

## ***Formulaic Sequences Difficulties in Affecting Communicative Competence: The Case of Master One EFL Learners in Biskra***

Date de réception : 2020-02-03

Date d'acceptation : 2021-01-06

Raihana Fourar, University of Kasdi Merbah, Ouargla, fourar.raihana@gmail.com

Ahmed Chaouki Hoadjli<sup>\*</sup>, University of Mohamed Kheider, Biskra, ac.hoadjli@univ-biskra.dz

### ***Abstract***

*The present study aims to pinpoint one of the encountered difficulties by Master one students at the Section of English in the foreign language Department in Biskra University where in only one group was taken as a sample. In addition, it seeks to evaluate its effect on learners' communicative competence, mainly on the oral and written levels. This study is a qualitative research approach and a case study design. With regard to the research tools, a semi-structured classroom observation and document analysis were employed respectively. The findings revealed that semantic opaqueness stands as a major difficulty to EFL learners as they showed a poor level when dealing with formulaic sequences that hold a non-literal meaning even though they were directly and explicitly instructed in the assigned area. Moreover, the effect of this difficulty was negatively reflected on EFL learners' communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, EFL learners, formulaic sequences, non-literal meaning, semantic opaqueness

### ***Résumé***

*La présente étude vise à identifier l'une des difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants de Master 1 d'anglais de l'Université de Biskra (un seul groupe a été pris comme échantillon) : l'opacité sémantique. L'étude cherche à évaluer son effet sur la compétence communicative des apprenants, à l'oral et à l'écrit. Pour mener à bien cette étude, la méthode qualitative est adoptée et un plan d'étude de cas est établi. En ce qui concerne les outils de collecte de données, une observation en classe semi-structurée et une analyse de documents sont respectivement effectuées. Les résultats ont révélé que l'opacité sémantique représente une difficulté majeure pour les apprenants car ils ont montré un niveau insatisfaisant en traitant les expressions non littéralement chargées. De plus, l'effet de cette difficulté s'est répercuté négativement sur la compétence communicative des apprenants EFL.*

**Mots clés :** Apprenants EFL, compétence communicative, expressions figées, opacité sémantique, sens non-littéraire

### **المخلص**

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى تحديد إحدى الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب ماستر في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بسكرة حيث تم أخذ مجموعة واحدة فقط كعينة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سعى هذا البحث إلى تقييم تأثير هذه الصعوبة على الكفاءة التواصلية للمتعلمين، ولا سيما على المستوى الشفوي والكتابي. لإجراء هذه الدراسة، تم اعتماد نهج بحث نوعي، واستخدام تصميم دراسة الحالة. فيما يتعلق بالوسائل البحثية، تم إدراج الملاحظة وتحليل المستندات على التوالي. كشفت النتائج أن الغموض الدلالي يمثل صعوبة كبيرة أمام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لأنهم أظهروا مستوى ضعيفاً عند التعامل مع الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية التي تحمل معنى غير حرفي على الرغم من أنهم تلقوا تعليمات مباشرة في مجال الدراسة. علاوة على ذلك، انعكس تأثير هذه الصعوبة سلباً على الكفاءة التواصلية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعقيم الدلالي، الصيغ النمطية التسلسلية، الكفاءة التواصلية، المعنى غير الحرفي، متعلمي اللغة

الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author

## *Introduction*

Communicating fluently and effectively in a target language, notably the English language in the case of this study does not arise out of vacuum, but it prerequisites a good command of the lexicon, in addition to using it in accordance with the socio-cultural norms of the speech community. In other words, a high level of proficiency in terms of communicative competence is certainly a long-term goal and, at the same time, a requirement for a learner of the foreign language. However, this long-term goal cannot be attained unless it was aligned with the enrolment of some key components, one of which is formulaic sequences. In fact, targeting the latter has become a priority in academically based contexts. Therefore, it is certainly needed not to underestimate some basic problems, specifically on the semantic level, that may impede an EFL learner from mastering these multi-words combinations. Accordingly, the present paper attempts to cast light on some of the induced difficulties by formulaic sequences, and to, ultimately, end up with an evidence on the seriousness of these difficulties through an evaluation of their effect on EFL learners' communicative competence.

### *1. Theoretical Background*

It is widely accepted, in the body of literature, that communicative competence is witnessing its heyday in the context of foreign language learning/teaching. As a point of departure, Chomsky (1965) sets up one of the early milestones to this phenomenon when he advances his dichotomy of "competence-performance". This linguist reckons that, while, competence refers primarily to an abstract system of rules, performance is the actual ability to apply this system (Chomsky, 1965). As a countermovement to this chomskyan sense, Hymes (1972) insists on the significance of the sociocultural factors that govern the appropriate production of a message in order to be in harmony with the norms of the speech community (Hymes, 1972). Simply put, Chomsky is interested in grammatical correctness; whereas, Hymes focuses on sociocultural appropriateness of a communicative product. This

explains the shifting of centrality from grammatical competence to communicative competence in the new trends of teaching second and foreign languages.

Nowadays, EFL learners' foremost aim is having, "The ability to use language, or to communicate, in a culturally-appropriate manner in order to make meaning and accomplish social tasks with efficacy and fluency through extended interactions" (Tarvin, 2015, p.2). To put it differently, they seek to become communicatively competent so that they can interact and converse successfully in the sociocultural context in which they find themselves. As a result, the researchers find themselves urged to find out methods and techniques for assisting learners to reach such an aim. For instance, they uphold formulaic sequences as an option with a high potential of functionality in language production and learning (e.g, Wood, 2002).

With regard to this linguistic phenomenon (i.e., formulaic sequences), Wray (2013) proclaims the existence of a "terminological problem" because it has been labelled differently, and this, in turn, has opened the door for contradictory prospects (Wray, 2013). Likewise, for defining it, providing one single definition to formulaic sequences is not an easy task as each researcher is approaching it based on his perspective. What is more likely to harden this task is the absence of an absolute criteria that can act as a basis for putting forth a complete definition (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). Yet, Wood (2015) claims that three items should be covered in any definition: multiplicity of the lexical units, singularity of the meaning and prefabrication for retrieval (Wood, 2015).

As a laudable attempt from him, Kecskes defines them as, "multiword collocations which are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated de novo with each use" (Kecskes, 2007, p.193). This means that a learner is not supposed to generate sentences from scratch each time since language is typically formulaic in nature. However, the definition that has been quoted in much of the literature goes back to Wray, and it is as follow:

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 (Wray, 1999, p.214).

In her definition, Wray (1999) highlights the essential criteria that should be considered when introducing/defining the notion of formulaicity (Wray, 1999).

This “formulaic paradox”, as Assassi and Benyelles (2016) describe it, did not stop at the level of agreeing on a standardised label or a referential definition, but it included the issue of categorising these ready-made combinations into well-defined subclasses (Assassi & Benyelles, 2016). Yet, three categories have benefited from a large amount of studies, and which are *collocations* “e.g., cost a fortune” (Duan & Qin, 2012; Fernández & Schmitt, 2015; O’Dell & McCarthy, 2017; Rao, 2018) , *idioms* “e.g., kick the bucket” (Irujo, 1986; McCarthy & O’Dell, 2002), and *phrasal verbs* “e.g., look after” (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003; Wood, 2015). Perhaps, this may feature them to be considered, according to a considerable number of researchers, as the main categories under the umbrella of formulaic language. Accordingly, the following research, along with its aims, addresses these categories.

It seems inconceivable to investigate the importance of formulaic sequences in relation to communicative competence without studying their performed functions. As a matter of fact, a functionally-based categorisation has been established by Wray and Perkins (2000) where the focus was on two functions: (a) social interaction, and (b) short-cut in processing (Wray & Perkins, 2000). The former function evolves around the concept of using formulaic sequences as devices for social interactions such as asserting separate/group identity, in addition to performing different speech acts (e.g. apologising and vowing). On the other side, the latter function means that these sequences reduce the amount and effort of the mental processing of an information, and they increase the fluency and

production of communication, be it spoken or written. Apart from this, Schmitt (2010) signals other functions that can be realised by formulaic sequences such as discourse organisation and transfer of precise information (Schmitt, 2010).

Based on what has been mentioned earlier, and counting on the results of different studies (e.g. Wisniewska, 2015; Assassi & Benyelles, 2016; Rafieya, 2018), formulaic sequences have proved to be highly relevant and functional for the improvement of EFL learners’ communicative competence along with its main components. By way of contrast, this does not eliminate the possibility of affecting negatively learners’ ability to communicate with the foreign language even under the light of explicit exposure in academic contexts. Regarding this assumption, it entails the existence of naturalistic difficulties wherein formulaic sequences act as a primary source to them; worth mentioning, the unfocused pedagogical instruction, the non-acquaintance with the sociocultural norms of the foreign culture, in addition to the nature of formulaic sequences that may represent a major difficulty for an EFL learner. In line with this claim, Wray and Perkins (2000) shed light on semantic irregularities where they argue that some formulaic sequences are hard to understand without a direct contextual explanation, and this can be attributed to their metaphorical meaning and semantic opaqueness (Wray & Perkins, 2000). The latter simply means that the meaning of a sequence cannot be inferred from the meaning of its constituent parts. On this account, it is definitely required to investigate thoroughly formulaic sequences difficulties, each researcher from a different standpoint in order to ease a teacher/learner process of teaching/learning these prefabricated expressions.

## 2. The Study

### 2.1 The Problem

Paring the notion of formulaicity within the process of communication helps in affecting positively communicative competence, and reaching native-likeness proficiency in an EFL context. However, some formulaic sequences seem to be more

challenging in their learning and integration in communicative products (dialogues, pedagogical written/oral activities and others). Therefore, assuring the functionality of these formulae both at the written and oral aspects requires, at the outset, detecting what may impede it, specifically on the semantic level.

### ***2.2 The Research Questions***

Based on the formulated problematic for this study, the following research questions were posed:

**RQ1:** What type of difficulties do EFL learners encounter when integrating some formulaic sequences in their communication, mainly speaking and writing?

**RQ2:** What kind of effect do these difficulties have on EFL learners' communicative competence?

### ***2.3 The Research Hypotheses***

Based on the aforementioned questions, the following research hypotheses were proposed:

**RH1:** Non-literal meaning of some formulaic sequences hinder EFL learners from communicating successfully.

**RH2:** EFL learners' communicative competence will be negatively affected.

### ***2.4 The Research Aims***

The present study aims to develop a sense of awareness for both EFL learners and teachers towards the area of formulaic sequences in addition to its relevance to the communicative competence. More precisely, it seeks to:

- Determine the sort of difficulties that may hinder the functionality of formulaic sequences for EFL learners by focusing on their meaning type (literal/non-literal).

- Evaluate the effect of these sort of difficulties on EFL learners' communicative competence, (i.e., speaking and writing).

### ***2.5 Population and Sample***

Based on the belief that Master one students at the Section of English in the Department of Foreign Languages in Biskra university (Algeria), supposedly, have an advanced level in the English

language, the researchers have attempted to include them in the present study as an overall population (N=195). Alternatively, stated, Master one students are considered to be more acquainted with the area of formulaic sequences comparing to other levels since they deal with it in the course of Language Mastery. Following a purposive sampling technique, only one group (N=47) was chosen to take part in this study, and this selection was based on the sample suitability for the collection of appropriate data in order to end up with adequate answers to the research questions.

### ***2.6 Study Description and Rationale***

Formulaic language as a promising field of study is gaining more attention by researchers who are conducting many studies on the improvement of teaching formulaic sequences via different approaches. However, we were mainly concerned with identifying certain difficulties that may impair this improvement. Wray states, "If formulaic sequences are so difficult to learn, then unless we understand why, we are unlikely to hit a successful way of teaching them" (Wray, 2000, p.468). That was what has urged the researcher to investigate some of the induced difficulties by formulaic sequences and their effect on learner's communicative competence. Precisely, the focus was on the semantic level to see whether non-literal meaning can constitute an obstacle to EFL learners when attempting to communicate or they can be learnt and reproduced easily regardless to their meaning type. Based on the nature of the study, in addition to the researchers' purposes, a qualitative approach was opted for, where two phases of data collection were included.

#### ***First phase***

This phase integrated collecting qualitative data through two semi-structured classroom observations: One at the teaching level where the focus was only on the teacher, and the other at the practicing level where the focus was on the representative sample. In this phase, the researchers intended to be non-participant observers in six sessions where one of the teachers was already

teaching formulaic language as a part of the syllabus of Language Mastery course to Master One students.

During lectures, the students were introduced to a general definition about formulaic language, its categories, and its importance in relation to communicative competence. Here, the first used checklist took into consideration the teachers' method of delivering the content, so that the researchers can make sure that the teacher's way of instruction is not a source for the difficulties that his students may face. Throughout tutorials, the focus of the second checklist was directed towards students' involvement and participation during their practice to get insights about the faced difficulties in relation to the integration of these ready-made combinations in their oral communication.

### *Second phase*

It also integrated collecting qualitative data through an official test designed and submitted by the teacher after the end of the classroom observation. As the teacher confirmed, the test covered the main categories of formulaic language, while a greatest focus was given to the semantic level. Then, a Content-based Approach was undertaken on one activity from students' copies of the test in order to check that a non-literal meaning of a formulaic sequence can constitute an obstacle to an effective communication, notably at the level of the writing skill.

After passing through these two phases, the researchers may become able to make a final evaluation about the effect of the encountered difficulties on students' communicative competence.

## *2.7 Methodology*

### *2.7.1 The Research Approach*

Due to the aims, and nature of assumption that our research is based upon, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This approach has been selected because it can help in producing rich textual data. In addition, it aids in gaining an in-depth understating of the pre-determined issue that needs to be explored in relation to formulaic sequences and communicative competence. Furthermore, it can help

in producing the kind of qualitative evaluation that we are looking to get by the end of the study.

### *2.7.2 The Research Design*

With reference to the narrow context of the present study, a case study was selected for the research design. In line with this matter, Zainal notes that, "A case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context" (Zainal, 2007, p.1). This methodological decision can also be justified by the allowance of this kind of research design to collect live data in natural settings. Not only this, but it strongly emphasises reaching a deeper understanding of the investigated issue.

### *2.7.3 Research Tools*

To execute our study practically, the researchers, first, have opted for a semi-structured classroom observation as it permits us to have a direct access to live occurring situations, and to take reliable snapshots for the encountered difficulties by EFL learners in the assigned area (i.e., formulaic sequences). Then, this data collection method was soon followed by document analysis as another source of relevant data, and which, by good fortune, happens to be applicable to qualitative studies, and collected in non-artificial educational settings. Opting for these two data collection methods, the researchers have aimed to minimise potential bias resulting from their part, specifically in the observational level, and to strengthen the credibility and validity of the collected data.

With regard to the classroom observation wherein the observers were non-participants, two semi-structured checklists have been designed as the learning-teaching process of the area of formulaic sequences occupied two different settings (i.e., tutorial sessions and lectures). It is noteworthy no ready-made grid, to the best of the researchers' knowledge can be used to serve the study purpose; so, they took charge of checklists development. In other words, the researchers designed tailor-made checklists by, mainly, taking into account their research questions and aims.

The first checklist that contained six directive items under one section was used during lectures. It was directed only towards the teacher along with his instructional delivery of the content in order to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of his teaching approach both to the students and to the subject under study. In the mean time, the second checklist was formed by the inclusion of three sections that sought, respectively, to: (1) explore teacher's instructional practices, (2) confirm the relevance of the content knowledge (i.e., area of formulaic sequences) to students in general and to their communicative competence in particular, and (3) examine students' participation and involvement in performing some pedagogical activities. Although this checklist consists of different parts, it attempted to identify and evaluate the effect of the potential difficulties on learners' communicative competence (i.e., the oral aspect) (See Appendices 1 & 2).

However, these checklists were not used until being piloted and validated with the assistance of some knowledgeable teachers in the department.

Opting for documents analysis, the researchers endeavoured to explore formulaic sequences integration in the written productions of students by laying focus on the encountered difficulties that have been noted during the observation. This was done with the intention of evaluating the effect of such difficulties on learners' communicative competence (i.e., the written aspect). It should be noted that the used documents were in the form of test papers where the latter belonged to the same sample being observed (See Appendix 3). As far as we were concerned with difficulties on the semantic level of formulaic sequences, one activity was selected to be analysed. In this activity, the students were required to write full sentences from their own productions by integrating four phrasal verbs in their literal and non-literal meaning. In other words, students were supposed to present each phrasal verb in two contexts where one context is biased towards literal meaning, and the other one is biased towards non-literal meaning. The four assigned phrasal verbs were respectively as follow:

- 1- Put up!
- 2- Look through!
- 3- Run out!
- 4- Get into!

### ***3. Results***

To analyse the collected data through this research phase, the researchers opted for a thematic analysis to the classroom observation, and a content analysis to the documents. Then, a descriptive method was used for the description, explanation/analysis and interpretation of the major ideas deduced from each data collection method.

#### ***3.1 Classroom Observation***

The following section is devoted to report the obtained results from both observation checklists. Then, it will be followed by a discussion to the findings with reference to the set research aims for this study.

##### ***3.1.1 The First Classroom Observation***

It was observed that there was no confirmation or comprehension checks by the teacher, so that he can check if his students have fully grasped the content delivered to them, or there were certain difficulties in the learning process to be detected. However, this does not reject the idea of the teacher's reliance on other criteria. In fact, he depended heavily on observing non-verbal behaviours of his students to determine if comprehension is attained, or there is a need for adding further explanations. As an example, he kept focusing, while explaining, on some paralinguistic features such as facial expressions, and body gestures as they can help him to tell whether his students were looking for more clarification about the content or not. On the top of that, he endeavoured to simplify complex and difficult materials by providing varied explanations. For instance, he used the act of exemplification to explain opaque idioms, and he even used activities to explain an idea when needed.

The teacher was noticeably stating information directly, and explaining the content explicitly. He also attempted to communicate his ideas effectively as he articulated clearly, repeated some explanations, and used the board to write

important notes. During the process of teaching, the teacher was directing his students' attention towards the importance of understanding the meaning of formulaic sentences, but he did not completely neglect their syntactical forms. For example, he considered phrasal verbs to be challenging in terms of their meaning that is typically not obvious for their first-time readers. In the case of collocations, there was greater emphasis on their syntactical forms due to its variety that needs to be considered by students. By the end of every attended lecture, the teacher included follow-up activities that were simple and linked to FSs.

Based on what has been observed, it can be claimed that the teacher's method of teaching was based on directness and explicitness, so that the students could be able to keep their focus on the content explained to them. In his attempt to determine the attainability of comprehension, he depended on the non-verbal type of communication (i.e., paralinguistic features). This behaviour may help students who prefer to keep silent even if they do not fully understand what they are being taught. Nonetheless, this did not allow him to ignore verbal communication, and which requires asking direct questions such as yes/no questions (e.g., do you need further explanation?).

It appears that the teacher could succeed, to a certain extent, in simplifying the complex material since he opted for a set of ways to explain effectively, such as exemplification, repetition and visualisation (i.e., forming a mental image in the mind for an abstract idea). Additionally, he tried to consolidate his students' understanding through a simple follow-up activity by the end of each lecture. Most importantly, the teacher showed a kind of sensibility about considering both syntax and semantics when teaching FSs. This can be proved by his insistence on the idea that no logical connection can be found between the form and the meaning of many FSs. Overall, the students had the chance to be exposed explicitly to the area of FSs in an academically based context even if it was for a limited period.

### ***3.1.2 The Second Classroom Observation***

#### ***Section One: Teacher's Instructional Practices***

In each session, it was observed that the teacher avoided being monotonous in his selection and development of instructional practices. This means the developed questions and activities were varied in terms of the difficulty level as well as the type (e.g., matching activities, completion tasks and improvising dialogues). What is important is that the activities fitted the area of formulaic sequences, and, by consequence, were suitable for developing students' formulaic competence. Moreover, the teacher noticeably made an extra emphasis on the semantic level where he sought to direct his students' attention towards the necessity of using contextual clues, in some cases, to extract the non-literal meaning of some formulaic sequences that cannot be processed holistically. On the top of this, the students were not only instructed but also urged to participate by the teacher who intended to pose integrative questions, and to give sufficient allotted time for the answer.

#### ***Section Two: Content Knowledge and Relevance***

It was found that classroom activities were designed based on the content being delivered to the students in the designated area (i.e., formulaic sequences), and this can be confirmed by what the researchers have previously observed and collected as data using the first observation checklist. This indicates the relevance and usefulness of the content knowledge for the reinforcement of students' communicative competence, notably at the written and oral aspects. On another note, the expected difficulty that was put under lens by both researchers, specifically on the semantic level, proved to work as a hindrance in the way of a successful communication whether the activity demanded immediate oral responses or written answers from the students' part. However, the level of difficulty changed according to the type of meaning held by the sequences. For instance, the students were able to answer easily and

correctly when a formulaic sequence held a context-independent meaning (i.e., literal meaning).

### *Section Three: Students' Involvement in the Practice of FSs*

Throughout all the sessions, there was not a clear tendency of students to involve themselves in the teaching process by asking clarification questions in any level, be it semantic or syntactic, and this may imply their full comprehension to the content for the observers. However, this did not have any reflection in their answers because they became unable to communicate their ideas adequately in the different instructional activities. It is worthy to mention that a high level of students' participation was recorded when the instructions of in-class activities were about formulaic sequences that are semantically transparent, and not vice versa. With regard to meeting the teacher's expectation of appropriate integration of formulaic sequences in their communicative products, his feedback seemed to be an optimal sign to be taken into account by the researchers. For instance, he showed negative feedback to his students in the case of idioms and phrasal verbs where he considered their answers as artificial unlike the case of collocations where he looked more satisfied through his positive feedback.

### *3.2 Document Analysis*

To pinpoint the sort of encountered difficulty by most students when attempting to integrate formulaic sequences in their written productions, and to evaluate its effect on their communicative competence, specifically the writing skill, an analysis of their written answers was carried out. The following table transforms qualitative data into quantitative one in order to ease our task of analysis and discussion, and to give more reliability to the results.

**Table 1** Percentages of Correct and Wrong Answers in the Activity

	Literal meaning		Non-literal meaning	
	Correct answers	Wrong answers	Correct answers	Wrong answers
Put up	62.5%	37.5%	17.5%	82.5%
Look through	95%	5%	82.5%	17.5%
Run out	92.5%	7.5%	67.5%	32.5%
Get into	72.5%	27.5%	77.5%	22.5%
<b>Total percentage</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>60.6%</b>	<b>39.4%</b>

As can be seen in **table 1**, the total percentage of correct answers in the case of integrating phrasal verbs in their literal meaning was higher (**80%**) unlike the percentage of using them in their non-literal meaning, and which was lower (**60.6%**). Moreover, what has drawn our attention during the analysis process is the non-variety of using these sequences in partnership with students' ideas and themes. For instance, most of the students tended to link the phrasal verb "run out" with time (e.g., time runs out!), whereas they linked the phrasal verb "look through" with sheets of papers.

Moreover, the students became incompetent when it comes to dealing with a sequence that has not been introduced during lectures, as it is the case with the phrasal verb "put up". Regarding the latter, lower percentages of correct answers (**62.5%**, **17.5%**) were estimated in both types of meaning in comparison to the percentages of the other phrasal verbs that were higher (see to the table). This means that the majority of students failed in doing their task (i.e., providing meaningful written sentences). What is more, some students preferred leaving a blank space instead of being obliged to handle the semantic opaqueness of these phrasal verbs, regardless to its level.

### *4. Discussion*

In this section, the researchers attempt to present the results that were collected from the pre-specified data collection methods. Then, these results

will be discussed with reference to the aim of this study.

Based on our purpose of undertaking this study, and which was examining whether non-literal meaning of FSs stands as a challenge for students when communicating their ideas in an oral or written way, in addition to the analysis in section four, a precise and concise discussion can be presented in the following lines. First, the teaching method adopted by the teacher within the area of formulaic sequences was fully explicit and direct. This means that the students were fortunate to receive direct instruction, and to be explicitly exposed to the pre-specified area in academic settings though it was over a short period. In fact, this kind of explicit instruction proved to be highly relevant for EFL learners in order to gain familiarity and ability to use them adequately in their both types of meaning (i.e., literal/non-literal). Furthermore, the teacher could succeed, to a certain degree, in driving students' attention to the importance of considering both syntax and semantics when learning and using formulaic sequences, as there is no logical connection between the form and the meaning of these multi-words combinations.

Not far from this vein, the designed instructional practices were characterised by their diversity, well order and a graduation in the difficulty scale, and, most importantly, by their direct relevance to the area of formulaic sequences. From a pedagogical perspective, this kind of activities such as acting-out dialogues, matching activities and fill-in the gaps is a good strategy to make learners more familiar with using formulaic sequences adequately in authentic communicative situations. In this way, students' level of expectancy towards tackling this area was probably met. When it comes to the teacher who developed the activities, he demonstrated a sense of awareness about the necessity of casting light on the semantic level of formulaic sequences without ignoring the syntactic one.

On the counter part, there is no absolute evidence of the teacher's concern about the difficulty that can be created by the type of meaning, particularly the non-literal one, of these chunks of

language. More to the point, this difficulty may work as an obstacle for students when they intend to integrate formulaic sequences in their communicative products. Therefore, it is possible to note that the teacher foremost goal was apparently enabling his students to understand the content delivered more than promoting their long-term learning progress. As a justification, the devoted time for the pre-assigned area (formulaic sequences) is too limited, and this may have a negative impact on the teaching process. On the top of this, students' inability to extract holistically the meaning of some formulaic sequences obstructed them from being communicatively competent, specifically on the level of the speaking skill. Otherwise stated, dealing with a lower level of semantic transparency can lead to a higher level of difficulty for students when transmitting their ideas orally. With respect to the writing skill, students' literal usage of formulaic sequences in their written answers was characterised by disparity and correctness in contrast to the non-literal usage where students did not succeed to show neither disparity nor correctness, in most of the cases. Once again, it can be confirmed that the non-literal meaning/ low level of semantic transparency of formulaic sequences stands as an obstacle to an effective communication of ideas, both at the oral and written levels.

While earlier studies (e.g., Kweon, 2011) proved that there is a difficulty when processing formulaic sequences whose meaning is less salient, the present study confirmed, within the boundary of its methodological framework, that this difficulty did not stop at that end. In fact, it indeed exceeded the processing phase, and led to the inappropriate use/integration of formulaic sequences, in addition to creating a negative effect on EFL learners' communicative competence.

### *5. Conclusion and Recommendation*

In recent times, communicative competence has reached its hey days since EFL learners and practitioners in the educational field are gaining more awareness about its importance in relation to understanding and producing communicative messages. Therefore, researchers have been looking

for solutions that may contribute in its development, one of which is formulaic sequences. The latter proved to play a crucial role in turning learners to proficient communicators of the target language.

As for the current study, it was concerned with problems that hinder the functionality of the suggested solutions in the literature. In precise terms, this study focused on pinpointing the non-literal meaning/ semantic opaqueness of formulaic sequences as a difficulty that can create certain effect on learners' communicative competence. That is to say, this difficulty was explored and its effect was evaluated in order to provide a reliable evidence rather than putting an assumption quite blindly.

To conduct this evaluative study, a qualitative research approach was adopted where two classroom observations and document analysis were employed to collect appropriate and relevant data to the research's purpose. With regard to the findings, it revealed that even after being explicitly instructed, learners are still obstructed by the non-literal meaning when trying to incorporate formulaic sequences in their communication, namely speaking and writing. Most importantly, this obstruction reaches their communicative competence where the latter is negatively affected.

The results of this study asserted the necessity of developing instructional practices and strategies that can be suitable for prolonging learners' ability to use formulaic sequences more effectively, and, eventually, affecting positively their communicative competence. Accordingly, researchers are urged to come up with solutions to the already presented difficulty, and which can be relevant in the Algerian educational context, each researcher from his own unique perspective.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

Lastly, some pedagogical implications can be drawn based on the analysis of the obtained data and in accordance with the aims of this study. They are as follow:

#### ***For teachers***

- Teachers should give more attention to teaching the area of formulaic sequences.
- Teachers are encouraged to introduce formulaic sequences to EFL learners in an early stage from their learning process. Moreover, this inclusion demands carefulness from the teachers' part in order to avoid being a source of learning difficulties.
- Teachers are urged to devote more time for their students to practise the use of formulaic sequences after being explicitly taught.

#### ***For students***

- Students are recommended to extend their practice on formulaic sequences away from the classroom context.
- Students should integrate formulaic sequences in their communication, so that they can develop their formulaic competence, in particular, and communicative competence, in general.

#### ***For researchers***

- Researchers should consider conducting more studies in the field of formulaic sequences, in addition to creating practical instructional strategies that can consolidate teachers' efforts to overcome the sort of difficulties discussed earlier in this study.

## References

- Assassi, Tarek. Benyelles, Radia. 2016, "Formulaic Language for Improving Communicative Competence", *Arab World English Journal*, 7(2), 163–176. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2814817>
- Chomsky, Noam. 1965, *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Fernández, Beatriz González. Schmitt, Norbert. 2015, "How much collocation knowledge do L2 learners have ? The effects of frequency and amount of exposure". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(1), 94–126. <https://doi.org/10.1075/itl.166.1.03fer>
- Hymes, Dell. 1972, On Communicative Competence. In *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Irujo, Suzanne. 1986, "Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth : in the Acquisition of Idioms Transfer in a Second Language". *TESOL QUARTERLY*, 20(2), 287–304.
- Kecskes, István . 2007, Formulaic Language in English Lingua Franca. In I. Kecskes & L. R. Horn (Eds.), *Explorations in Pragmatics: Linguistic, cognitive and intercultural aspects*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kweon, In So. 2011, "Is Literal Meaning Processed Before Figurative Meaning in L2 Idiom Processing ?" 1, 8(1), 63–85. Retrieved from [http://www.asiatefl.org/main/download\\_pdf.php?i=146&c=1419303262](http://www.asiatefl.org/main/download_pdf.php?i=146&c=1419303262)
- McCarthy, Michael. O'Dell, Felicity. 2002, *English Idioms In Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Dell, Felicity. McCarthy, Michael. 2017, *English Collocations in Use Advanced* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rafieya, Vahid. 2018, "Knowledge of Formulaic Sequences as a Predictor of Language Proficiency". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 7(2), 64–69. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.7n.2p.64>
- Rao, Chandra Sekhar. 2018, "The Importance of Collocations in Teaching of Vocabulary". *Journal for Research Scholars and Professionals of English Language Teaching*, 8(7).
- Rudzka-Ostyn, Brygida. 2003, *Word Power: Phrasal Verbs and Compounds*. (A. A. Walt & C. van Der, Eds.). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schmitt, Norbert. 2010, *Researching Vocabulary: A Vocabulary Research Manual*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schmitt, Norbert., & Carter, Ronald. 2004, "Formulaic sequences in action: An introduction". In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *Formulaic Sequences: Acquisition, processing and use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Tarvin, Lynn David. 2015, "Communicative Competence: Its Definition, Connection to Teaching, and Relationship with Interactional Competence". <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3214.2807>
- Wisniewska, Marta. 2015, "Communicative Competence in Professional Discourse". *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 3(2), 50–57. <https://doi.org/10.13189/lls.2015.030203>
- Wood, David. 2002, "Formulaic Language in Acquisition and Production : Implications for Teaching". *TESL Canada Journal*, 20(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v20i1.935>
- Wood, David. 2015, *Fundamentals of Formulaic Language: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wray, Alison. 1999, "Formulaic Language in Learners and Native Speakers". *Language Teaching*, 32(4), 213–231.
- Wray, Alison. 2013, "Formulaic language". *Language Teaching*, 46(3), 316–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444813000013>
- Wray, Alison. Perkins, Mick. 2000, "The functions of formulaic language : an integrated model". *Language and Communication*, 20(1), 1–28. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/s0271-5309\(99\)00015-4](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/s0271-5309(99)00015-4)
- Zainal, Zaidah. 2007, Case study as a research method. *Kemanusiaan*, 9, 1–6. Retrieved from [http://psyking.net/htmlobj-3837/case\\_study\\_as\\_a\\_research\\_method.pdf](http://psyking.net/htmlobj-3837/case_study_as_a_research_method.pdf)

**Appendices**

**Appendix 1**

**Classroom Observation Checklist**

Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Course: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Section: \_\_\_\_\_ Level: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observation Number: 1 2 3 4

All items marked **Not Observed** must be explained in Comments

Teacher's Instructional Delivery of Content	
Items	Observed
1-Teacher endeavours to perceive difficulties that obstruct his learners' comprehension by asking questions and listening to their verbal responses.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
2- Teacher observes non-verbal behaviours to determine if comprehension is attained or to add further explanations.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
3- Teacher simplifies complex and difficult materials by providing varied explanations in order to meet the needs of all his students.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
4- Teacher delivers the content explicitly, and communicates his ideas clearly during the lecture.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
5- Teacher directs his students' attention towards the importance of the meaning of different formulaic sequences.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
6- Teacher includes follow-up activities in order to consolidate and monitor students' overall understanding of what has been taught.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	

**Overall Comments:**

.....  
 .....

Observer's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:...../...../.....

Supervisor's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:...../...../.....

**Appendix 2**

**Classroom Observation Checklist**

Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Course: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Section: \_\_\_\_\_ Level: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observation Number: 1 2 3

All items marked **Not Observed** must be explained in Comments

Section one: Teacher's Instructional Practices	
Items	Observed
1- Teacher develops a variety of questions and activities that imply a graduation in the difficulty scale as appropriate both for students and the area of formulaic sequences (FSs).	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
2- Teacher directs his students' attention towards the importance of extracting the implicit meaning of some formulaic sequences (such as idioms) based on contextual clues in the developed activities.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
3- Teacher fosters students' participation during classroom activities in order to enable them to communicate effectively.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	

Section two: Content Knowledge and Relevance	
Items	Observed
1- Classroom activities are chosen based on their relevance to the content being taught in the assigned area (FSs).	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
2- The observed difficulties of learning the content (FSs), especially on the semantic level, impede learners from being communicatively competent whether in the speaking or writing skill	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>
<b>Comment:</b> ..... .....	
3- The explicit instruction of FSs is relevant and useful for the reinforcement of students' communicative competence, notably speaking and writing.	Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>

<p><b>Comment:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
--

<b>Section three: Students' Involvement</b>	
<b>Items</b>	<b>Observed</b>
<p>1- Students tend to ask more questions that have a relation with the content/meaning of formulaic sequences more than their form.</p>	<p>Yes <input type="radio"/></p> <p>No <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>Comment:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	
<p>2- Students are able to communicate and answer correctly different instructional activities regardless of their difficulty level.</p>	<p>Yes <input type="radio"/></p> <p>No <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>Comment:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	
<p>3- Students tend to participate more frequently in classroom activities in relation to FSs that are semantically transparent.</p>	<p>Yes <input type="radio"/></p> <p>No <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>Comment:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	
<p>4- Students meet teacher's objectives by integrating some formulaic sequences to communicate their ideas.</p>	<p>Yes <input type="radio"/></p> <p>No <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>Comment:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	

Observer's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:..... / ..... /.....

Supervisor's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:..... / ..... /.....

Appendix 3

University Mohammed Khider- Biskra-  
 Faculty of Letters and Languages  
 Department of Foreign Languages  
 Division of English

Class: Master I (G1 & G2)  
 Course: Language Mastery  
 Date: 18/12/2018

09.05  
 12

TEST 02

I. Idioms

1. Choose from the box a corresponding idiom to the following sentences. (02)

As dry as a bone, all's fair in love and war, as thick as two short planks, have second thoughts, I am all fingers and thumbs, as red as a lobster, put my foot in it, it's the thought that counts, better safe than sorry, as thick as thieves, I have all my fingers green

- I really get her embarrassed; I asked her if Jane was her mother, but she said Jane is her sister.  
 > Idiom: *Put my foot on it*
- I reconsidered lending him the money as my wedding is to be next April.  
 > Idiom: *Have a second thought*
- I can't believe I didn't know the answer - I looked really thick and dull.  
 > Idiom: *As thick as two short planks*
- I can't do up these tiny buttons; I feel awkward and clumsy.  
 > Idiom: *I am all fingers and thumbs*

09.05  
 20

2. Use the following idioms in a meaningful conversation. (02)

- It never rains but it pours  
 A: *What a horrible day! I didn't wake up early so I missed the bus also I lost cell phone*  
 B: *Oh darling! It never rains but it pours*
- It takes two to tango.  
 A: *The tea party was perfectly organized, you should be so tired after the guests had left*  
 B: *You know, it takes two to tango, Maria did the decoration and I made the cake I wasn't alone don't worry*
- First come, first served  
 A: *Are you sure that you don't have any free seats for tonight's movie?*  
 B: *Unfortunately sir, you know that is an exclusive movie, you would better come earlier. First come, first served*
- Spend a penny  
 A: *Susan what's wrong with you, I feel like you are not at ease?*  
 B: *Yes you get it, I have to spend a penny*

1  
 05

**II. Phrasal verbs**

- Use the following phrasal verbs in their literal and non literal meaning in sentences of your own. (04 pts)

**1. Put up**

Literal: ...I ~~put~~ <sup>put</sup> that vase up...so the decoration looks better now.

Non-literal: The guests enjoyed staying here...we were very welcoming and we put them up with pleasure.

**2. Look through**

Literal: I ~~could~~ <sup>could</sup> have an accident today...the snow falls heavily...so I couldn't see through the glass.

Non-literal: This homework is out of 12...so I should look through each paragraph in it.

**3. Run out**

Literal: He ~~run~~ <sup>ran</sup> out from the house after knowing that his father will punish him.

of you

Non-literal: I went to work by bicycle today...my car run out of fuel.

**4. Get into**

Literal: I had a fight with my brother because he got into my room without permission.

Non-literal: I don't read newspapers because I don't want to get into political issues.

**III. Collocations**

Complete this passage by choosing the best collocation from the choices below. (04 pts)

**Courses and qualifications**

When she was a small child, Amelia's teachers identified her as having unusual intelligence and remarkable mental agility, and they put her on a special programme for (1) **b** children. Amelia (2) **b** a scholarship to (3) **b** a local grammar school. By the age of eighteen, she was a straight A student, and she (4) **C** a place at one of the country's most prestigious (5) **C** of learning to read English Literature.

In the first academic year of the English Literature programme, the core subjects were *The development of the novel* and *Contemporary poetry*. Amelia had a large number of set texts to read. It was hard work but she loved it. Her professors were all (6) **C** scholars and her courses were taught by some of the world's leading authorities in the field. She completed her studies with considerable success and graduated from university last year. In the meantime, her parents have decided that it is time they made up for their lack of (7) **b** education and they have signed up for a number of evening courses. Eventually they hope to meet the entry requirements for university entrance and to be able to complete a degree as (8) **b** students.

1. (a) gifted **b** endowed (c) capable
2. (a) had **b** won (c) gained
3. (a) attend **b** join (c) enroll
4. (a) secured (b) ensured **c** guaranteed
5. (a) sittings (b) settings **c** seats
6. (a) remarkable (b) distinguished **c** great
7. (a) official **b** formal (c) certified
8. (a) mature **b** grown up (c) prime

of you