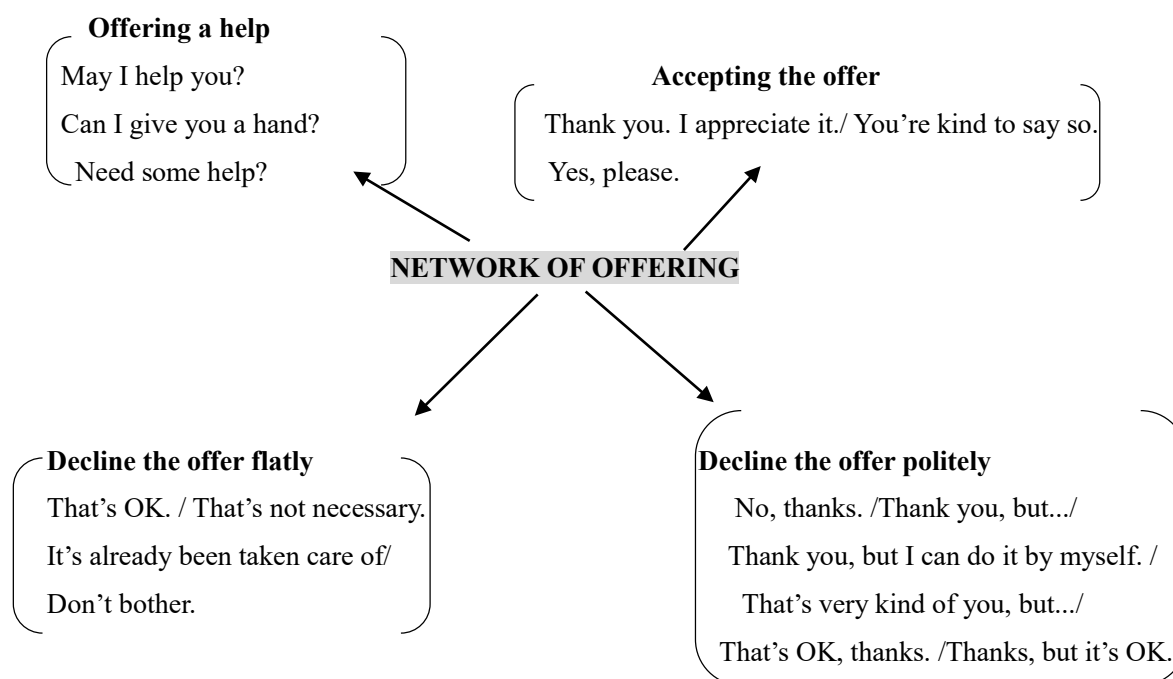
Thus, learning formulas tends to become rote learning. Meaningful learning, which results in establishing meaningful relationships of items, is generally better than rote learning in the task of learning vocabulary. The same will apply to the learning of formulas. The question is: How do we organize formulas in a meaningful way to enhance meaningful learning?

#### 4. Formulaic Networking

To make the learning of formulas more meaningful, we argue that there is a possibility of organizing formulas in a formulaic network. If formulas within a certain domain are to be organized in the form of a network, then, the task of memorizing formulas should be meaningful. Learners do networking exercises as group work, and, as Mayor (2004) suggests, learners become “active sense-makers who seek to build coherent and organized knowledge” (p. 14).

To check this possibility, let us take a look at formulas to be used when we make an offering. Suppose that someone makes an offer of help. The other person may accept the offer or decline it politely or

flatly. Considering these, we can produce a network of offering as in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. A formulaic network of offering**

This figure is straightforward and needs no explanation. If someone says, “May I help you?,” for example, you may accept or decline the offer. When you accept it, you are likely to express your gratitude. When you decline it, you may do so flatly (by saying “That’s not necessary.”) or politely (by saying “Thank you, but I can do it myself.”).

The act of declining can be elaborated by making a distinction between declining someone’s offer and declining someone’s request. We may express the two cases of declining in Figure 2.

Case 1: Decline someone’s request

- Apologizing

I’m sorry I can’t.

I’m afraid I can’t.

Case 2: Decline someone’s offer

- Expressing your gratitude

Thank you very much for the offer, but..

Thanks for asking, but ...

- Expressing the reason

e.g., I have to attend my sister’s wedding.

- Expressing your wish

I wish I could, but ...

I’d really love to, but ...

## Figure 2: A formulaic network of declining

Figure 2 shows that in declining someone's request, we not only apologize for not being able to accept, but we also express the reason for that, as shown below:

A: Could you help me with this statistical analysis?

B: I'm sorry I can't. I don't know much about statistics.

<apologizing>

<expressing the reason>

To decline one's offer, thanking the person for the offer is usually necessary information. Thanking the person who made a request is unlikely. Instead, the act of apologizing goes with declining someone's request.

However, expressing one's wish can be a tactic to soften the tone of declining someone's request or offer. Likewise, when we decline something (a request or an offer), we often give the reason, which makes the declined person psychologically easier to accept the decline, as illustrated below:.

The case of declining a request

A: Could I borrow your car? Just two hours. Please.

B: I wish I could, but I'm sorry I can't. It's a company car.

<expressing one's wish>

<declining>

<expressing the reason>

The case of declining an offer

A: Would you like to dinner with Ms. Yamada and me?

B: I'd really love to, but I already have plans for dinner.

<expressing one's wish>

<expressing the reason>

When the network-building exercises are practiced in class, the students will not be simply given what they have to memorize; they will be given an opportunity to construct their own learning by building a formulaic network individually or collaboratively.

The point to be emphasized here is that formulaic networking can make the learning of formulaic

language meaningful, and if a network of formulas is stocked within the learner's mind, it will become his or her usable linguistic repertoire.

#### 5. Definition of formulaic competence in a flow of communication

It is necessary for language learners to have meaningful networks of formulaic expressions in their stockroom. However, having expressions in a stockroom, no matter how large it would be, does not guarantee that learners can use them functionally. The stockroom view simply tells us what the learner has in his or her brain. Even though expressions are networked, the situation does not change. Linguistic storage remains storage unless it is used.

Formulaic language is widespread. We take it as true, and need to ask a further question: What are the purposes of formulaic language? We argue that this question leads to inquiring about the nature of formulaic competence in language use. It shifts our attention into the flow view of formulaic language, a view which sees formulaic language in a flowing stream of communication.

Schmitt and Carter (2004) listed a number of these purposes. Formulaic language expresses a message or idea. For example, we can express the idea "Don't procrastinate" by saying "An early bird catches a worm." Schmitt and Carter identify that formulaic language is used to realize communicative functions. By saying "I'm just looking, thank you." in a shop, we are declining an offer of assistance from a shopkeeper. Here, declining an offer is a communicative function, and "I'm just looking, thank you." is a formulaic expression to realize it.

They also say that formulaic language is used to signal discourse organization. In order to introduce a contrasting idea, people say "in contrast" or "on the other hand." This is a case of formulaic language signaling discourse organization. Schmitt and Carter further list the purposes such as "expressing social solidarity" (e.g., "Yeah, it is," which expresses agreement) and "transacting specific information in a precise way" (e.g., "Cleared for takeoff" clearly indicates that we permit you to enter a runway and commence takeoff).

It is our opinion that Schmitt and Carter's suggestion is useful but does not seem principled. We propose a more principled and comprehensive way of characterizing the functions of formulaic language as follows:

- ① Expressive optimization: A formula can express one's intention in an optimal way.
- ② Constructional easiness: A formula can make sentence construction easier.



- ③ Discourse navigation: A formula can navigate the flow of discourse.
- ④ Formulaic chaining as a communication skill: A chaining of formulaic expressions leads to communication skills such as making a presentation, giving a lecture, and moderating a meeting.

### 5.1. Expressive optimization

These are functions operative in a flow of communication. As regards expressive optimization, there is an underlying assumption that a certain intended meaning is linked with a formulaic expression in many ways. For instance, when you express your gratitude, you are most likely to say “Thank you.” The use of so-called functional expressions (e.g., Could you please ...?, Why don’t you ...?, Let me remind you ..., I’m sorry to interrupt, etc.) is the case of expressive optimization.

As mentioned earlier, second language learners try to produce perfectly grammatical sentences, and yet, it takes unnecessary efforts for the partner to get the intended meaning. In a private school, a Japanese business person once wrote a letter of thanking by saying, “I’m awfully sorry for your kindly having done that for me.” This is a direct translation from a polite Japanese expression (*sonna koto wo shite itadaki totemo kyoshuku shiteimasu*). The sentence is grammatically correct and meaningful in Japanese, yet the English counterpart can be easily misunderstood. A native English teacher, familiar with Japanese learners of English, edited the sentence into “I don’t know what to say, but thank you so much for your kindness,” which carried the Japanese business person’s intention straightforwardly. This is a case of expressive optimization. “Thank you so much for your kindness” is an optimal way of expressing the speaker’s intention.

### 5.2. Constructional easiness

Constructional easiness is associated with the prefabricated nature of formulaic expressions. For example, the prefabricated pattern “Nothing is more A than B” frequently appears in verbal interaction, as in the following:

- Nothing is more important when living in a foreign country than flexibility.
- Nothing is more difficult for an introvert than making a speech before a crowd.
- Nothing is more irritating than my brother.
- Nothing is more fulfilling than doing a worthwhile deed.

Thus, “nothing is more A than B” serves as a prefab construction, which can be used repeatedly and easily. Another prefab construction is “either A or B,” where A and B are to be filled with verbal

elements, as follows:

- Either come in or go out.
- Either refund my money or call the manager.
- We'll either eat at home or go to a restaurant.
- She should either quit or stop complaining so much.

Many grammatical constructions (e.g., little more than, in a way that, there is no doing, it won't be long before) can serve the realization of constructional easiness.

### 5.3. Discourse Navigation

Discourse navigation is another major function of formulaic language. The following expressions are often used to navigate the flow of discourse in English:

to start off, then, as a consequence, as a result, by and large, to wrap up, to conclude, etc.

We introduce a topic by saying "Oh, that reminds me of something" or "You know what." We get off the topic by saying "Oh, by the way" or "Let me get off the track." These expressions are part of formulaic language. Talking continues for some time, and you try to highlight the main points by saying "What I'm saying here is ..." or "The point I'm making here is ...." In this way, formulas are used as discourse navigators.

We use formulas as discourse navigators for many purposes: e.g., asking for clarification (e.g., What do you mean by...?), clearing misunderstanding (e.g., There seems to be a misunderstanding here.), checking one's understanding (e.g., Do you mean to tell me that...?), interrupting (e.g., Excuse me, but ...) and so on.

### 5.4. Formulaic chaining as a communication skill

The fourth function of formulaic language is significant. Formulaic expressions are chained or sequenced to perform the act of making a presentation, moderating a meeting, and making a negotiation. When you want to state the objective of your presentation, for example, you may say:

I'm here today to introduce the latest teaching method in our school.

My purpose today is to examine the main features of our educational reform.

What I want to do today is to review annual results.

Expressions like “I’m here today to,” “My purpose today is to,” “What I want to do today is to” are all formulaic. After the statement of the objective, you may give your presentation a structure, by using the underlined formulas.

First of all, I’d like to look at the history of our school.

Secondly, I want to consider its present situation.

After that, I will look at our competitors.

Finally, I will be considering the future.

In making a presentation, you will do a number of other things (such as the below), which are mostly expressed in formulaic language.

- Thematic development: let’s now move on to, I’d like to go on to, this brings me to, etc.
- Information addition: in addition, furthermore, moreover, what’s more, etc.
- Paraphrasing: in other words, to put it differently, that is, etc.
- Illustrating: for example, to illustrate, as a way of illustration, etc.
- Describing reasons: This is why, That’s the reason, It’s because, etc.
- Expressing the scope of a proposition: generally speaking, strictly speaking, legally speaking, etc.
- Expressing emotional reactions: to my disappointment, much to my surprise, to my regret, etc.
- Expressing personal opinions: in my opinion, in my understanding, as far as I know, etc.
- Showing degrees of certainty: it is certain that, it is theoretically possible that, it is unlikely that, etc.
- Highlighting the points in the middle: the problem is, the question is, what really matters is, etc.
- Summarizing: to wrap up, to recap, to sum up, etc.

Making a presentation is a skill to be trained. If we define presentation skills in terms of formulaic chaining, then we can direct ourselves to training learners to be able to use formulaic expressions one after another in a coherent manner. A presentation is a predictable act, and, hence, it is possible to envision a script regarding what linguistic moves are made and how the moves are sequenced in a certain way. Each move in making a presentation is verbally realized by using formulaic language. If a presentation is conceptualized as a chain of formulas, then it becomes a highly trainable skill.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

Much communication takes place in the form of formulaic expressions. Language users, natives or

nonnatives, are aware that it is much easier to use formulaic language and prefabs than to generate novel expressions from scratch by using words and rules (Hinkel, 2014, 2017).

According to Pawley and Syder (1983), “fluent and idiomatic control of language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of ‘sentence stems’ which are ‘institutionalized’ or ‘lexicalized’” (p. 191). Lewis (1993) advocates that chunks, collocations, and prefabricated phrases should be the fundamental units in language teaching and learning (Lewis, 1993).

Today, more and more teachers pay attention to formulaic expressions and teach them in vocabulary and grammar instruction. Their teaching is, however, based largely on the stockroom view. That is, the teacher introduces a series of formulaic expressions in such a way as to help students expand their repertoire of formulas. In vocabulary teaching, the size matters; the same goes for the teaching of formulaic language. However, the size alone does not guarantee either lexical competence or formulaic competence, in that we can easily imagine a case where students have an enormous amount of vocabulary and formulaic language and are still unable to use them effectively in communication situations.

In the early stages of language learning, learners have inadequate language resources with respect to lexicon, grammar, and formulas. Intuitively, teachers make use of formulaic expressions as a shortcut comprehension and production. In order to teach how to make a suggestion, the teacher introduces the formula “Why don’t you ...?” to students. There is no need to account for the way of making a negative interrogative construction grammatically. The expression “Why don’t you...?” is a semantic unit which can be recurrently used when making a suggestion.

Even a beginner can easily take in the expression as a whole and uses it aptly. This is the strength of teaching formulaic language. In this connection, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) stated:

“It is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantages of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and learners) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced” (p. 32).

However, the teacher soon encounters a problem. The amount of formulaic expressions is vast and enormous. The teacher raises a question: How many formulas do I have to introduce and in what order? Without envisioning the target goal, the teacher may easily experience a sense of disorientation when teaching formulaic language. Selecting and teaching a useful formula randomly works well for

some time, but the magic does not last long.

In order to avoid this problem, we suggested that learners should put in meaningful formulaic networks in their stockrooms. In other words, networks of formulas, not discrete items, should be the unit of teaching when we help expand the range of the learner's formulaic language. Formulaic networking is a pedagogical activity, which makes learning meaningful. Networks of formulas comprise the learner's language resources.

Language resources are something which is to be used for communicative purposes. To capture this, we need the flow view of formulaic language, or the use of formulas in a flow of communication. This flow view has a pedagogical implication: i.e., Teaching formulas is not enough. The teacher should teach formulas in a way that the learners are able to fulfill the four functions (expressive optimality, constructive easiness, discourse navigation, and formulaic chaining).

With formulaic networking and the four functions in the flow of communication, we are able to set the goal of teaching:

#### Formulas in a stockroom

- (1) Let students build networks of formulas (e.g., a network of expressing one's surprise, a network of making future plans, a network of expressing quantity).

#### Formulas in a flowing stream of communication

- (2) Let students use formulas in order to express one's intended meanings.
- (3) Let students use formulas as prefab constructions to produce sentences.
- (4) Let students use formulas to navigate the flow of their discourse.
- (5) Let students use formulas in a sequence so as to make a presentation, to moderate a meeting, etc.

On the basis of this framework, the teacher may be able to produce 5 types of exercises, which will help learners become formulaically more competent.

#### Final Remarks

There is no doubt that formulaic expressions are common and fundamental to language use. It is, hence, extremely important to teach them in a second language classroom. This is public knowledge among language teachers. However, those expressions are so many and diverse that it is impossible to learn them all (Swan, 2006). It is unrealistic that learning formulas dramatically improves the learner's communicative abilities, because most language learners don't know how to use them.

Simply put, simple memorization of formulas does not lead to the learner's formulaic competence.

In this paper, we first suggested that formulas can be grouped into several domains or categories. Grouping is a step towards developing formulaic competence, and yet, this is far from satisfactory. So we suggested that formulas within a certain domain should be clustered together in a formulaic network. We believe that this is an important step because formulaic networking activities can make the learning of formulas meaningful. However, having a set of formulas in a meaningful way is no more than a useful way of enriching the learner's language resources.

Language resources should be utilized to handle a variety of verbal tasks. With this in mind, we suggested that there are four basic functions of formulas in a flow of communication, and we are able to ask the following questions:

1. Is the learner able to use formulaic language to express his/her intended meaning in an optimal way?
2. Is the learner able to use formulaic language as prefab constructions to produce sentences easily?
3. Is the learner able to use formulaic language to navigate the flow of discourse?
4. Is the learner able to use formulaic expressions in a sequence to, for example, make a presentation?

These questions hopefully help language teachers target the points of instruction so as to help students develop their formulaic competence.

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