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Cultivation of Oral English Competence among Chinese Mainland EFL Learners from the Perspective of Formulaic Sequences

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Abstract:

This paper aims to review the ideal language input and output unit based on formulaic sequences and the theoretical assumptions underlying input and output hypotheses in view of the relatively low oral English competence among EFL learners in Mainland China. Adopting a theoretical literature review approach, the authors have scrutinized the internal relationship among formulaic language, input and output hypotheses, and oral English competence based on the review. Our review showed that besides comprehensive input material, which has always been the Chinese EFL teachers' sole focus in teaching oracy skills, output opportunities connected with formulaic language should also be highly emphasized to increase students' oral competency. Implications: In light of this, several suggestions are offered to help cultivate Chinese EFL students' oral performance, namely 1) raising awareness of formulaic sequences, 2) broadening the channels of input of formulaic sequences, and 3) creating more opportunities based on formulaic sequences for students to practice speaking EFL classroom. This research reviews the ideal EFL teaching and learning unit from a new perspective by integrating input and output hypotheses with formulaic sequences. The highlight on creating authentic output opportunities based on formulaic language has been ignored in the past oracy skills teaching practice. This provides a solid theoretical foundation and implications for future EFL teaching practice in Mainland China.

Keywords: formulaic sequences, oral English competence, input and output hypothesis, teaching performance.

公式化序列视角下中国大陆英语学习者英语口语能力培养

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摘要:

鉴于中国大陆英语学习者的英语口语能力相对较低, 本文旨在回顾基于公式序列的理想语言输入和输出单元以及输入和输出假设背后的理论假设。作者采用理论文献综述的方法, 在综述的基础上仔细审视了公式化语言、输入和输出假设以及英语口语能力之间的内在关系。我们的审查表明, 除了综合输入材料, 这一直是中国英语教师在教授口语技能方面的唯一重点, 还应高度重视与公式语言相关的输出机会, 以提高学生的口语能力。启示: 有鉴于此, 对培养中国英语学生口语表现提出几点建议, 即 1) 提高对公式序列的认识, 2) 拓宽公式序列的输入渠道, 3) 创造更多基于公式的机会。序列供学生练习口语英语课堂。本研究通过将输入和输出假设与公式序列相结合, 从一个新的角度回顾了理想的英语教学和学习单元。在过去的口语技能教学实践中, 忽视了基于公式化语言创造真实输出机会的亮点。这为中国大陆未来的英语教学实践提供了坚实的理论基础和启示。

关键词: 公式序列、英语口语能力、输入输出假设、教学表现。

1. Introduction

In learning the English language, the emphasis is always placed on the four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; listening and reading are input activities, while speaking and writing are output activities. Among these, speaking and writing skills are deemed the most challenging skills to be acquired by many foreign language learners, including EFL (English as Foreign Language) students in mainland China. Oral English Competence refers to the speaker's ability to communicate orally in English in a certain communicative situation (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). The forms of oral expression include description, introduction, explanation, speech, debate, dialogue, discussion, etc., to realize the communicative purpose of informing, explaining, and persuading (Jin & Jie, 2017). It involves both the speaker's internal knowledge of the language and the use of spoken language in specific situations. Oral activities are unique, as they are interactive, dynamic, and instant. In addition, oral expressions are often accompanied by paralinguistic and non-linguistic features (Halliday, 2004).

Based on a nationwide survey covering various educational stages and the job market, Zhang et al. (2017) investigated the status quo and reform needs of high school and college English education in China and found that high school students' oral English competence is in particular need of improvement especially the graduating students as they need to develop oral competence in English listening and speaking before joining the workforce could be related to two extreme tendencies in foreign language teaching in mainland China. The first tendency is represented by a structural approach in teaching, which emphasizes the study of grammatical rules. The ignorance of the use of language in the actual context has resulted in insufficient language fluency among learners. The second one is represented by adopting a communicative approach in teaching, which over-emphasizes the use of language in the context without paying attention to the system of grammatical rules.

Many EFL students in mainland China reported that it is quite difficult to find appropriate words when they

communicate with others in English. Some revealed that they could not express what they want to say fluently within the limited time when speaking.

The difficulties reported above are closely related to two major problems in ELT in China. First, it has long been a problem that English teaching mainly focuses on increasing scores of English language tests in which oral English is not a compulsory part involved in most provinces, and oral English competence was not given due attention in English classes (Huang, 2021). Both teacher and students did not pay enough attention to oral English, which results in the students' relatively lower oral English competence. The second problem is related to the teaching approach adopted by teachers in teaching speaking. Qi (2019) also stated that outdated teaching concepts, the sole teaching model, low utilization rate of modern teaching techniques, and lack of authentic communication context are still the issues in English classes. Hence, the students show little interest in listening and speaking classes. Moreover, there are not enough opportunities for them to practice oral English in a real-time context.

Regarding the daily use of language for native English speakers, many repetitive chunks occur frequently, and a rough estimation by Conklin and Schmitt indicated that one-third to one-half of native-speaker speech is formulaic (McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2018). In this regard, Qi and Xia (2016) suggest that students' mastery of oral competence is greatly related to their formulaic knowledge. They experimented on 41 sophomores from a three-year college and divided them into the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). The EG was required to recite the chunks during the eight weeks of the experiment. The results indicated that such a practice had enhanced the students' speaking and writing ability. However, in the EFL context of mainland China, there is a lack of formulaic knowledge for students who usually depend on separate lexis and grammatical rules to construct sentences. Due to the feature of formulaic language, it is not easy for EFL students to acquire and use them in their speaking practice.

Therefore, the focus of foreign language teachers