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The Relevance of Formulaic Sequences in Literary Texts to Readers' Aesthetic Response

علاقة الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية في النصوص الأدبية بالاستجابة الجمالية للقراء

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Abstract:

A writer's appeal, at foremost, is to make a successful transaction between the reader and his literary text, not only in terms of interpretation but also in terms of enjoyment during the reading journey. However, EFL readers often get submerged by the ornament style of the writer who, intentionally or not, insert a variety of formal and stylistic devices such as formulaic sequences to create a positive transactional-aesthetic response. To address this issue, this qualitative study aimed to explore the extent to which formulaic sequences like idioms and collocations can trigger EFL readers' aesthetic response. Accordingly, a Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to 53 EFL readers. The findings revealed that EFL readers positively responded to the integration of formulaic sequences in literary texts where they reckoned that these formulas can promote their aesthetic pleasure and impression towards a literary text.

Keywords: Aesthetic response, EFL readers, Formulaic sequences, Literary text, Transaction

المخلص:

تتمثل رغبة الكاتب ، في المقام الأول ، في إجراء تواصل ناجح بين القارئ ونصه الأدبي ليس فقط من حيث التفسير ولكن أيضاً من حيث الاستمتاع أثناء رحلة القراءة. ومع ذلك ، غالباً ما يُعْمَرُ قراء اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالأسلوب المزخرف للكاتب الذي يقوم ، عن قصد أو بغير قصد ، بإدخال مجموعة متنوعة من الأدوات الأسلوبية كالصيغ النمطية التسلسلية لخلق استجابة جمالية. لمعالجة هذه المسألة، هدفت هذه الدراسة النوعية إلى استكشاف المدى الذي يمكن أن تؤدي فيه الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية كالأمثال والمتلازمات اللفظية إلى استجابة جمالية لقراء اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وفقاً لذلك ، تم إجراء استبيان مصمم وفق مقياس ليكرت لـ 53 قارئاً للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. قد كشفت النتائج أن قراء اللغة الإنجليزية استجابوا بشكل إيجابي لدمج الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية في النصوص الأدبية حيث أمنوا أن هذه الصيغ يمكن أن تعزز لديهم المتعة الجمالية نحو النص الأدبي

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستجابة الجمالية ، قراء اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية ، النص الأدبي ، التواصل .

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1.INTRODUCTION

Enjoying the reading journey prerequisites a literary text that can adequately communicate with readers, in general, and English as a foreign language (EFL) readers, in particular.

Worthy to mention that the psychological feeling of curiosity to read the content of a literary text is not sufficient, but the aesthetic pleasure that can be created is also fundamental for impelling the reader to continue the rest of the journey. As such, the writer can take advantage from good structures and stylistic devices to charm the reader. Yet, it is unavoidable to say that the strong desire to sustain content readability has often led many publishers as well as authors to ignore the role of structures within the form. In this respect, Miall and Kuiken (2002) stated, “readers can take pleasure in the aesthetic feelings that arise from their engagement with formal features of literary texts” (p.224). This means that formal features of a literary text are crucial to direct EFL readers to respond more actively and aesthetically to varying pieces of literature.

The question of what can make a text enjoyable to elevate aesthetic readers’ response in relation to formal features of a language appears in front of researchers who are concerned with stylistic inquiries on reader-response theory. The latter goes back to the pioneering work of Louise Rosenblatt, an American literary theorist, whose theoretical underpinnings have led to the emergence of tentative propositions in recent years, one of which can be formulaic sequences. This linguistic phenomenon that focuses on a variety of ready-made forms and combinations proved its efficiency for users of the English language with respect to their language fluency and proficiency (e.g., Wood, 2009; Bakhshizadeh et al., 2015) , in addition to their overall communicative competence (e.g., Sirkel, 2017). However, formulaicity in stylistics has not been much explored, and, consequently, little is known about the effect of formulaic sequences inclusion in literary texts on EFL readers’ aesthetic response, notably their attitudes and opinions. It is for this end,

this exploratory study has been carried out.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aesthetic Reader-Response

Within the body of literature, reader-response theory did not witness much considerable growth of interest until the second half of the 20th century. This interest was clearly reflected in Rosenblatt's (1978) book, "The Reader, the Text, the Poem" in which she introduced her transactional reader-response theory. As a basic assumption of this theory, she argued that a mutual and reciprocal relationship exists between the reader and the literary output/text where she placed emphasis on the reader's role in meaning construction during the transaction (i.e., the reading act). It is worthwhile to note that Rosenblatt (1985) took a dim view of the usages of transactional theory of reading with interactive-processing and information-processing where researchers attempted to use them similarly. In this line, she expressed her uneasiness against this matter by saying: "I found my transactional theory being said to share" common ground" with information-processing and "top-down" and "bottom-up" processing being shown as squatters on that common ground under the rubric of interactive processing"(p.96). To restate it differently, she emphasised the accurate theoretical use of the words "transactional" to designate the theory of reading and "transaction" to refer to the reading event/act. Therefore, the current study is bound to the theoretical framework that she established for her work.

Reader response research in stylistics adopted the idea of reading as a process that occurs on a continuum from efferent (non-aesthetic) to aesthetic stances where the former refers to

the pleasure and feelings evoked from the act of reading while the latter draws attention to the attained information at the end of the reading journey (Rosenblatt, 1978). That is to say, “the reader co-authors the literary work” (Justman, 2010, p.127) in a way that his/her response corresponds to his/her intention from reading a literary text be it a story, a novel or a poem. In precise terms, the same text can be either read non-aesthetically by focusing on the content or aesthetically by being enrolled with the existing formal devices and words such as rhythm, alliteration, and prefabricated word sequences (i.e., formulaic sequences as it is the case in the present study).

Supporting the theory of aesthetic response, Miall and Kuiken's (2002) study focused on feelings that can accompany the reading process, and which they sorted them out into four main types: (1) evaluative feelings like the overall enjoyment or satisfaction towards a story; (2) narrative feelings that are related to aspects of the fictional event such as empathy with a character; (3) self-modifying feelings that are concerned with reconstructing the understanding of the textual narrative by the reader; and (4) aesthetic feelings in reaction to the formal components or features of a text whether they were stylistic, generic or narrative. With regard to the fourth type, Miall and Kuiken (2002), stated that, “Readers can take pleasure in the aesthetic feelings that arise from their engagement with formal features of literary texts” (p.224). It should be noted that in the current study, it is the aesthetic feelings of EFL readers towards the inclusion of formulaic sequences (e.g., idioms and collocations) in a literary text that will be explored via their attitudes and opinions.

1.2 Formulaic Sequences: A Tentative Proposition

It is generally accepted that there is a terminological tolerance with regard to the notion of formulaicity since many labels can be used to refer to it, some of which are multiword units, conventionalized forms, ready-made expressions, clichés, chunks and formulaic speech (Wray & Perkins, 2000). The term adopted in this paper is formulaic sequences as it has been much used by important figures in the field (e.g., Schmitt, 2004; Wray & Perkins, 2000). Regardless of the multiplicity of the existing founded definitions of formulaic sequences in the literature, Wray's (1999) blanket definition which, stays the most dominant one, refers to “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning 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”(p.214). Wray, here, tightened the characteristic of holistic storage and retrieval of formulaic sequences without the necessity to generate nor analyse them grammatically each time of use.

In line with what has been mentioned earlier, formulaic sequences seem to serve well when they are associated with both productive skills (i.e., writing and speaking) and receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening). Arguably speaking, they work as “a short cut in processing” (Wray & Perkins, 2000, p.15) because of their ability to reduce the processing/production effort, and augment the fluency/proficiency level of their users. Furthermore, they help in marking as well as organising the discourse structure (Schmitt, 2010), especially that they constitute 52.3% of the written discourse as was demonstrated by Erman and Warren (2000). These functions and others can be reached by different categories of these sequences such as idioms, collocations and phrasal verbs, and which present the

most common formulaic sequences for EFL readers. Conceivably, what would raise an issue for EFL readers is neither the definition nor the types of formulaic sequences, but the non-correspondence of the linguistic level of the literary text with the linguistic proficiency of EFL readers. As a matter of fact, the conductors of this study are more concerned with the evoked aesthetic feelings by the so-called formulaic sequences to EFL readers than the linguistic area. Therefore, they build their ideas based on the assumption that the linguistic level of both EFL readers and the literary text are correspondent.

3. Methodology

Ensuring the systematic flow of any undertaken study requires framing it methodologically at the outset. So in order to explore EFL readers' aesthetic response towards formulaic sequences presence in literary texts via their attitudes and opinions, a qualitative approach was adopted. With reference to the adopted approach in addition to the aims of the study, a case study design was selected to collect numeric data with qualitative aspects using a Likert-scale questionnaire. Yet, methodological decisions did not stop at this end, but they reached the population and sample. Accordingly, English as a foreign language readers (i.e., EFL readers) were chosen as a target population for this study. However, the actual sample contained 53 respondents who were included based on a random sampling technique.

With regard to data collection methods and procedures for this study, the Likert-scale questionnaire consisted of two sections, and it was designed by taking into consideration the researchers' objectives. The first section of the questionnaire included 11 questions that could reveal demographic

information, in addition to reading habits. In other words, this section was concerned with personal and background information of the respondents. Likewise, the second section contained 13 Likert-scale questions to reflect attitudes and perceptions of EFL readers about the possible role that formulaic sequences may play to arouse their aesthetic feelings and overall enjoyment with a literary text.

For the purpose of identifying potential deficiencies in the format as well as the content of the used data collection method, the preliminary questionnaire was piloted by administering it via e-mail to nine (9) respondents who did not belong to the same sample of the study, and who were chosen randomly. The respondents were invited to express their critical comments and give their suggestions in the opinionnaire section. Based on their answers, the questionnaire was refined and given its final form. Afterwards, this Likert-scale questionnaire was validated by professors of methodology (i.e., experts), and created using Google Forms in order to facilitate the administration phase, especially during this Covid-19 crisis that hardened the social contact and interaction among people. To analyse the collected data from the questionnaire, a descriptive method was opted for the description, explanation and interpretation of the generated data in the form of percentages and charts.

4. Results and Discussion

The present study, as an exploratory one, was conducted to explore EFL readers' attitudes towards the effect that formulaic sequences may play on their aesthetic response in general, and aesthetic feelings in particular. The data obtained from the first section of the questionnaire will be displayed

transparently, while data drew out from the second section where respondents were asked to assign choices that correspond to their opinions will be presented in the form of a summative table.

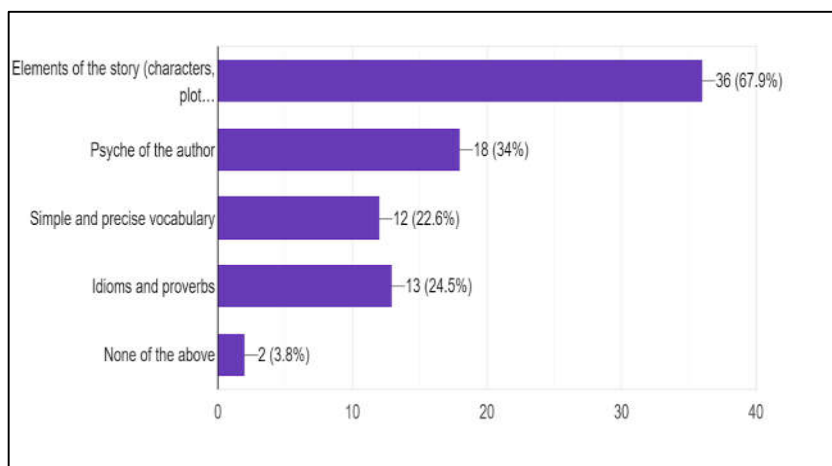
Section One: Readers' Background Information

Based on the collected data from the first section of the questionnaire, the higher percentage (77.4%) of the whole sample respondents went to the female gender, while the male gender percentage signified a low percentage (22.6%). With regard to the education degree of the study sample, 64.2% of the respondents hold a master degree, 13.2% hold a PhD degree and the rest varied from holding a bachelor's degree into pursuing secondary school studies. As their academic achievement was high for most of them, almost half of the respondents (49.1%) considered their level of reading as a good one. The level of the remaining respondents ranged from very good to average respectively: 35.8%, to 11.3%. As for the rest, only two of them considered their level to be poor.

Concerning the purpose of engaging in the reading process, respondents were asked a multiple choice question about their favourite genre of books where they could choose more than one answer. The highest percentage is 39.6%, and which 21 respondents have opted for. In other words 39.6% of the respondents considered detective fiction as their preferable genre of books. A considerable percentage of respondents (30.2%) selected fantasy genre, while the lowest percentages diversified themselves into romance, science fiction (Sci-Fi) and horror genre lovers.

Respondents to our questionnaire were also required to point out what they look for when reading a book from any sort of genre. The following figure displays the percentages of each chosen option with the corresponding number of the respondents.

Fig.1. Aspects that Readers look for when Reading a Story



From this figure, it can be noticed that 36 respondents with a percentage of 67.9% claimed that they look for elements of the story such as characters and plot when reading. In the meanwhile, psyche of the author was considered as a desired aspect vis-à-vis reading a story with an estimated percentage of 34%. Considering the vocabulary and formal features of a story, 22.6% of the respondents revealed that they look for simple and precise vocabulary, whereas 24.5% of them seek to find idioms and proverbs. Noteworthy, readers seem to look for formulaic sequences on the syntactical level more than looking for simple and generated language. As a final observation, only two respondents expressed their non-interest in the mentioned

aspects looked for when reading a story.

Section Two: EFL Readers' Attitudes towards Using Formulaic Sequences to Maximise their Aesthetic Response

The following table shows the respondents' attitudes towards a couple of statements in order to elicit whether formulaic sequences can help them, as EFL readers, to aesthetically respond to a literary text, and, thus, to maximise their aesthetic feelings. It should be noted that results will be displayed based on a thematic description, and the focus will be on the statements that have a direct relation to the aesthetic response and pleasure of EFL readers.

It should be noted that the responses to the statements ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree based on the following order:

- 1: Strongly Disagree**
- 2: Disagree**
- 3: Neutral**
- 4: Agree**
- 5: Strongly Agree**

Table1. EFL readers' attitudes towards using formulaic sequences in literary texts: Percentage

Statements	Percentages%				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Formulaic Sequences (FSs) are important as much as the content	1.9	5.7	20.8	<u>60.4</u>	11.3
2. FSs can make an author's style distinctive	3.8	1.9	5.7	<u>54.7</u>	34
3. Very recognisable FSs make an author's style poor	13.2	41.5	24.5	15.1	5.7
4. FSs can be spotted out easily by the reader in a literary text	00	26.4	30.2	<u>43.4</u>	00
5. FSs turn a literary text into readable and comprehensive	00	24.5	22.6	<u>47.2</u>	5.7
6. FSs promote the aesthetic pleasure and impression to the reader	00	3.8	15.1	<u>60.4</u>	20.8
7. FSs vary in terms of the pleasure they add to a literary text	1.9	3.8	9.4	<u>56.6</u>	28.3

8. Overwhelming variety of FSs distracts the reader's comprehension	3.8	18.9	13.2	<u>49.1</u>	15.1
9. Unusual syntactical structures of FSs create a reading difficulty	00	15.1	7.5	<u>56.6</u>	20.8
10. Figurative and idiomatic meaning of FSs create a reading difficulty	00	11.3	11.3	<u>66</u>	11.3
11. Difficulties created by FSs increase the reading time of a literary text	3.8	11.3	11.3	<u>64.2</u>	9.4
12. A literary text can be free from FSs and still be enjoyable	3.8	11.3	17	<u>47.2</u>	20.8
13. FSs have a major role in maximising readers' aesthetic response towards a literary text	3.8	9.4	17	<u>52.8</u>	17

According to the displayed percentages with respect to statements 2, 3, 4 and 5, 54.7% of the respondents think that formulaic sequences can help in making a writer's style distinctive in comparison to other writers. On a different note, a low percentage of respondents (15.1%) agreed on the idea that recognisable and well-known formulaic sequences can make a writer's style sounds poor rather than innovative, while 41.5% showed their disagreement with this statement. In line with their positive responses, the respondents (47.2%) agreed that a writer can convert his literary text into a readable one so that it can be more comprehensible to its readers by integrating formulaic

sequences. However, making these kinds of judgements requires the reader, at the first place, to spot out formulaic sequences. In this line, 30.2% of the respondents were in the mid-point (i.e., neutral), while 26.4% disagreed with the statement that indicates the easiness of spotting out formulaic sequences in a literary text. Such neutrality and disagreement means that a low percentage supported this statement.

Concerning the results of statements 8, 9, 10 and 11, an estimated percentage of 49.1% considered the possibility of distracting the readers' comprehension by the overwhelming variety of formulaic sequences. Although it is not high, 18.9% of the respondents disagreed with the above statement. In view of statement 9 and 10, 56.6% and 66% represent the percentages of agreement with the reading difficulties that can be created by the unusual syntactical structures and figurative meaning of some formulaic sequences. Besides this, a high percentage 64.2% was recorded in connection to the increasing of time allocated to reading a literary text because of these pre-mentioned difficulties.

The last results that are considered the most important ones with reference to the aims of this study are related to statements 1, 6, 7, 12 and 13. Based on the displayed percentages in the table, 60.4% of the respondents considered formulaic sequences used for the sake of evoking pleasure important as much as the content and literary ideas expressed in a literary text. Similarly, 60.4% and 20.8% of the respondents, respectively, agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that formulaic sequences can promote the aesthetic pleasure and impression to the reader of a literary text. However, it is suggested that not all formulaic sequences can evoke the same degree of pleasure, and that was confirmed by the respondents

when 77.4% of their options ranged from agree to strongly agree. Regardless to the high positive percentages of agreement, 47.2% agreed that the absence of formulaic sequences does not block the enjoyment of the reading process. Overall, formulaic sequences as a proposed formal feature that can be used by writers to maximise readers' aesthetic response towards a literary text have received considerable agreement from the part of the respondents with a total percentage of 69.8%.

Through discussion to what has been displayed, it is noticed that EFL readers are aware of the importance of formulaic sequences in relation to the writer's writing style as well as his/her literary piece of writing. More precisely, they believe that fixed-expressions such as idioms and collocations can help to reflect the creativity of the writer in turning his/her style into a peculiar and impressive one. As an unexpected perception, there was no disapproval of the assumption that widely-known formulaic sequences may have a negative effect on the writer's style. As a matter of fact, writing things that are familiar both at the syntactical and semantical levels can be advantageous to EFL readers' comprehension because of their small linguistic world. To put it differently, well-recognisable sequences can be processed holistically and rapidly due to their high frequency and predictability, and this may facilitate the reading process and enable the reader to sustain the level of enjoyment when reading.

On another vein, what may stand as a problem for EFL readers is the hardness of spotting out formulaic sequences because of the non-fixedness issue neither on a satisfactory definition nor on an exhaustive list of sequences within this field of inquiry (i.e., formulaic language). Furthermore, the over-integration of these multi-words may lead to a reverse effect on

readers who find themselves distracted rather than amused in their reading journey. Another problem that can arise is the complicated syntactical structures along with their semantic opaque meaning of some formulaic sequences (the meaning of the sequence part does not constitute the overall meaning). Once more time, EFL readers can find themselves obstructed from participating aesthetically within the literary text. These are some of the stumbling blocks that can be found on the road of readers' enjoyment, and that definitely need to be put under consideration.

Above all, the unit of analysis in this paper does not reflect EFL readers' response experience, but rather their positive attitudes towards combining formulaic sequences to the structure of a literary texts. They reckon that their aesthetic feelings can be triggered in response to the assigned stimulus in this study (i.e., formulaic sequences) but with different degrees. As it happens, a writer tends to use some collocations and idioms that are more pleasantly rhythmic to his/her readers. Thus, formulaic sequences'role in stimulating readers' aesthetic feelings seems to be much appreciated.

5. CONCLUSION

In Order to achieve a successful reading journey, the reader must be aware of the different stylistic and literary devices. In this line, this study explored EFL readers' attitudes towards formulaic sequences with the aim of orienting their attention to a particular device that can spread an aesthetic flavour to literary pieces of writing when being read. The results revealed that EFL readers do appreciate the existence of formulaic sequences in literary texts, and this in turn may indicate their aesthetic feelings that arise due to this device.

Correspondingly, they are recommended to familiarise themselves with the area of formulaic language. Moreover, it can be claimed that formulaic sequences can contribute in creating the desired aesthetic response to readers, and this claim should be more validated by researchers who are urged to conduct more studies, notably empirical ones, in the field of stylistics.

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