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## Use of Formulaic Expressions: A Strategy to Promote Oral Fluency among ESL Learners

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Learning English as a second language has always been problematic in ESL (English as Second Language) Classrooms. ESL learners feel very “unnatural” to converse with others in a foreign language. As mentioned by Ur (1996), these students are unable to think what to say when asked to interact in English. They are unable to retrieve vocabulary or expressions from their mental lexicon when they have to communicate in English (Lennon, 2000). This happens because either they lack competence in the language or performance in the same. Hence, this paper intends to suggest a strategy that could help to improve the oral fluency of ESL learners to some extent. The strategy is to make ESL students aware of the use of different formulaic expressions in various speech acts. These expressions will vary according to the degree of formality of the situation. This may prove to be an effective strategy in teaching oral communication, as Fillmore (1979) has stated that one must “have control of a number of processes for creating new expressions”. Therefore, this article would give a detailed version of the above mentioned strategy to help ESL learners get rid of being “tongue-tied” when speaking English.

### **Introduction:**

When English is being learnt as a second language, its acquisition process tends to be quite challenging. Since English is now considered as ‘global language’ or ‘lingua franca’, the proficiency in this language is required in every field. A quite comprehensive research has been going on to innovate strategies to develop the communicative competence among ESL learners. It has been observed that ESL students are good enough in their writing skill when compared to speaking skill. Hence, many scholars are working on how to improve the oral fluency of ESL learners.

Nation (1989) supports Keith Maurice’s 4/3/2 technique to develop fluency because this technique leads to:

- Change in audience every time a person speaks
- Repetition which helps them to access the language easily which has already been produced.
- Reducing time frame puts pressure on students to convey message in a precise and effective way.

The author also suggested games like “marketplace” (where students play the role of buyer and seller) and “messenger” (where students play the role of a describer, a messenger and a maker). To promote fluency, Nation (2003) emphasized to maximize the use of second language in the classroom and at the same time also incorporate first language in the teacher talk to some extent. Communication strategies also help to maintain fluency in the second language because learners can use paraphrasing, circumlocution etc. when they lack appropriate vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to express themselves (Brown, 2003). Reading aloud is also supposed to be a helpful strategy in developing fluency in second language (Schloff & Yudkin, 1991; Tam 1997). Another way to promote oral fluency is to make learners practise the speaking activities without putting any emphasis on the pace of their speaking. It is so because speech rate is not the prime marker of oral fluency. Speaking rate of non native speakers is somewhat slower than the native speakers’ (Munro & Derwing, 1998; Brown, 2003). Pair-taping, suggested by Schneider, (2001) enables learners to make recording of their speech in pairs. This process motivates them to actively participate in second language communication. Gonzalez (2000) says that using stories and “narrative discourse structure” also enhance fluency because there are some patterns which repeat in stories. The author also mentions a model of story grammar that could be used in the second language classroom. The model is as follows:

Setting + Theme + Episodes+ Resolution

Developing vocabulary that is appropriate in its context of use is another technique that helps to articulate fluently (Brown, 2003; Lennon, 2000). Even, teaching the “expressions as wholes” help the students to speak language confidently (Gonzalez, 2000).

### **Objective:**

The objective of this paper is to introduce ESL students with some formulaic expressions for various speech acts which would vary according to the formality of the situation.

### **Formulaic Expressions:**

These expressions, as explained by Fillmore (1979), are fixed and their appropriate interpretation depends on the context in which they are used. These are being “memorized” rather than “generated”.

Examples : Don’t tell a soul.  
Anybody home? etc.

Hence, “mastery of formulaic utterances” helps students to use language easily. These fixed linguistic forms must become the part of ESL speaker’s knowledge.

**Speech Act:**

It is an utterance which is a functional unit in communication. It has both propositional (literal meaning) and illocutionary (the effect of speech or writing on the reader or listener) meanings. Some examples of speech act are requests, order, complaints, promises etc.

**Use of Formulaic Expressions in various Speech Acts:**

Introducing formulaic utterances for various speech acts should be done at the very beginning of exposing students to the second language. This is to be preferred because later when students are asked to perform speaking activities like role plays, storytelling etc., they will not grope for words or phrases or expressions to communicate in some situations. Once the second language learners get the opportunity to break the silence; their anxiety level decreases. Hence, they may improve their speaking skill gradually. According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, affective variables such as anxiety, stress, low motivation etc. act as filter which hinders the development of second language.

The formulaic expressions should be used keeping in view the formality of situation. Each expression would vary in its physical manifestation in different situations but has the same meaning. Sometimes ESL students express their message in a way that is impermissible in that context. Hence, they land themselves in a very awkward position. This creates frustration and anxiety in them and demotivates the students to use the language further. For example:

A conversation between a teacher and a student:

Teacher: Why your work is not checked?

Student: Sir, I came for the same yesterday, but you were so busy that you did not check it. (Inappropriate response)

Student: Sir, I came for the same yesterday, but I could not get it checked as you were held up in some work. (Appropriate response)

Thus, utterances in most of the formal situations tend to use passive voice.

Some formulaic expressions for various speech acts are given below:

1. a) Agreeing in a formal situation.
  - Yes Sir/Madam.
- b) Agreeing in an informal situation.
  - You know that's exactly what I think.
  - I couldn't agree more.

2. a) Disagreeing in a formal situation.
  - I'm afraid, I don't agree with that.
  - I'm not sure. I wonder....
- b) Disagreeing in an informal situation.
  - Surely not! Certainly not!
  - I really don't think that's right.
  - I don't agree. I completely disagree.
3. a) Inviting in formal situation.
  - You are cordially invited to attend.....
  - It would give us/me immense pleasure if you could.....
- b) Inviting in informal situation
  - You are coming for....
  - I don't want any excuse, you have to....
4. a) Greetings in formal situation.
  - Good Morning/Evening/Afternoon! How are you sir/madam?
- b) Greetings in an informal situation.
  - Hi! What's up?
  - Hey, what's up?
5. a) Requesting in formal situation.
  - It would be very kind of you if you....
  - I would be highly obliged if you....
- b) Requesting in an informal situation.
  - Please, you can....
  - Do take some.
6. a) Expressing gratitude in a formal situation.
  - That is/was (vey) kind/good/nice of you.
  - I am really very grateful/ obliged to you.
- b) Expressing gratitude in an informal situation.
  - Thanks!
  - Thanks a lot!
  - Many thanks!
7. a) Accepting thanks in formal situation.
  - It's my pleasure!
- b) Accepting thanks in an informal situation.
  - It's all right!

Likewise, many more formal and informal formulaic expressions can be introduced for different speech acts. This strategy is for those ESL learners who always remain silent in the class because of the fear of cutting a sorry figure in front of others.

### Conclusion:

The idea behind the proposed strategy is to familiarize ESL learners with these expressions so that when they come across such situations, they can retrieve those utterances from their memory easily. According to Lennon, P (2000), “accessing and formulation tend to be highly automatized in proficient speakers”. Thus, this technique would prove to be a motivation booster for “tongue-tied” ESL learners.

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