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Abstract
In examining how English as a second language (ESL) learners process English formulaic expressions in a nonnative English context, this study aims to investigate the strategies that learners use and how first language (L1) culture and conceptual knowledge could influence the use of the strategies. This study is guided by the research question of how francophone ESL learners in Thailand process formulaic expressions in situation-bound utterances (SBUs). Three Francophone Cameroonian learners of English in a university in Thailand (served as the experimental group) and two native English speakers (as the control group) participated in this study. Oral Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was employed to elicit data and evaluated based on 4 categories: (1) Native-like English; (2) Towards Native-like English; (3) Francophone English; and (4) Irrelevant English. The result showed that among the three francophone participants in the study whose native languages were French, 60% DCT responses were Towards Native-like (TNE), 30% were Francophone English (FE), 10% were Native-like English (NE). There was no response from the DCTs, according to the analysis, that was irrelevant English. A further analysis of the three categories revealed that the learners primarily used simplification, verbosity, literal salience, and L1 cultural transfer strategies in processing formulaic expressions. This study corroborates the seemingly weak connection of English linguistic proficiency and sociolinguistic competence in ESL learner's pragmatic knowledge, as well as the reliance on L1 conventionalized conceptualization in processing English formulaic expressions. Implications for teaching formulaic expressions in a nonnative English as a foreign language (EFL) context in general, and Thai context in particular are also discussed.

Keywords: English formulaic expressions, situation-bound utterances, Francophone ESL learners' strategies

1. Introduction

Research has shown that we store representations of individual words in our mental lexicon (Wray & Perkins, 2000). There is a growing agreement that the lexicon also contains formulaic expressions, such as, *'how are you'* and *'thank you'*. Wray (2002, p. 9) captures formulaic expressions rather nicely as "words or other elements linked together, which are, or appear 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". In fact, there are compelling reasons to think that the brain represents formulaic sequences in long-term memory, bypassing the need to compose them online through word selection and grammatical sequencing in capacity-limited working memory (Lyons, 1968). On this basis, therefore, formulaic expression is operationalized in this paper as a phenomenon that incorporates various types of word strings that appear to be stored and retrieved as a whole from the memory. This working definition is from Wray & Perkins (2000). They define formulaic expressions as:

> 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 the memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (p. 1)

The main characteristic of such utterances is that "their internal structure, unlike that of genuine sentences, is not accounted for by means of rules which specify the permissible combinations of words" (Lyons, 1968, p. 17). In other words, formulaic expressions and grammatical sentences are alternative ways of expressing meaning. Formulaic expressions are common in native-speaker utterances, but it is, probably, even more common in the speech of second language (L2) learners, practicing speaking. These prefabricated words have "a formula-specific pragmatic property" (Kecskes, 2000b, p.13), prearranged in English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) speaker's utterances, "reflective of native-like selection and native-like fluency" (Pawley & Syder, 1983, p. 19). Kecskes (2007, p. 192) describes the importance of these formulae by stating that "people belonging to a particular speech community have preferred ways of saying things" and preferred ways of organizing thoughts. Depending on the variability degree, different terminologies are used for formulaic expressions, such as, conventional expressions, pragmatic routines, prefabricated expressions, multi-word units, ready-made chunks, and lexical phrases. The adoption of 'formulaic expressions' in this study is, most importantly, to emphasize the socio-cultural aspect of these expressions, and because it is the most widely used terminology in the literature, amongst others. Formulaic expressions serve as an available resource to a speech community in order for the community to communicate. Psycholinguistic shows that formulaic expressions are stored and retrieved as 'chunks' in the mental lexicon. Conklin & Norbert (2008) argue that formulaic expressions are often linked to a single meaning/pragmatic function in a social communication setting. Lack of ability to produce native-like formulaic expressions may lead to communicative breakdown in social interactions. This study aims to investigate how ESL/EFL learners process English formulaic expressions in a non-native English speaking context by looking at what strategies the learners use. How their L1 socio-cultural knowledge influences the use of the strategies is also part of the aim in this study. The case investigated in this study is francophone Cameroonian ESL learners in Thailand.

1.1 Learners processing of formulaic expressions

Aspects of sociolinguistic competence in the field of pragmatics and applied linguistics study formulaic expressions and second language acquisition. The production of formulaic expressions and natural interpretation characterise native English-speaking speech as they, without any conscious effort, process formulaic expressions without "decomposing their components" (Xu& Zhang, 2015, p. 1). Nevertheless, this is seemingly not the same situation for language learners without so much exposure to, or target language practice in the target environment. Learners acquisition of formulaic expressions requires "the knowledge of the socio-cultural background of the target language, whose meaning can be explained only as a function of habitual usage; the pragmatic functions, usually not elicited in these linguistic units" (Kecskes, 2000b, p. 607). As a consequence, language learners may portray non-native-likeness in producing formulaic expressions. This is indicative of their low level of sociolinguistic pragmatic competence. In the case of Cameroonian francophone learners of English in Thailand (as the studied example), students usually focus on the linguistic signs to pass their examination rather than the concepts in the signs. The ensuing effect of such a situation is that the learners will be deficient in native-like sociolinguistic competence. To illustrate this point better, learners may get high examination scores, but unable to correctly express themselves in English in social situations. They may produce seemingly grammatical utterances, but not appropriate ones. To this end, the social norms of the target language could be violated as a result of the lack of pragmatic competence to enhance grammatical competence. Such insufficient pragmatic awareness is most evident among these learners when they communicate with native speakers, be it within native context or non-native context. Observing what happens in ESL/EFL environments as teachers, the development of learners' linguistic proficiency is oriented mainly towards language skills with little target-like socio-cultural knowledge. Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998) argue that L2 learners are not able to acquire a sufficient level of sociolinguistic competence of the target language because the target language learners learn in the classroom lacks a native-like pragmatic function. ESL/EFL learners find it seemingly difficult with instructed classroom learning to acquire native-like or close to native-like sociolinguistic competence. It becomes unlikely for them to achieve a high level of sociolinguistic competence though they command a high proficiency level in linguistic knowledge. In a foreign language learning contexts, pragmatic competence generally tends to delay behind linguistic competence (Ringbom, 2013). In their argument, Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998) assert that even the advanced language learners often show a marked imbalance between their grammatical and pragmatic knowledge or, more specifically, between the micro level of lexico-grammatical knowledge, and the macro level of communicative competence in sociocultural contexts. Along these lines, there is generally a weak connection between English linguistic proficiency and sociolinguistic competence in a non-native English learning context.

1.2 Strategies in processing formulaic expressions

Previous studies on formulaic expressions have so far been interested in investigating the existing relationships between L2 proficiency and processing of formulaic expressions (Cook & Liddicoat, 2002；Garcia, 2004；Taguchi, 2005, 2007, 2011; Holtgraves, 2007; Bardovi Harlig & Bastos, 2011). Their studies all attest to the overall advantage of ESL learners' competence in processing formulaic expressions. Fewer studies, however, have researched into how L2 learners process formulaic expressions, that is to say, what strategies learners employ in processing formulaic

expressions, and how linguistic proficiency influences the strategy they use. Investigating how L2 speakers processed situation-bound utterances, Kecskes (2000b), analysed the strategies of 88 non-native students in the United States of America (USA) individually and found out that learners mainly use oversimplification, overuse, verbosity and ignoring the utterances strategies in processing situation-bound utterance. Probably due to the diverse home backgrounds of the learners, Kecskes did not go into further analysis of the reasons why learners used those strategies and how their home conceptual knowledge influenced the strategies (Xu & Zhang, 2015), thus, the need for this line of study.

1.3 Situation-Bound Utterances (SBUs)
This paper focuses on a particular type of formulaic expression known as situation-bound utterances (SBUs) (Kecsks, 1997, 1999). SBUs are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrence is tied to standardized communicative situations (Coulmas, 1981; Kiefer, 1995, 1996; Kecsks, 1997, 1999). The use of formulaic expression is highly predetermined and predictable by the situation in the SBUs. The acquisition and production of formulaic expressions in SBUs by an L2 learner requires the knowledge of the socio-cultural background of the target language, because SBUs are functional units whose meaning can be explained only as functions of habitual usage. The pragmatic functions are usually not encoded in these linguistic units, therefore SBUs often receive their *charge* from the situation they are used in. It is generally this situational charge that distinguishes SBUs from their freely generated counterparts. Different concepts have been used to describe these expressions in the relevant literature, such as *routine formulae* (Coulmas, 1979), *situational utterances* (Kiefer, 1985, 1995), *bound utterances* (Kiefer, 1996), and *institutionalized expressions* (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). These varied concepts explain, but not limited to this particular type of pragmatic units, but are also discussed in other fields of applied linguistics. The term 'situation-bound utterances' is preferred in this study to any other concept because it refers to the main characteristic feature of the utterances being investigated: their boundedness to a particular situation.

2. Research objectives and research questions
This section presents the research objective and research questions in this study.

2.1 Research objectives
ESL/EFL learners' processing of formulaic expressions in the literature has received not as much attention as it should, empirically. In an attempt to fill in this gap in this regard, this study seeks to examine the strategies that Francophone Cameroonian learners use to process English formulaic expressions, and how their L1 conventionalized conceptualization of these expressions may influence the use of these strategies.

2.2 Research questions
The research objectives in this study will be examined by means of the following research questions:
1. How do francophone ESL learners in Thailand process formulaic expressions in situation-bound utterances?
2. What processing strategies do learners use in situation-bound contexts?

3. Research method
The following sections are the research method.

3.1 Research instrument
An oral DCT (Discourse Completion Task) was used in this study. As there are fewer standard testing materials oriented on ESL/EFL learners' formulaic expression processing strategies, this study based the DCT material on Xu and Zhang (2015) research. Ten discourse completion tasks were employed in this research, which included dialogues, ranging from making apologies, responding to compliments, making requests, greeting and introducing. All 10 DCTs were adapted to suit the ESL/EFL context and also used to serve as testing materials for the control group (rater) in this study. The choice of a single instrument for this small-scale study is mainly because of practical reasons.

3.2 Participants
The study employed two groups of participants. One is the experimental group and the other is the control group. The experimental group was made up of Francophone Cameroonian learners, studying in English in Thailand and the control group was made up of native English speakers. Considering this is a small-scale research, the Francophone Cameroonian learners of English were 3 undergraduate university students at a university in Bangkok, studying Airline Business Management. All three learners have French as their L1. They have been studying English as a school subject since primary school in Cameroon, and are undertaking their university course in English. It is mandatory for these learners to take the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) annually in order to check their English proficiency level due to their language background. The learners have also taken the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam with a minimum score of 6.5. They were tested on all the four language skills. This is indicative of the fact that, in general, the learners in this study have a good command of English. Three (two English speakers and one French speaker) native speakers (i.e. those with English or French as their L1) participated as the control group in the study. The controls are native English language lecturers in a university in Bangkok. Their replies to the DCTs were compared to those of the learners in the experimental group.

3.3 Evaluation
Four evaluative criteria, adapted from Xu & Zhang (2015) research were employed in this study to evaluate the DCT responses elicited by the Francophone Cameroonian learners. They were Native-like English, Towards Native-like English, Francophone English and Irrelevant English. A response is Native-like English when is appropriate and grammatical in the English language. It is towards native-like English when the responses can still be understood by native speakers, but with errors in grammar and wordings. Francophone English responses are those that are only appropriate in the francophone culture, but may not be understood by native English speakers. Irrelevant English replies are neither understood by native speakers nor by the francophones, or have nothing to do with the target questions.

    One major difference between Towards Native-like English and francophone English responses is that Towards Native-like English replies are generally based on English conceptual knowledge, while learners who provide francophone English replies tend to rely more on the francophone

conceptual system. Accordingly, two evaluating groups participated in the study. The first group comprised of two native English speakers who evaluated the 10 DCTs according to their native-like and towards native-like English categories. The second group consisted of one francophone teacher of English, teaching French in Bangkok who later evaluated and decided on whether the remaining DCTs responses were francophone English or irrelevant English.

4. Results and discussion

From the data, it showed that among the three Francophone Cameroonian participants in the study whose native languages were French, 60% DCT responses were Towards Native-like (TNE), 30% were francophone English (FE), 10% were Native-like English (NE). There was no response from the DCTs, according to the data, that was irrelevant English.

   This study proposed that Francophone Cameroonian learners of English had a moderately low level when handling conventional expressions in situation-bound utterances, as 90% of the DCT answers are not Native-like. The subjects in the study had studied English as a subject, studying in English in Bangkok, written the IELTS exam, and every one of them passed with an overall score band of 6.5, showing the participants have a high level of English proficiency. The finding of the study might suggest the inadequate association between linguistic knowledge and sociolinguistic competence of the learners in a nonnative context. Because of the absence of target socio-cultural information, ESL/EFL learners have a tendency to depend on their L1 conceptual framework while understanding and uttering formulaic expressions in L2. A further examination of the strategies used as part of Towards Native-like English and francophone English of the DCT indicates that this finding partly corroborates Kecskes (2000b) and Xu & Zhang (2015) results. Notwithstanding the strategies of oversimplification and verbosity found in their study, the participants in this study used literal saliency and L1 transfer strategies, found in XU & Zhang but not in Kecskes.

4.1 Oversimplification

At the point of responding to a compliment, demonstrating a thankfulness, or making an expression of apology, Francophone Cameroonian learners of English tend to give a brief 'Thank you' or 'I'm sad' answer. Then again, native speakers have a tendency to be elaborative as in Tables 1 and 2.

1st Situation: You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter. You kept it for almost 2 weeks.
Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.
You: _____.

Table 1. *Making apologies*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
Sorry.	I'm so sorry. I lose track of time. Anything I could do to make it up to you?
Am so sorry.	Am so sorry. Please remind me next time so I don't forget.
So so sorry.	I'm so sorry. It was really selfish of me. I completely forgot about it.

2ⁿᵈ **Situation:** *You just gave a presentation in class.*
Instructor: Your presentation was great.
You:_____

Table 2. *Response to compliment*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
Thank you.	Thank you. This really means a lot to me.
Thanks.	Thank you. I worked so hard all night to make the presentation good.
	Thank you. Am glad to know you enjoyed it.

Without sufficient and explicit teaching of pragmatic knowledge to learners, ESL/EFL learners will most likely not comprehend what else they may say in these circumstances aside from a straightforward answer of 'Sorry' or 'Thank you'. It might likewise show that they would rather take no chances by saying less or nothing as this could be disrespectful or impolite. The propensity of shortened expression affirms what Taguchi (2011) found out that learners have a constrained scope of pragmalinguistic resources, often symbolized by the use of a few forms over a range of function or the use of formulaic language. However, native speakers of English tend to be more elaborate in their discourse turns in situations like this. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, native English speakers use more semantic and syntactic modifiers in contrast to non-native English speakers.

4.2 Verbosity
The data reveals that the learners have a tendency to be verbose, especially when they have to respond to questions relating to 'how/why'. According to the learners, these kinds of questions are seemingly easier for them to answer, particularly if they have something to say. In order words, they would feel confident and safe when they have enough vocabulary to express themselves in English in this kind of situation. Nevertheless, native speakers, in this kind of situation, will often be succinct in their response as presented in Table 3. In his study, Kecskes (2000a), affirms that in the American culture, questions as 'How are you doing?' functions as a greeting, which demands responses like 'fine, thank you' or its equivalent. In some other cultures, on the contrary, this question would be interpreted literarily as 'tell me how you are doing?' ESL/EFL learner's inability to familiarize themselves with this difference causes them to use their L1 conceptual knowledge. Just as reported in Kecskes (2000a), this study supports his view in Table 3, where the francophone learners interpreted this situation-bound utterance in its literal sense as a question. Not realizing the question is a form of greetings, the learners responded with excessive information, thus violating the Gricean maxim of quantity which says "Make your contribution as informative as required. Don't make your contribution more informative than required" (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46). All native speakers interpreted the conversations in the non-literal way by providing brief replies. When doing so, the native speakers tend to take a 'you' perspective. By responding with 'How are you?' they seek to keep a smooth social intercourse to achieve the phatic function of language use.

5ᵗʰ **Situation:** *You ran into a friend in the corridor right before both of you went to a class.*

Friend: Hi, how are you doing?
You: _____

Table 3. *Responses to greetings*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
Fine, thanks. I have a serious exam next week. Sorry we can't talk today for long.	Fine, thank you. What about you?
Not too bad, not too good, but ok. I have to attend all classes in order to pass with good grades? How about you, too?	Am doing great, and you?
	Am fine. How are you?

4.3 Salience of literal meaning

Proposed by Giora (1997) in the 'Graded Salience Hypothesis', the hypothesis postulates the relevance of salient meanings as the most conventional, frequent, familiar and prototypical. Salient meanings are often initially processed irrespective of the literary or metaphorical meaning. For instance, for native speakers today, the metaphorical meaning of 'get out of here', 'you're kidding' has become the most salient meaning for them as a result of the change of collective salience over time. The metaphorical meaning is what is processed initially by native speakers, unlike for foreign language learners who consider what is salient quite differently. ESL/EFL learners initially process the literal interpretation before the metaphorical meanings when learning the language. Due to the lack of target native-like socio-cultural experiences, they are unable to acquire the conceptual load attached to the words. So, the literal meanings of the words are usually salient in their minds. The findings here support the literal salience hypothesis in foreign language learning based on the results shown in Table 4:

8th Situation: You are talking to your friend Bob about another friend, Ray.
You: I think Ray was really rude to you yesterday.
Bob: Tell me about it.
You: _____

Table 4. *Response to 'come again?'*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
I don't really like to talk about people behind their back.	Yeah, he was.
I don't want to gossip.	Can you imagine. I didn't like it myself.
He said you were foolish.	I can't believe he said that.

What is salient, for native speakers, in the expression 'tell me about it' is the metaphorical interpretation. However, this is not the case with Francophone learners in this study, as they tend to us the literal meaning by telling the story of how rude Ray was to Bob. It is worth reiterating that without enough exposure to the target socio-cultural environment, what the ESL/EFL students learn are mostly the linguistic signs without the pragmatic function encoded in the units.

4.4 Transfer of L1 culture

The Francophone learners of English in the experimental group in this study tend to be modest when they receive a compliment as illustrated in Table 6.

3rd Situation: You had friends over and they have just finished having dinner at your house that was prepared by you.
Friend: That was really delicious!
You: _____

Table 5. *Response to compliments*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
Never mind. It will be better next time.	Thanks. I specially prepared it for you.
It's a pleasure. Just poorly prepared.	Thank you. I spent so much time and money to make it delicious.
I learnt from my mother, thank you. I know it's not what you really like.	I try to make it healthy. Thanks for the compliment.

An instance of the learner's modesty is represented in Table 5. Yu (2011), studying the sociolinguistic behaviour of Chinese learners of American English, focusing on how they offer 'compliments' in L2 shows that the linguistic strategies used by native Chinese speakers to realize compliments are different from those used by the native speakers. For instance, Chinese speakers exhibit a lower tendency to respond to compliments than the native speakers. Yu's findings support that of this study with the Francophone Cameroonian learners. Also of importance is that fact that the Francophone learners of English would feel it is impolite when they had something good while others do not. Consequently, they tend to express their regret for others as presented in Table 6.

7th Situation: A friend of yours asks about a party that you went to.
Friend: How was the party last night?
You: _____

Table 6. *Response to questions*

Francophone learners of English	Native speakers of English
Oh, we had fun. Sorry that you were not there to join the fun.	It was pretty cool. What were you busy with last night?
Good. Too bad you could not come.	Good. It was fun.
Excellent. Wish you were there.	Fantastic. It was such an extraordinary moment.

Native English speakers view 'How was the party last night?' as a social ritual. They would ask 'What did you do?' in return to show consideration for the other party. By asking the question, they seek to establish personal relationships in human interaction for phatic purpose. That's not the type of question most francophone people are used to asking in this situation. Umar's research (2004) found that Arab English learners, even at a high level of proficiency, may turn to their L1 cultural framework when formulating their pragmatic strategies. The current study supports Umar's research in that Francophone Cameroonian learners of English also rely on their native

conceptual base in selecting their pragmatic strategies when processing English formulaic expressions.

5. Implications for teaching

This study has a number of pedagogical implications. The findings so far seem interesting as it thus, in its own way, reveals the importance of teaching formulaic expressions in ESL/EFL classrooms as they seem to "hold the key to native-like idiomaticity" (Wray, 2000, p. 479). Ellis (2005) supports this claim by saying that formulaic expressions enable learners to be able to practice sociolinguistic function of the language and maximize their communicative ability. Learners may "raise their awareness of the conventions involved in the target socio-cultural norms" (Yu, 2011, p. 11) by learning formulaic expressions. As a result, learners will be aided to develop pragmatic competence, promote production fluency and reduce their reliance on their L1 conceptual base. For learning through explicit tasks (as we recommend in this study), the number of communicative exposures tasks will probably lead to greater engagement involved in the classroom, for it is clear that more practical pragmatic tasks will lead to greater learning. Thus, teachers should consider the various types of pragmatic tasks when setting up their classroom teaching activities. This brings up a more general question of what type of pragmatic tasks is most effective. We looked at only a limited number of pragmatic tasks in this study, and they all can be used in the classroom to facilitate learners' learning of formulaic expressions. However, other types of tasks such as, salutation are particularly effective in teaching and learning formulaic language.

Stressing on the importance of formulaic expressions, Wood (2002, p. 1) says it promotes language processing "as lexical chunks segmented from input and stored as a single entity in the long-term memory". Formulaic expressions are fundamental to language production by allowing language production to occur while bypassing controlled processing and the constraints of short-term memory capacity. The learning burden is minimized by the lexical chunks, as "calling on memorized formulas is believed to be less cognitively demanding than constructing new utterances from scratch, and so it is thought that formulas may help speakers to cope with the demands of real-time language production and comprehension while maintaining fluency" (Durrant, 2008, p. 43).

6. Limitation

This study has one major limitation. The limitation concerns the number of participants used in the study. Considering this is a small-scale research, the choice of the small number of participants was mainly for practical reason. However, the number of participants could be increased for greater generalisation. The concept of formulaic language could also be investigated with learners from other ESL/EFL contexts.

7. Conclusion

This cross-sectional study investigated the strategies that Francophone ESL learners in Thailand use to process English formulaic expressions. The result shows that learners have a relatively low level in processing formulaic expressions, although they command a relatively high English linguistic competence. This finding indicates the weak connection of English linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence in an ESL/EFL environment. One characteristic of

language learning in a nonnative English context is that learners are not adequately exposed to the "conventionalized conceptualization" (Taylor, 1993, p. 212) of the target language, so they usually tend to rely on the conceptual base of their L1 when producing formulaic expressions. An analysis of the strategies that the learners use to process formulaic expressions indicate this reliance on L1 cultural cognition and conceptual system.

8. Suggestions and recommendations
An easy way into native-like speech production competence in formulaic expressions is to explicitly teach learners since they will achieve fast and efficient language processing with "a natural tendency to economy of effort" (Sinclair, 1987, p. 320). The research described in this paper informs language teachers teaching English to ESL/EFL learners and other foreign language teachers of focus teaching areas in improving the idiomaticity and fluency of English production. Teachers may also organize classroom activities targeted at the use of formulaic expressions in daily interactions. Situational conversations, role plays, debates and topic discussions are among those which can be used to offer a close-to-authentic context for language learning. All these will make learners improve their language competence. Learners may come to realize how to appropriately use formulaic expressions and where to avoid simplicity and verbosity when performing speech acts.

Future research may also investigate whether ESL/EFL learners with different English proficiency level may use different strategies in processing formulaic expressions.

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