

The role of memorised phrases in language learning

Florence Myles
University of Essex

25 June 2015



Outline

- Research context
- What are memorised phrases
- The study
- Implications for teaching



Research context

- Two types of knowledge in second language learning:
 - Implicit or 'acquired' knowledge
 - Explicit or 'learnt' knowledge
- Interaction between those two types of knowledge remains unclear
- Emphasis on learnt knowledge in the classroom context


Example of dichotomy between learnt and acquired knowledge

- 3rd person –s in English

I walk

he walks

- Difference between ‘knowing the rule’, and being able to apply it in ‘real time’ (online production)
- It’s why many learners who can successfully do a grammar exercise are not always able to apply the same rule when they speak



Research questions

- What is the role of learnt classroom routines/memorised phrases in the construction of learners' productive competence?
 - Do the learnt system and the productive system develop independently of one another?
 - Do these two systems interact?

Memorised phrases: what are they?

- Various terms: formulaic language; rote learnt formulas, chunks etc...

In beginners: Longer and more complex than other learner output; usually well-formed

(1) *quel âge as-tu?* what age have you? (“how old are you?”)

(2) **Il âge frère?* he age brother?

In both cases, intended meaning: “how old is your brother?”


(same learner, during the same task, after 4 terms of learning French)

- Often overextended:

**mon petit garçon euh où habites-tu?*

my little boy umm where do you live?

“where does your little boy live?”



“a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other 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, 2002

“a multimorphemic unit memorised and recalled as a whole, rather than generated from individual items based on linguistic rules”

Myles et al. 1998

In the context of the classroom: routines which are practised without learners necessarily fully understanding how the words have been put together, e.g. in role plays, exchange of personal information etc.



This study

■ Datasets

□ Beginners

- Longitudinal; 60 learners; years 7, 8, 9 (11-14 years old); oral tasks

□ Post-beginners

- Cross-sectional; 20 in each of years 9, 10, 11 (14-16 years old); oral tasks

Interrogative chunk: *comment t'appelles-tu?*

Comment	+ t'	+ appelle	+ tu
Wh-fronting+	2:sg:refl	+ verb	+ 2:sg:subj
<i>What</i>	+ <i>yourself</i>	+ <i>call</i>	+ <i>you</i>

'what's your name?'

Very often overextended to inappropriate contexts, e.g:

comment t'appelles-tu le garçon?

'What's your name the boy?'

Development of interrogatives (when no chunk available)

1. Verbless stage

Je grand maison? (I big house)

2. Infinitive verb stage

La mère regarder le magasin? (the mother look – inf
– the shop)

3. Finite verb stage

La mère regarde livre? (the mother looks book)

Proportion of non-formulaic interrogatives with/without verb

	Year 7 2nd term	Year 7 3rd term	Year 8 1st term	Year 8 2nd term	year 8 3rd term	year 9 1st term
Interrogatives without verbs	41 (95.3%)	129 (83.8%)	53 (82.8%)	235 (87.4%)	287 (79.5%)	182 (81.3%)
Interrogatives with verb	2 (4.7%)	25 (16.2%)	11 (17.2%)	34 (12.6%)	74 (20.5%)	42 (18.8%)
Total	43 (100%)	154 (100%)	64 (100%)	269 (100%)	361 (100%)	224 (100%)

Asking 'what's his/her name?'

- Chunk: *comment t'appelles-tu?* 2nd person reference (what's your name)
- How do learners ask 'what's his/her name?'

Use of *comment t'appelles-tu* with 3rd person reference

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 11
2nd person chunk	18 (52.9%)	31 (39.2%)	27 (22.7%)
3rd person reference	16 (47.1%)	48 (60.8%)	92 (77.3%)
Total	34 (100%)	79 (100%)	119 (100%)

5 developmental stages

1. Chunk over-extended: * *comment t'appelles-tu?*
2. Chunk over-extended, but lexical NP tagged on: * *comment t'appelles-tu le garçon?*
3. Chunk starting to break down: * *comment t'appelle (la fille)?*
4. Further breaking down: *comment s'appelle (un garçon)?*
5. 3rd person pronoun used (very rare): *comment s'appelle-t-il?*

Relationship between chunks and generative grammar

At the same point in time, we find within individual learners both:

- Highly complex chunks, delivered relatively fluidly and accurately, e.g. *comment t'appelles-tu?*
- Very simple syntax outside chunks, e.g. *euh nom?* (pointing at picture)

Role of memorised phrases in early language learning

- All learners use chunks, but some are much better at memorising them
- The learners who have the largest store of chunks keep using them (they do not discard them), but they are also the learners who are most active at 'working' on them to use their constituent parts elsewhere
- Memorised phrases give learners an entry into communication, before their productive grammar can produce complex structures
- Memorised phrases provide a set of language samples which act as models for constructing their grammar




Conclusion

- Chunks break down over time and feed into the construction of the productive grammar
- The breakdown of chunks drives the construction of the L2 grammar forward (as their grammar is more advanced)



Implications for teaching

- Learning set phrases is useful: it gives learners entry into communication when their grammar is not advanced enough yet
- Learners should be encouraged to experiment with memorised phrases, e.g. changing the subject, the reference, the object etc.

- 
- Mitchell, R., & Martin, C. (1997). Rote learning, creativity and 'understanding' in classroom foreign language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 1(1), 1-27.
 - Myles, F. (2004). From data to theory: the over-representation of linguistic knowledge in SLA. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 102, 139-168
 - Myles, F., Hooper, J., & Mitchell, R. (1998). Rote or rule? Exploring the role of formulaic language in classroom foreign language learning. *Language Learning*, 48(3), 323-363.
 - Myles, F., Mitchell, R., & Hooper, J. (1999). Interrogative chunks in French L2: A basis for creative construction? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21(1), 49-80.