Formulaic Sequences in Mainland China over the Past Decade – A Review

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Abstract: In this paper, Formulaic Sequences (FS) over the past ten years are reviewed to provide some insights on its usage in the process of teaching and learning English language in China. It identifies three main features. Firstly, the general trends of FS, Secondly, the characteristics of development of FS in various fields. Thirdly, the use of FS and the teaching of FS. Finally, the paper puts forward some suggestions on the use of formulaic sequence on teaching and learning foreign language in mainland China.

Keywords: Formulaic sequences, use, characteristics, teaching, learning, English language, trend

1. Introduction

Formulaic Sequences (FS) originated from the concept of psychology--chunking. Especially in the 21st century, FS gradually became a hot topic in the field of foreign language education research. The public interest in conducting research on FS has also increased. On the one hand, many countries in the world have made it clear that cultivating students’ ability to use chunks to deal with practical problems is one of the purposes of language teaching. On the other hand, there are more and more theoretical research in the field of FS with content are continuously broadened and deepened. Research methods have also become more diverse. Due to different research perspectives, there are many definitions of formulaic sequences. With a re-emergence of interest in this area recently, researchers have applied various terms to the many definitions. For example, they have been termed chunks of language, lexical bundles, academic formulas, prefabricated lexical phrases, and prefabs or multiword units.

According to Wray (2002), FS is a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words and 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. Although FSs are pervasive in spoken English discourse, they can be difficult to straightforwardly identify when researchers employ certain definitions and criteria.

Likewise, Lewis (1993) divides chunks into 4 categories: (1) Multi-word phrases, composed of two or more words, with fixed forms and meanings that cannot be changed, such as “by and large”; (2) Collocations, mainly High-frequency fixed phrases, including "adjective + noun", “verb + object”, etc., such as "obey the law"; (3) Semi-fixed phrases, refers to fixed or semi-fixed words with specific pragmatic function of which some constituents can be replaced, such as "not so ... as"; (4) sentence frames, usually seen as fixed or semi-fixed combinations in forms with a certain discourse function , usually used to guide a sentence, such as "not only ..., but also...”.

In the process of second language acquisition, the learning and use of FS are of great significance. The study of FS abroad has more than 100 years of history. As early as in the late 1970s, linguists have confirmed that FS play an important role in the language use and processing of native speakers and second language learners (Wray, 2002). Domestic research started late and developed rapidly after 2000. This article focuses on reviewing the research literature on FS published in 14 major domestic foreign language key journals from 2010 to 2019, tracking the development of FS related research in the past 10 years, clarifying the main research topics and their characteristics, and analyzing existing problems and deficiencies, looking forward to the development trend of future research.

2. General Trends

At present, there are more than 50 definitions of FS. Common domestic ones include “formulaic sequences”, “chunks”, “prefabricated chunks”, “lexical bundles”, “collocations” and “multiword units”. In this study, the above keywords were used to search the literature in the key foreign language journals included in CNKI from 2010 to 2019, and 77 papers were searched for as the data source of this review.
By combing these 77 CSSCI papers, it shows general trends of the related researches on FS focus on the following five areas: (1) definition and function of second language FS; (2) the usage of FS, involving learners’ usage of FS and its characteristics, comparison between second language learners and native speakers; (3) the teaching of FS, including teaching methods on FS, acquisition rules and the role of FS in teaching; (4) FS and dictionary compilation; (5) the literature reviews of researches on FS.

The years before 2019, the research on lexical chunks was still in its infancy, most of the research on FS were based on the introduction of theory and experience, and there were few empirical studies and investigations. There was a lack of in-depth discussion on the rules and processes of FS acquisition (Y. Huang & Wang, 2011). After 2009, FS research has followed the trend of linguistics, combined with corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, and semantics research, with diverse research methods and a rapid increase in the number of empirical studies. At the same time, studies related to translation studies, cultural studies and lexicography have emerged, showing a trend of integration with multiple disciplines.

Although the numbers of research on FS show a stable trend, the number of articles is unevenly distributed. Most of the studies are on usage and teaching of FS. These two types of research papers account for more than three quarters of the total. The number of papers on definitions of FS is relatively small, because these types of papers have been relatively concentrated in the early stages of the research on FS and have been relatively mature after 2009. The use of FS has developed strongly, showing a trend of multiple research methods and a combination of multiple disciplines. Among them, the corpus-based method has been used in the largest number of studies, and the number of studies combined with cognitive linguistics is closely followed by a continuous upward trend.

3. Characteristics of Development on FS in Various Fields

Definition and function of FS

There are dozens of expressions related to FS abroad, and there are many translated versions in China. This situation is not conducive to the theoretical research and acquisition research of FS. The conclusions drawn by different studies are not universal. Therefore, there are many systematic studies on the definition and function of FS, especially in the early stage of domestic FS research. Ma (2011), on the basis of previous studies, highly summarized the relevant concepts of formulaic sequences in order to better guide the teaching.

The usage of FS

There are many studies on FS. Research in this field can be divided into three parts according to the content: the learners’ usage of formulaic sequences, the contrast between the learners’ and native speakers’ formulaic sequences, and comparison of FS used by learners of different levels.

The usage and characteristics of learners’ FS

The early 2010-2019 research focused on the usage of formulaic sequences by English learners, most of which were based on corpora. Xu (2011) used corpus tools to discuss the characteristics of FS usage, extraction mechanisms, and processing advantages of Chinese students. Moreover, Zhan (2011) summarized and commented on the retrieval techniques and tools of recognition of FS based on corpus, such as WS Con Cord, WS Word List, N-gram, Context Word, and Concgram. Nevertheless, Zhong & He (2012) pointed out that there was a growing trend of empirical research on FS in China, but the research content was too concentrated, mainly focusing on the processing advantages and psychological representation of FS, while empirical research on other topics was rare.

In recent years, the development of linguistics has unfolded from a multi-dimensional perspective, opening the interface between FS and all levels of language, such as the cognitive psychological basis of FS, and the pragmatic functions of FS. In addition, cognitive processing of FS has achieved fruitful results. Sang & Zhang (2013) found through experiments that FS provide an unequivocal processing advantage over non-FS in terms of processing speed and accuracy that within FS idiom processing speed is slower and accompanied with more errors than that of non-idioms.

There are also a wide number of researches on factors that affect learners’ processing of FS, such as frequency, frequency and diversity. With the help of psycholinguistic research methods, the researchers found that the frequency significantly affects the processing speed of formulaic sequences. The higher the frequency of
formulasic sequences, the less time it takes to recognize formulaic sequences and the shorter the reaction time is (Y. Xu & Wang, 2015).

Comparison of the usage of FS between English learners and native speakers

Many researchers (Qi & Ding, 2011; Yang, 2015; Hu, Shi, & Ji, 2017) have compared the similarities and differences in the usage of FS between English learners and native speakers, providing evidence for revealing the rules and difficulties of using FS. These studies include the comparison of the characteristics of learners and native speakers using different FS, the comparison of oral abilities between English learners and native speakers and the comparison of written language between English learners and native speakers. Researchers have tried to find differences in processing factors for FS.

The results revealed that: English learners and native speakers have certain similarities in the usage of FS, but there are also obvious differences. Chinese learners have a strong sense of output, and native speakers use a higher degree of dispersion. In spoken language, native speakers present stronger spoken characteristics. In terms of written language, Chinese learners' choice of FS is greatly influenced by writing prompts. Their choice of words is broad and vague, and Chinese learners use more cohesive chunks.

Comparison of the usage of FS by learners of different levels

There are relatively few comparative studies of the use of lexical chunks by learners of different levels. Jiang & Li (2017) examined the use of FS in the composition of Chinese learners of different language levels and native language backgrounds, and found that advanced learners use more FS than intermediate learners, and use more types of words. The research also has referential significance on research concerning English acquisition. The effect of learners’ differences on acquisition of FS needs further study.

4. Teaching of FS

The acquisition of FS has always been a concern of foreign language teachers and second language acquisition researchers (Lewis, 1993).

The teaching approach and acquisition rules of FS

The research features on how to make it easier for learners to store and extract FS is the focus of FS teaching. Zhou (2014) investigated the effects of memory retrieval and phonemic repetition on second language FS acquisition. Wu (2014) discussed the role of task-driven FS teaching and training model in college English teaching. She stressed that the English class should be task-driven, with FS acquisition as the main line, teachers as the leading role, and students as the main body, so as to cultivate students’ ability to internalize the language, enhance their learning initiative, and reduce their dependence on teachers.

The role of FS in language teaching

These studies include the improvement of teaching efficiency through FS instruction, and the feasibility and effectiveness of FS teaching in English vocabulary, listening, speaking, interpretation, and writing. Then, Wang (2012) discussed a new vocabulary teaching model centered on FS, aiming to broaden the thought of teachers and students; Xiao (2011) did an experiment based on FS to write to improve speaking and it has turned out to be successful. Xu(2011) believes that the input and output of high-frequency FS are important channels to improve the fluency of second language writing. Wang & Yang’s experiment (2014), started from the source of language learning, helped students study FS in depth, and emphasized FS through multi-modal enhancement in teaching. After the experiment, it was found that learners’ listening comprehension could be significantly improved. The research by Li & Zhao (2019) showed that the use of prefabricated chunks leading to an unmarked interpreting strategy improves communication efficiency and reduce cognitive load in interpreting at the same time.

Lexicography

There are only 3 studies on lexicography. Second language learning lacks the natural mechanism and environment for language acquisition, Zhang (2012) explored how to develop dictionaries to make up for this lack. Lin (2010) discussed the features and problems of the Dictionary of English Learning and Communication. Chen (2010) believes that there are some problems in FS arrangement among the five popular dictionaries, so how to deepen the comprehension, combine with other analysis methods, absorb the research results of FS in the
field of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, and make the learning dictionary become a tool for both coding and decoding is a problem that needs to be further studied.

**Features of the study of FS**

Huang & Wang (2011) gave a detailed description of the features of the study on FS in China. Qu & Peng (2016) summarized empirical researches on FS abroad over the past 20 years. Huang & Zhan (2011) discussed the latest progress of cognitive processing on FS in combination with cognitive linguistics. Li, Li, & Gao (2012) analyzed the studies of formulaic sequences from the perspective of hermeneutics. Truly, research on FS is beginning to show a trend of combining with multi-disciplines. Researchers try to analyze FS from various fields in order to bring different perspectives to FS research, so as to make up for the deficiencies and gaps of previous FS research and provide new methods for future research.

5. **Conclusion**

Summarizing the in-depth research and important progress carried out in the above five fields, based on analysis and thinking, the author found the following aspects need to be further improved. Firstly, there is no consensus on the definition of FS. The definition of FS is too broad and diversified, which leads to the lack of comparability of relevant empirical studies. The ontological study of FS, including definition, characteristics and extraction criteria, still needs further efforts.

Secondly, there are many articles that explore the factors of FS acquisition. Comparative studies and the influence of learners’ differences on the acquisition of FS are few and need further exploration. Thirdly, common research paradigms of psycholinguistics, such as self-paced reading, eye tracking, and start-up research, are widely used in foreign related research on the overall representation and processing advantages of FS. The process of FS research is realized and the word Visualization to a certain extent (Wang & Dai, 2014). However, in China, there is almost no such research on how to use new research methods to reveal the essential features of FS which is also the main research direction in the future.

6. **References**