Formulaic Language in Second Language Teaching—A Case Study of Situation-Bound Utterances in China’s EFL Textbooks

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Abstract. As one kind of formulaic expressions, situation-bound utterances (SBUs) are “highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations” [1]. SBUs have also played a special role in intercultural communication, because misunderstandings will arise due to a lack of knowledge of using them appropriately. However, little importance has been attached to SBUs in China’s EFL teaching. This study first collects and classifies the SBUs in a being-used EFL textbook, then compares the identified expressions with recurrent patterns in existing corpora. Pedagogical implications will be given at last through providing a teaching worth list of SBUs as a reference for EFL teaching.

1. Introduction

As one kind of formulaic expressions, situation-bound utterances (SBUs) are “highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations” [1]. SBUs have also played a special role in intercultural communication, because misunderstandings will arise due to a lack of knowledge of using them appropriately. However, little importance has been attached to SBUs in China’s EFL teaching. Few previous studies have been done towards EFL learners’ SBUs learning. It is necessary to investigate the current situation of EFL learners’ mastery of SBUs on the one hand, and the strategies of teaching SBUs on the other. Therefore, the present study is aimed to answer three questions as follows:

- Why should more importance be attached to situation-bound utterances? And what role do situation-bound utterances play in foreign language teaching?
- What situation-bound utterances are being taught in China’s EFL textbooks? Are these expressions frequently used by native English speakers in their daily life?
- How can situation-bound utterances be incorporated into the classroom pedagogy?

This study aims to call for attention to the SBUs teaching and investigate the current situation of SBUs teaching in China’s EFL textbooks. By comparing with the corpora, this study tries to provide a list of frequently-used SBUs based on situations, from which EFL teaching implication can be drawn.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Classification of Formulaic Language

On the definition of formulaic language, there is no satisfactory one in the field. Scholars are often vague in both the definition and the use of terms. A lot of terms have been used referring to such kind of expression. According to Wray, there are almost 50 ways of saying this kind of term, “formula”, “routine”, “ready-made language chunks”, “institutionalized expressions” so on and so forth.
One of the most often cited and adopted definitions of a formulaic sequence is that of Wray, according to whom, it is “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” [2]. In giving a definition as such, she tries to be as inclusive as possible, covering any kind of linguistic unit that has been considered formulaic in any research field. In effect, this means that the words in a formulaic sequence are “glued together” and stored as a single “big word” [3].

By formulaic language, Kecskes proposed the definition like this: “multiword collocations that are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated de novo with each use” [1].

The various terms and definitions of formulaic language may represent the different research perspectives of the researchers. To sum up, formulaic language consists of three important factors:

- It is more than one word; it can be continuous or discontinuous.
- It is words go together to show a specific meaning.
- It acts as one big word in our brain.

On the classification of formulaic language, it can be of many different kinds, such as, collocations (fast food), binomials (black and white), multi-word verbs (rely on), idioms (tie the knot), speech formulae (what’s up?), discourse markers (by the way), lexical bundles (as well as), expletives (damn it!), grammatical constructions (the -er), and many more.

Kecskes [4] [5] proposed a formulaic continuum (Table I) which categorizes only those expressions that are motivated and have some psychological saliency for the speakers of a speech community. As we can see, the more we move to the right in this continuum, the wider the gap between the literal meaning and the prefabricated meaning becomes.

### TABLE I. Kecskes’ Categorization of Formulaic Expression.

| Grammatical Units | going to; have to |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Fixed Semantic Units | as a matter of fact; suffice it to say |
| Phrasal Verbs | put up with; get along with |
| Speech Formulas | not bad; you know |
| Situation-bound Utterances | welcome aboard; help yourself |
| Idioms | Kick the bucket; Spill the beans |

#### 2.2 Situation-Bound Utterances (SBUs)

In 1962, Hymes observed “linguistic routines” and pointed out that “a vast portion of verbal behavior consists of recurrent patterns, of linguistic routines”, and thought that the analysis of routines includes “identification of idiomatic units, not only greeting formulas and the like, but the full range of utterances which acquire conventional significance, for an individual, group or whole culture” [6].

Several other terms have also been used to refer to this kind of expression in the field: “interaction rituals” [7], “routine formulae” [6], “enonces lie (A French Term)” [8], “situational utterances” [9]. The variety of terms shows the difficulty of defining this particular expression.

Coulmas agreed that routines are tied to social interactions, like in the speech acts of apologizing and congratulating. He defined “routine formulae” as “expressions whose occurrence is closely tied to types of recurrent social situations”, which he refers to as “standardized communication situations” [10]. In his other works, “routine formula”, “conversational routine”, “linguistic routine”, and “routine speech” have also been used.
Kecskes defined situation-bound utterances (SBUs) as “highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations” [4]. In his opinion, SBUs are one kind of formulaic language.

2.3 Context of Situation

Situation is about the position or a set of circumstances in people’s mind. It is not only about linguistic context which includes the words, phrases or sentences before or after a linguistic element, but also situational factors which is non-literal but has influence on the linguistic component. As Halliday and Hansan [11] said “this notion of what is ‘with the text’, however, goes beyond what is said and written: it includes other non-verbal goings-on the total environment in which a text unfolds”.

In situation-bound utterances, “situation” is about the recurrent social or cultural settings and backgrounds the utterances in. As Kecskes has stated clearly “they (SBUs) represent conventions of usage that a matter of culture. Their use is a question of appropriateness rather than correctness”[1]. Therefore, to interpret SBUs, there is a need to figure out both the situational and socio-cultural context. Both linguistic meaning and social function have been provided in the situation. The “situation” in SBUs is not the situation in people’s common sense but a concept from a broad perspective.

Since SBUs is not only about the meaning in context but also about the conventions, function plays an important role in the classification of “situation”. In the field of functional linguistics, research analyzes speech functions into detailed categories: greetings, compliments, engaging, disengaging, requesting, accepting to a request, positive responding, and negative responding [12]. This provides a good reference for the classification of SBUs in the present study.

2.4 Previous Researches on Situation-Bound Utterances

SBUs play a very important role in the development of pragmatic competence because they usually express what is expected to be said in particular social situations and what kind of language behavior is considered appropriate in a given speech community.

Since SBUs play a vital role in people’s pragmatic competence, more and more scholars come to the field and try to help with the interpretation and teaching of SBUs. Lots of them are empirical and are to prove SBUs are important for pragmatic competence but not easy to interpret. The case study done by Chemezov and Gural [13] showed that pragmatic mistakes happen more frequently when interpreting SBU in an actual situational context. Therefore, socio-cultural actual situational context is highly relevant to learners’ understanding of SBUs. Also, empirical research on the comprehension of SBUs by EFL learners finds out that the situational context is very important in the interpretation process [14].

Chinese scholars have not paid much attention on SBUs. Not like research overseas, most of them are introductory on the theoretical perspective. For example, Ma [15] analyzed SBUs through cognitive-pragmatic approach.

3. Method

The authors collected all the SBUs in Learning to Speak: An English Video Course (2014), from book 1 to book 4, which is an English textbook of listening and speaking used by university students. According to the situations and previous researches, the authors then classify them into eight categories and pick one SBU from each as the representative.

The recurrent patterns of SBUs are retrieved in the register of spoken English of corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) and BNC (British National Corpus). COCA is a 450 million words American English corpus, while BNC contains more than 100 million words which cover British English for a wide range. And the KWIC (Keyword in Context) display can help with the checking of the replies. As the reply to a sentence shows how the hearer interprets or understands it, every answering sentence to the examples is checked manually during the retrieval.
For those have huge number of hits, the first 200 ones would be checked as the representatives. The retrieval results combine COCA and BNC show the most frequent replies to the SBUs.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Results of Corpus Retrieval

All the SBUs in Learning to Speak: An English Video Course (2014) book 1 to book 4 have been collected. After collection, taking functional classification as the reference, the authors classified them and picked up six categories as examples according to different functions. The details are shown in Table II.

| Item | Category | Examples |
|------|----------|----------|
| 1    | Two strangers meet for the first time | *How do you do?*  
*Nice to meet you.*  
*How are you?* |
| 2    | Expressing appreciation between strangers or acquaintances | *Thank you.*  
*Thanks.*  
*I really appreciate it.* |
| 3    | Requesting between strangers or acquaintances | *Can you / I …?*  
*Could you / I …?*  
*I wonder if …?* |
| 4    | Invitation between acquaintances | *Would you like to…?*  
*How about…?*  
*Do you want to…?* |
| 5    | Invitation between acquaintances | *How about …?*  
*If I were you, I would...*  
*Shall we…?* |
| 6    | Showing concern between friends | *Are you OK?*  
*How do you feel?*  
*Is anything the matter?* |

As we know, how the hearer answers reflects how he or she understands the speaker. Studying the replies to these SBUs is part of the research. In the process of retrieval, the authors classified the sub-categories of requesting and invitation based on the replies, divided them into two parts: positive replies and negative replies. Therefore, the six categories turn to eight at last. One example of each category was picked. The examples picked are in bold as in Table II above. The authors retrieved each example to see the replies. The first 200 hits are checked and the suitable situations are counted. The results are as follows:

| Examples                                              | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| *No specific answer to this sentence, just start the conversation* | 26          | 2          |
| *How do you do?*                                      |             |            |
| *Very good / nice to see you.*                         | 4           | 8          |
| *Thank you, I’m fine.*                                 | 2           | 2          |
| *Hi! / Hello!*                                        |             |            |
In the retrieval of “How do you do?”, it is surprisingly to find out that the most frequent reply is no specific reply. That is to say, most of the hearers are saying what they want to say directly but no specific answer to this “How do you do?”. By the way, speakers do not expect the hearer to reply because many of them just go on speaking after saying “How do you do?”. In China’s EFL textbooks, taking Learning to Speak: An English Video Course (2014) as an example, the correct reply should be “How do you do”, which is not the same as the answers in the corpora. Other casual replies like “Nice to see you”, “Thank you, I’m fine.”, and “Hello” are also can be found in COCA and BNC.

TABLE IV. Replies to “Thank you.”

| Examples                                      | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Thank you. / Thanks. / Many thanks.         | 43          | 30         |
| No specific answer.                          | 30          | 24         |
| All right. / It’s alright. / You’re alright.| 8           | 14         |
| My pleasure. / It’s been a pleasure.        | 10          | -          |
| You’re (very/quite) welcome.                | 5           | 2          |
| It’s OK.                                     | -           | 3          |
| Not at all.                                  | -           | 2          |
| Sure.                                       | 1           | -          |

“Thank you” is very common in our daily life. It can be used in many situations. In this study, the use of expressing appreciation is focused. The authors picked up first 200 hits from each corpus and checked the conversational ones. The results in Table IV show the most frequent reply to “Thank you” is “Thank you” or something alike. However, in our textbook, the most preferred reply is “You’re welcome”, which can scarcely be found in corpora. Meanwhile, people in English-speaking countries would like to say “All right” or “It’s alright” in this situation. Sometimes, they even do not answer this specific sentence but go on what they want to say. Many of the conversations in the corpora are from interviews or broadcasts, which explains why there are so many “Thank you” and no answering.

TABLE V. Positive Replies to “Can you help me?”

| Examples                                      | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| OK.                                          | 6           | 5          |
| What’s up? (Ask for more information)        | 4           | 3          |
| No specific answer to this sentence, just help| 3           | 3          |
| Sure.                                        | 2           | 2          |
| Yeah, that’s alright. (I’ll do it tomorrow.) | -           | 3          |

The fourth and fifth categories deal with situations of asking for help. As we can see, there are not so many hits in corpora. If someone is willing to help, he or she would say “OK.” (As in Table V). Or they may ask more information about the thing to show their considerations. Some people just take into action but do not say anything at all. A few people answer like “Sure” and “Yeah, that’s alright.”. In the textbook, the provided answer is “Sure.”

TABLE VI. Negative Replies to “Can you help me?”

| Examples                                      | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| No, ...(the reason)                           | 3           | 3          |
| Sorry, but...(the reason)                    | 3           | 2          |
| Well, there’s a variety of reasons. The biggest reason, of course, would be...| 1           | -          |
| What? ... (the thing he wants to help with)  | -           | 1          |
If the hearer is not willing to help or it is not convenient to help at the moment, people always refuse first and then tell the reason, like “No, I am going to catch the last bus”. As is shown in Table VI, there are not many options from corpora. The specific words or sentences may differ from people to people, but the patterns are the same. When you refuse someone, it is polite to say something about the reason. And the reply could be “Sorry, but… (the reason)” in the textbook.

TABLE VII. Positive Replies to “Would you like to …?”

| Examples                        | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|---------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Yes, I’d love to.               | 19          | 12         |
| (Yeah,) Sure.                   | 14          | 4          |
| Sure, what’s it about?         | 2           | 2          |
| That sounds great / interesting.| 4           | -          |
| All right.                      | 1           | 3          |

The authors use the formula [Would you like to v*] to retrieve SBUs from the corpora. The most frequent used positive reply in both corpora is “I’d love to.” which is the same in the textbook. As is shown in Table VI, the other frequently used reply is “(Yeah,) Sure.”. Others like “That sound great.”, “All right.” are also frequently used in daily life. In some situations, people would like to ask more information to show their interests. Therefore, a positive attitude with a question on this topic may seem a good pattern.

TABLE VIII. Negative Replies to “Would you like to …?”

| Examples                      | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|-------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Sorry, but...(the reason)     | 6           | 12         |
| (provide the reason directly) | 4           | 3          |
| No, I don’t like…            | 3           | 1          |
| I’d love to, but…            | -           | 2          |
| No, thank you.               | -           | 2          |

For the negative replies, the answers are comparatively simple as shown in Table VIII. The most frequent one is the pattern of “sorry” plus the reason, which is similar as the negative replies to “Can you help me?”. Some people would tell the reason directly. Both “No, I don’t like…” and “I’d love to, but…” have the similar meaning as the most frequent pattern. And the answer “I’d love to, but…” is also favored the EFL textbook. The speaker can choose according to the relationship between the two interlocutors. A few people may value their privacy, therefore simple sentence as “No, thank you.” would be perfect for them.

TABLE IX. Positive Replies to “How about …?”

| Examples                             | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| All right.                           | 10          | 2          |
| Yeah.                                | 3           | 7          |
| Yeah, that’s a good idea. / Sounds great. | 5           | -          |
| Certainly.                           | 2           | 1          |
| I agree (with you).                  | 1           | -          |

To retrieve “How about …?”, the authors use the formula [How about vvg (equals to V-ing in the corpus retrieval.)]. The result is shown in Table IX. The most frequent one is “All right.”, while “Yeah.”, “Sounds great./That’s a good idea.” and “Certainly” are also used. In very few conditions, people would say “I agree (with you).” However, “Sounds great.” and “Let’s go!” are suggested by the textbook.
TABLE X. Positive Replies to “Are you ok?”

| Examples                                      | QTY in COCA | QTY in BNC |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Yes. / Yeah.                                  | 11          | 2          |
| I’m fine. / Fine. / I’ve been fine.           | 9           | 8          |
| (Yes,) I’m OK. / I’ll be OK.                  | 6           | 5          |
| I’m all right.                                | 1           | 2          |
| Of course.                                    | -           | 3          |
| I am good.                                    | 2           | -          |

The corpora tell us that most of the people would say “Yes./Yeah.” or express they are good as in “I’m fine./Fine./I’ve been fine.”, “I’m OK./I’ll be OK.” “I’m all right.” (As shown in Table X). “Of course” is also used but not so corresponding in form as the previous ones, while “I’m good.” is similar to “I’m OK.”

The results of retrieval may not reflect the exact reality in frequency, but it provides the most used ones for reference.

4.2 The Teaching Worth List

With the comparison between the identified expressions and recurrent patterns in corpora, the authors got a list based on observation and investigation. Since this list is based on the selected textbook, it may not include every possible answer. The teaching worth list is about the possible replies of the representative SBUs of each category (as in Table XI)

TABLE XI. Teaching Worth List.

| Category              | SBUs                                                                 | Replies                                                                 |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First meeting         | How do you do?                                                       | I’m fine, how are you?                                                 |
|                       | How are you?                                                         | Thank you, how are you?                                                |
|                       | Nice to meet you.                                                    | My name is ____, it’s nice to meet you.                                |
|                       |                                                                      | Thank you, I’m fine.                                                   |
|                       |                                                                      | No specific, just start the conversation.                              |
|                       |                                                                      | How do you do?                                                        |
|                       |                                                                      | Very good/nice to see you.                                             |
|                       |                                                                      | Hi! /Hello!                                                           |
| Expressing appreciation| Thank you.                                                            | You’re (very/quite) welcome.                                          |
|                       | Thanks a lot.                                                        | No problems./No worries.                                               |
|                       | Thank you very much.                                                 | Thank you./Thanks./Many thanks.                                        |
|                       | Much appreciated.                                                   | No specific answer.                                                    |
|                       | Thank you for…                                                      | All right./It’s alright./You’re alright.                               |
|                       | Many thanks.                                                        | My pleasure./It’s been a pleasure.                                    |
|                       |                                                                      | It’s OK.                                                               |
|                       |                                                                      | Not at all.                                                            |
| Positive replies to request | Can you help me?                                                 | Sure. (What do you need help with?)                                    |
|                       | Would you mind doing…?                                              | OK.                                                                    |
|                       |                                                                      | What’s up? (Ask for more information)                                  |
|                       |                                                                      | No specific answer to this sentence, just help.                        |
|                       |                                                                      | Yeah, that’s alright. (I’ll do it tomorrow.)                           |
| Negative replies to request | Would you please…?                                                 | Sorry/I’m sorry, but…(the reason)                                     |
|                       | Could you please do…?                                               | No,…(the reason)                                                      |
|                       |                                                                      | Well, there’s a variety of reasons. The biggest reason, of course, would be… |
|                       |                                                                      | What? … (the thing he wants to help with)                              |
| Positive replies to invitation | Would you like to do…?                                             | Sure, what’s it about?                                                |
|                       | Would you care to do…?                                              | Yes, I’d love to.                                                     |
| Category                             | SBUs                                      | Replies                                      |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Negative replies to                 | Would you please consider…?              | That sounds great/interesting.               |
| invitation                           | Why don’t …?                              | (Yeah,) Sure.                                |
|                                      | Why not…?                                 | What’s it about?                             |
|                                      | May I ask you to…?                        | All right.                                   |
| Positive replies to                 | How about doing …?                        | Sorry/I’m sorry, but…(the reason)            |
| suggestion                           | What about doing…?                        | I’d love to, but…                            |
|                                      | Shall we do…?                             | (provide the reason directly)                |
|                                      | Why don’t…?                               | No, I don’t like…                            |
|                                      | Are you OK?                               | No, thank you.                               |
|                                      | Are you all right?                        |                                              |
| Positive replies to                 | What’s the matter?                        |                                              |
| other’s concern                      | What’s wrong?/Is anything wrong?          |                                              |
|                                      | I’m fine./Fine./I’ve been fine.            |                                              |
|                                      | (Yes,) I’m OK./I’ll be OK.                 |                                              |
|                                      | I am good.                                |                                              |
|                                      | I’m all right.                            |                                              |
|                                      | Of course.                                |                                              |

This teaching worth list consists of eight categories: 1) first meeting; 2) expressing one’s appreciation; 3) positive replies to other’s request; 4) negative replies to other’s request; 5) positive replies to other’s invitation; 6) negative replies to other’s invitation; 7) positive replies to other’s suggestion; and 8) positive replies to other’s concern. All of them are recurrent patterns in people’s daily life. For EFL learners, the possibility of encountering these kinds of situations is very high. Each category is provided some of the representative SBUs. These SBUs in the same category has the same function in specific situations. As how a people reply is closely related to his or her understanding of the speakers, the replies to every category are given.

5. Conclusion

With the results of current situation of SBUs teaching in China’s EFL textbooks, the authors find out some problems and offers suggestions for EFL teaching in China.
- The importance of formulaic language, especially SBUs should be attached.
- The suggested replies to a SBU should be more flexible rather than a fixed answer. The using and replying of SBUs is not about correctness but appropriateness.
- It is necessary to use contexts of situation in EFL teaching, especially in SBUs teaching.

To improve EFL learners’ pragmatic competence and second language fluency, the authors advocate methodologies focusing on context-appropriate collocations and other types of formulaic sequences.

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