

FORMULAIC EXPRESSIONS IN TESOL AS A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Abdulkhakova Dilafruz Shamsiddinovna
Uzbekistan State World Languages University

ABSTRACT

This study identifies the role of formulaic expressions in enhancing the vocabulary regarding the both speaking and writing competence through a cognitive linguistic and usage-based framework. Formulaic expressions are considered as multiword sequences used frequently in natural setting by native speakers. Based on Alison Wray, David Wood and Norbert Schmitt's theoretical foundations, this research explores how lexical chunks are retrieved with ease under the cognitive entrenchment in an EFL classroom. Holistic approach to the processing of formulaic expressions is an important aspect in this investigation as formulaic language are ready-made chunks with a single meaning or function. Classroom-based instruction with 18 learners aged 16-22 in a private English learning center have been conducted with cognitive principles of frequency, chunking and conceptual meaning. Data were gathered through classroom observations, pre- post - instruction speech samples and writing notes. The findings reveal that speech continuity, expression variety, confidence and reduced pause frequency in the learner's language skill development. A shift from fragmented word-by-word production to more fluent chunk-based retrieval indicates reduced processing demands and increases automaticity in speech. In this action research study, TESOL classroom practice is used as an effective bridge between linguocognitive theories and fluency development in communication, particularly for learners transitioning from intermediate accuracy to communicative fluency.

KEYWORDS: Formulaic Language, Fluency, Cognitive Load, TESOL, Chunking, EFL Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Formulaic language constitutes a crucial component of natural language, considerably enhancing linguistic proficiency, discourse structure, and cognitive processing. The precise distinction between formulaic and non-formulaic (novel), particularly within usage-based linguistic contexts, is still under discussion. Due to the word-formation characteristics of a language's vocabulary system, conventionalized word strings and sequences are termed formulaic language. For example, English speakers may formulate alternative phrases such as *have a nice day*, *have a good day*, *goodbye*, *take care* and so on. Furthermore, the word pain can be paired with several descriptors such as *severe pain*, *intense pain*, *sharp pain*, *chronic pain*, *excruciating pain*. Consequently, these expressions include a broad range of multiword sequences that significantly contributed to the development of formulaic language with several communicative features (Wray, 2002). D. Abdulkhakova (2025) suggests that formulaic language may have profound historical roots, even though it was not extensively investigated at that time. Consequently, it is probable that this language phenomenon is associated with language instruction

and learning. Many utterances were employed in spoken or written discourse, and they were based on specific formulas that have been the subject of discussion.

The anthropocentric paradigm is essential for the advancement of cognitive linguistics, as it encompasses both cognition and the human psyche. Textual meaning is formed through the interaction between the text-producing and text-perceiving individuals within specific cultural and cognitive contexts, as G. Elmuradova (2026) explains in the article. Consequently, the necessity of pre-made lexical chunks is necessary to prevent miscomprehension and reduce anxiety when expressing an idea.

According to usage-based explanations (Bybee, 2013; Tomasello, 2003), the frequency of occurrence of multiword sequences influences the acquisition, representation, and processing of information. Although numerous studies (Geluso, 2019; Carrol & Conklin, 2020) have described the structural and functional properties of formulaic sequences, scholars still lack universally applicable criteria for distinguishing formulaic units from freely generated linguistic combinations, which we will carry out research in our further studies. This methodological gap becomes especially visible in cognitive linguistic research, where formulaicity often depends on both distributional patterns in language corpora and underlying cognitive representations in speakers' mental lexicon.

When it comes to fluency as a research focus in this paper, it remains a persistent challenge for English learners of a foreign language (EFL). Supporting second language acquisition involves more than just teaching language, it requires fostering psychological, social, and academic foundations for learners' success. A holistic approach to ESL education helps create effective and fair opportunities (Chiaramonte, 2025, p. 1169). As defined above, formulaic language is integral to an integrative lesson planning scope and sequence which should be viewed as a key element of communicative approach to a language for improving a natural language use. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, language is learned through usage, frequency, and pattern recognition rather than solely through abstract rules (Ellis, 2008). Learners store and retrieve recurring language patterns as whole units, which reduces processing time and supports fluency. This research examines how formulaic expressions, as stored cognitive chunks, can enhance speaking fluency in B1 learners. Therefore, the present research addresses the following research question concerning the cognitive perspective in facilitating speaking fluency in B1 level TESOL learners.

METHODOLOGY

This action research study adopted a classroom-based pedagogical intervention design informed by cognitive linguistics and usage-based theory to investigate how formulaic expressions contribute to speaking fluency in B1-level learners. The study was conducted in a private English learning center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan within an EFL context and involved 18 participants between the ages of 16 and 22. Learners were introduced to formulaic expressions through three key cognitive principles: frequency, whereby high-frequency expressions were selected; chunking, in which expressions were taught as complete units rather than individual words; and conceptual meaning, emphasizing communicative function over direct translation. The instructional procedure (Table 1) followed four stages, including input (presentation of five to seven formulaic expressions per lesson), noticing (identifying patterns in context), practice (controlled speaking activities such as dialogues and drills), and production (free discussion tasks). Data were collected

through classroom observation, analysis of student speech samples before and after instruction, and teacher field notes documenting fluency development.

Table 1
Teaching procedures

Stage	Description
Input	Presentation of 5-7 formulaic expressions per lesson
Noticing	Students identify patterns in context
Practice	Controlled speaking tasks (dialogues, drills)
Production	Free discussion using target expressions

RESULTS

The results indicated clear qualitative improvements in learner output, as students shifted from fragmented speech such as *“I think... people... maybe good...”* to more structured and fluent expressions like *“I think that people prefer this because...”*, and from hesitant phrases like *“This... different... I don’t know...”* to more cohesive utterances such as *“On the other hand, it depends on the situation”*. (Table 2) Observations further revealed improvements in speech continuity (Tables 3), reduced pause frequency, increased variety of expressions, and greater learner confidence. These changes reflect a cognitive processing shift from word-by-word construction, characterized by hesitation and pauses, to chunk-based retrieval, enabling faster and smoother speech production. The key finding suggests that learners increasingly relied on formulaic sequences rather than constructing sentences from scratch, indicating more efficient cognitive processing. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, these findings support the view that language acquisition is usage-based and driven by exposure to frequent patterns, which are stored as holistic units and retrieved automatically during communication (Ellis, 2008). The observed improvement in fluency can be explained by reduced cognitive load, as learners no longer process each word individually but instead access pre-stored chunks, shifting from analytical to more automatic processing, which aligns with Wray’s (2002) argument that formulaic language functions as a processing shortcut. Pedagogically, the study suggests that TESOL practitioners should prioritize high-frequency chunks, introduce expressions in meaningful contexts, emphasize communicative function over translation, and particularly target B1-B2 learners who are transitioning toward greater fluency. Importantly, while formulaic expressions enhance fluency, they do not replace grammatical competence but rather complement it by facilitating more efficient language production. Using formulaic language can alleviate the cognitive burden for both instructors and students (Abdulkhakova, 2025). Rather than being deconstructed into grammar rules (modal verb + subject + verb form), the expression *“Would you mind...”* can be taught as a singular formulaic segment. Teachers can present it swiftly as a pre-made civil request, which simplifies instruction and reduces the time required for explanation.

Table 2

Before instruction	After instruction
<i>I think... people... maybe good...</i>	<i>I think that people prefer this because...</i>
<i>This... different... I don't know...</i>	<i>On the other hand, it depends on the situation</i>
<i>It is very easy</i>	<i>It is a piece of cake</i>
<i>We are improving slowly</i>	<i>We are getting there step by step</i>
<i>Let's finish it</i>	<i>Let's call it a day/wrap it up</i>
<i>They go and come many times</i>	<i>They go back and forth</i>
<i>I am very busy</i>	<i>I am under a lot of pressure</i>
<i>This is just the beginning</i>	<i>This is just the tip of the iceberg</i>
<i>We need to think carefully</i>	<i>We need to think outside the box</i>
<i>I understand now</i>	<i>Now I see the bigger picture</i>
<i>There are good and bad sides to this idea</i>	<i>There are pros and cons to thus idea</i>

Table 3

Observed Fluency Development (OBD)

Indicator	Observation
Speech continuity	Improved
Pause frequency	Reduced
Expression variety	Increased
Confidence	Increased

The findings support the view that formulaic expressions play a crucial role in second language fluency when examined through a cognitive linguistic framework. It is also permissible to employ the Frayer model, as analyzed by M. Alimbetova (2025), and formulaic language to facilitate effective communication. By implementing a balanced instructional design, this method fosters meaningful, cognitively complex language learning and improves retention, cultural awareness, and student engagement. The Frayer Model commences with the selection of relevant, comprehensible authentic texts and the identification of key vocabulary. Subsequently, the Frayer Model is employed to conduct a systematic exploration in order to enhance comprehension. Through structured pre-, while-, and post-reading activities, students actively engage with vocabulary in context, thereby enhancing their communicative competence and retention (Alimbetova, 2025, p. 23)

From a usage-based perspective, language acquisition is driven by exposure to frequent patterns. As learners encounter recurring expressions, these patterns become stored as holistic

units, enabling faster retrieval during communication (Ellis, 2008). The improvement in fluency observed in this study can be explained by reduced cognitive load:

- Learners no longer process each word individually
- Stored chunks allow for automatic retrieval
- Processing shifts from analytical to holistic

This aligns with Wray's (2002) argument that formulaic sequences serve as a processing shortcut in language use. The study is limited by its small sample size, short duration, and lack of quantitative measurement; however, it provides valuable insight into the integration of cognitive linguistic principles into TESOL practice. In conclusion, formulaic expressions play a central role in facilitating speaking fluency by reducing cognitive processing demands and enabling chunk-based retrieval, thereby offering an effective bridge between linguistic theory and classroom application.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that formulaic expressions, when viewed through a cognitive linguistic lens, play a central role in developing speaking fluency in TESOL contexts. By reducing cognitive processing demands and enabling chunk-based retrieval, they provide learners with an effective pathway toward more natural and fluent speech. Integrating cognitive linguistic principles into classroom practice can help bridge the gap between language theory and real-world communication.

REFERENCES

- Abdulkhakova, D. S. (2025). Cognitive mapping of formulaic language in Uzbek, English, and Russian as a conceptual corpus study. *KONFERENSIYA*, 1(1), 165–173.
- Abdulkhakova Dilafuz Shamsiddinovna (2025). A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OVER FORMULAIC LANGUAGE AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PHRASEOLOGY. *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences, Philosophy and Culture*, 5 (12), 89-98. doi:10.5281/zenodo.17911507
- Alimbetova, M. (2025). Enhancing Lexical Competence in Philology Students: The Role of Authentic Texts and the Frayer Model. *Language Bridge Academic Journal*, 1(1), 21-29.
- Boers, F., Eyckmans, J., Kappel, J., Stengers, H., & Demecheleer, M. (2006). Formulaic sequences and perceived oral proficiency. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(3), 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168806lr195oa>
- Bybee, J. (2013). 'Usage-based theory and exemplar representation,' in Hoffman, T. and G. Trousdale (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (pp. 49-69). Oxford University Press.
- Carrol, G. and Conklin, K. 2020. 'Is all formulaic language created equal? Unpicking the processing advantage for different types of formulaic language,' *Language and Speech*, 63/1: 95-122. doi:10.1177/0023830918823230

- Chiaromonte, Giuseppe (2025). "The Multilingual Acquisition Theory (MAT): A Double-Helix Model of Cognitive and Environmental Influences in Language Learning." Volume. 10 Issue.3, March-2025 International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology (IJISRT), 1162-1171, <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25mar1019>
- Ellis, N. C. (2008). The dynamics of second language emergence: Cycles of language use, language change, and language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal*, 92(2), 232–249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00716>.
- Elmuradova, G. (2026). The Anthropocentric Paradigm in Linguistics: The Language Personality and Cognitive-pragmatic Foundations of Text Creation and Interpretation. *Language Bridge Academic Journal*, 1(3), 14-17.
- Geluso, J. (2019). Frequency, semantic, and functional characteristics of discontinuous formulaic language: A learner corpus study. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/17682/>
- Nattinger, J. R., & DeCarrico, J. S. (1992). *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Rafieyan, V. (2018). The role of knowledge of formulaic sequences in language proficiency. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 231–247. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-018-0050-6>
- Tomasello, M. 2003. *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511519772>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to convey my heartfelt appreciation to all participants who engaged in this classroom-based study and dedicated their time and effort to the speaking exercises and pedagogical intervention. Gratitude is expressed to the teaching staff and the private English learning center for facilitating the instructional environment essential for this research. I express gratitude to QuillBot for its assistance in language refinement (polishing) and stylistic enhancement during the manuscript preparation. Its assistance was especially beneficial in enhancing clarity, coherence, and scholarly readability. Finally, sincere thanks are extended to colleagues and mentors whose insights into cognitive linguistics, TESOL methodology, and formulaic language studies helped strengthen the theoretical and pedagogical dimensions of this research.