Prefabricated Language: Issues and Controversies

Lina Adinolfi
The British Council Teaching Centre
Thessaloniki

Recent research in the computational analysis of native speaker performance language and studies in the processes of first and second language acquisition have identified repeatedly occurring sequences or chunks of language. The extent to which both native speakers and language learners appear to use prefabricated expressions in the production and comprehension of language has important implications for the current theoretical framework of linguistic description – particularly as regards the distinction between syntax and lexicon – as well as for models of classroom instruction.

A number of methodological complexities are involved in the study of these units, with the result that very little is known about their nature or function. Of particular interest, as far as L1 and L2 acquisition is concerned, is their relationship to input and their contribution to the development of linguistic competence.

This paper is based on my participation in a recent research project in conjunction with the Centre for Language in Education at the University of Southampton and describes some of the issues and controversies involved in the study of prefabricated forms in both native speaker and learner language systems.

Prefabricated forms have been described as:

Units of meaning which are intermediary between lexical words and grammatical structures. Such units are sentence-like in that they are syntactically combined sequences of words, yet they seem to be stored in the mind ready for use as pre-formed unitary items, like words, already assembled for immediate access. They are therefore formulaic in character and, although they may require some adaptation for contextual fit, they are not composed on each occasion from constituent parts. They are the result of recall and not of the composition of components by the application of syntactic rules. (Widdowson 1990: 91)

Many studies distinguish between two types of chunk, the first consisting of completely fixed phrases, the second of flexible frames with slots which can be filled by a range of alternative forms (cf routines and patterns, Hakuta 1974: 289).

Two separate contexts are generally identified for the study of lexical phrases. The first concerns their role in competent speaker language; the second, their role in learner language. Studies of learner language tend to distinguish between first language acquisition on the one hand, and second language acquisition on the other – with further distinctions being made in the latter according to the learning environment (naturalistic/instructed) and the age of the learner (adult/child). These contexts will be examined below.
Lexical phrases in native speaker language

Pawley and Syder (1983) draw attention to two linguistic capacities which they refer to as the puzzles of native–like selection and native–like fluency.

The first of these concerns the ability of the native speaker to routinely select from many possible alternatives for conveying the same meaning and to use language forms that are not only grammatical but also idiomatic and appropriate. Such an ability contrasts with the language learner whose choice of expression might be grammatically correct but will not necessarily be idiomatic or unmarked.

The second of these puzzles concerns the ability of the native speaker to produce stretches of connected discourse which appear to exceed human capacity for encoding speech.

The suggestion is that fluent idiomatic control of language can be accounted for by regular recourse to prefabricated expressions. That is to say, native–speaker competence includes not only generative rules but also a proportion of memorised phrases which play an important role in the efficient processing of language.

According to this view, these units are involved in composing and decoding utterances and the strategy applies to both the spoken and written form of the language. Pawley and Syder estimate that several hundred thousand prefabricated forms are regularly accessed in this way.

This modified view of competence has important implications for language processing and description. The notion that certain forms may either be accessed as pre-assembled units or be produced by the application of syntactic rules implies that language is stored and accessed in more than one form. As far as description is concerned, the implication is that language be viewed as a lexico–grammatical continuum, from the entirely fixed to the more variable, to language that is newly constructed word-by-word.

Prefabricated forms in learner language

While prefabrication is by and large an accepted phenomenon in learner language, there is much less agreement as to its extent and function. Central to research in this area is what criteria to use in identifying such units in learner language.

Three possible functions have been proposed for prefabricated chunks in learner language. These shall be examined in turn.

Many linguists (eg Krashen and Scarcella 1978) regard formulaic language primarily as a coping strategy, a temporary means of expression which permits entry into communication while competence in terms of the target language rules is limited.

Another theory (Raupach 1984) views language as a psycholinguistic continuum involving different processing mechanisms – from highly automatic use on the one hand to creative expression on the other. The suggestion is that formulaic language is used as an energy–saving device while the mind focuses on more complex processes, namely encoding and decoding non–automatic language.

The debate centres, however, on a third possible function of prefabricated forms, namely its contribution to the language learning process itself.
In the early stages of language learning the use of formulaic expressions would appear
to have a motivating function by allowing for increased learner participation and thus more
learning possibilities.

What is more controversial is whether the emergence of spontaneous creative language
occurs alongside and largely independently of the use of formulaic expressions or whether
it develops out of the gradual unpacking and analysis of such forms.

In the first view formulaic expressions provide an initial prop but have an otherwise
marginal role in the language acquisition process. In the second, they are a fundamental
component in acquiring the systematic rules of competence.

The suggestion that memorised formulas in learner language act as the raw material in
developing the rules of syntax and thus serve as the basis for creative language use is
supported by research in L1A on the one hand (eg Clark 1974/77, Peters 1983) and in L2A
on the other (eg Hakuta 1974/76, Fillmore 76, Vihman 1982).

According to this view, learners begin by using a limited set of formulas in association
with particular contexts. These utterances generally appear syntactically well-formed but
there is evidence to suggest that the learner has no knowledge of their internal structure.
Initially, new utterances are the result of a strategy whereby such formulas are juxtaposed
without modification. The next stage is marked by a shift from completely fixed expressions
to frames with slots – indicating that the units are beginning to be broken down into their
constituent parts. The process of segmentation and analysis continues to the point where the
learner is able to identify grammatical rules and morphological features which then serve as the
basis for creative language. The comprehension of new utterances involves similar strategies
and contributes to this process of linguistic analysis.

**Lexical phrases and instructed language learning**

Few studies have addressed the issue of prefabrication in L2 development to date, yet
the classroom provides a distinct setting for the study of this phenomenon, particularly as
classroom instruction is often associated with certain practices which may have an effect
on the way in which learners use prefabricated language.

The roles implied for formulas in language processing on the one hand and language
learning on the other have persuaded some researchers – among them Nattinger (1980),
Ellis (1984), Widdowson (1990), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) – to consider the
implications of using such units as the basis of instruction, as an alternative to current
practice. Based on the notion that much language production and comprehension consists
in the retrieval of such forms and on the possibility that segmentation is in some way a
natural process for language learners, the proposal is to reverse the traditional approach in
language pedagogy by beginning with formulaic units rather than grammatical ones.
Learners would then be exposed to variants of these chunks, a process which would assist
them in the gradual analysis of such units of communication.

Despite the attraction of these initial proposals, the difficulties involved in devising a
scheme for the selection, categorisation and sequencing of prefabricated units suggest that
the formulation of a comprehensive methodology for teaching through lexical phrases is still
in its infancy. For an account of one way in which lexical phrases have been incorporated
into classroom teaching, see Adinolfi (1993).
The relationship between the role of prefabrication in native-speaker language on the one hand and learner language on the other is as yet unclear.

Three functions have been proposed for prefabricated units in learner language. Of these, only its role in facilitating language processing could be said to apply to native speaker language as well.

A fundamental difference between the two language systems is that formulas in learner language are generally viewed as situationally-bound forms whose constituent parts have not been fully analysed. This contrasts with native speaker language in which these units have been analysed but are seen as part of a continuum which permits language to be accessed at more than one level. Related to this is the fact that the use of prefabrication in native speaker language is considered to be a relatively stable phenomenon, whereas in learner language it is viewed as a somehow transient or variable strategy.

The relationship between the roles of prefabrication in L1A on the one hand and L2A on the other also needs to be addressed. A major difference between the outcomes of L1A and L2A is that – under normal circumstances – L1A invariably results in competent control of language, while in L2A, a similar level of competence is usually achieved only when child learners are involved. Otherwise L2 learners vary widely in terms of rates of acquisition and levels of approximation to the TL.

The study of prefabrication in learner language

The study of prefabrication in learner language presents a number of methodological difficulties.


Indeed, the issue is complicated by the fact that at any one time a proportion of the formulas used by the language learner will be in the process of breakdown and the researcher will have to distinguish between those forms which are entirely fixed, those in the process of analysis, and expressions which are examples of productive language.

Given that the use of formulas is thought to be directly influenced by the saliency and frequency of such forms in input, any study of their occurrence must monitor input as well as production. The process of data collection for any one individual over a period of time will require close monitoring.

Another methodological issue concerns the role of prefabrication in relation to both production and comprehension. A study of learner utterances reveals more about language encoding than decoding. The role of formulas in language comprehension remains relatively difficult to ascertain.
Of interest too is how far the learner is aware of the internal structure of an utterance, that is to say the constituent parts and rules that govern its formation. There are two possible ways of obtaining such information, namely, by asking the learner or by devising elicitation tasks to test the individual's awareness of the underlying rules of certain utterances in their repertoire. In terms of either feasibility or effectiveness, neither technique is straightforward as a means of data collection.

Another difficulty in the study of prefabrication concerns the way in which chunk use should be represented. The learner's concept of segmentation is fundamental in a consideration of this issue. How, then, should the researcher decide how many distinct morphemes the learner's utterance consists of?

A related issue concerns the effect of written representations of language on the learner's conceptualisation of the language and the use of prefabricated forms. Given that exposure to written forms of language would assist learners in identifying separate words and thus speed up the process of analysis of language into its component parts, is prefabrication more likely to be a feature of language learning in which written forms play a less prominent role?

Finally, recent studies in learning styles and strategies suggest that the use of formulas may be favoured by some learners — whether child or adult — more than others (Cruttenden 1981). Such findings, while not unexpected, only add to the complexities of investigating the use of such units. Further research might establish what factors influence these different learning styles.

This paper has attempted to provide an overview of some of the issues and controversies involved in the study of prefabrication to date. The fact that much remains unknown about the nature of these units, their extent and function in both learner and native speaker language is largely due to the methodological complexities involved in their study. Interest in the area is relatively recent and it is evident that more research is needed, with respect to both native speaker and learner language systems, in order to clarify the status of this phenomenon.

Notes

1Several labels have been used to refer to these phenomena, among them formulaic expressions, prefabricated units, preassembled forms, routinised formulas, lexical phrases. These terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

References

Adinolfi, L.
1993 The Use of Lexical Phrases as Language for Classroom Interaction [Unpublished Paper], University of Southampton.

Clark, R.
Cruttenden, A.

Ellis, R.

Fillmore, L.

Hakuta, K.

Hickey, T.

Huang, J & E. Hatch.

Kamiol, R.

Krashen, S & R. Scarcella.

Nattinger, J R.

Pawley, A & F. Syder.

Peters, A.
1983 *The Units of Language Acquisition*, Cambridge University Press.

Plunkett, K.

Raupach, M
Van Patten, B.
1986 "Second language acquisition research and the learning/teaching of Spanish: some research findings", *Hispania* 69, 202-216.

Vihman, M. M.

Weinert, R

Widdowson, H
1990 *Aspects of Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press.