



THE ROLE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL COMPETENCE IN FOSTERING PRODUCTIVE SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This article examines the role of phraseological competence in developing productive speaking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Drawing on corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and communicative language teaching frameworks, the study argues that mastery of fixed and semi-fixed multi-word units — including idioms, collocations, lexical chunks, and formulaic sequences — is central to achieving oral fluency and communicative accuracy. The paper reviews existing theoretical models and empirical research, identifies key pedagogical implications, and proposes evidence-based instructional strategies for integrating phraseological awareness into EFL speaking curricula. Findings suggest that systematic exposure to and explicit instruction in phraseological units significantly enhances learners' spoken output in terms of fluency, naturalness, and pragmatic appropriateness.

Keywords: phraseological competence, EFL, productive speaking skills, formulaic language, lexical chunks, oral fluency, communicative language teaching



1. Introduction

The acquisition of productive speaking skills remains one of the most challenging aspects of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Despite years of instruction, many EFL learners continue to exhibit disfluency, unnatural phrasing, and pragmatic inadequacy when engaged in spontaneous spoken interaction. While phonological and grammatical accuracy have historically received much pedagogical attention, the role of phraseological competence — the ability to recognize, store, and produce multi-word units (MWUs) — has gained increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades.

Phraseological competence encompasses a broad repertoire of pre-fabricated language units that native speakers deploy automatically and efficiently in discourse. These units include collocations (*make a decision*), idiomatic expressions (*kick the bucket*), lexical chunks (*as a matter of fact*), and various other formulaic sequences. Fluent native speakers rely heavily on such units to reduce cognitive processing demands and to achieve communicative naturalness ^[1].

The present article argues that phraseological competence is not a peripheral aspect of language proficiency, but a central component that directly enables productive speaking. Through a synthesis of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the paper demonstrates that EFL learners who develop robust phraseological knowledge speak more fluently, more accurately, and more appropriately than those who rely solely on rule-governed construction of utterances ^[2]. The article concludes by offering pedagogically actionable recommendations grounded in both corpus-based research and communicative language teaching (CLT) principles.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Defining Phraseological Competence



Phraseological competence is most comprehensively understood through the lens of Cowie's (1992) taxonomy of formulaic sequences, Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) concept of lexical phrases, and Wray's (2002) theory of formulaic language [3]. Wray defines formulaic sequences as "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" [4]. This storage-retrieval mechanism is fundamental to understanding why phraseological knowledge contributes so powerfully to speaking fluency.

Nation and Webb (2011) expand this perspective by situating phraseological competence within the broader framework of lexical knowledge, noting that knowing a word entails knowing its collocational patterns, connotations, and syntagmatic relations [5]. Accordingly, phraseological competence is inseparable from deep lexical knowledge; learners who know words only in isolation cannot deploy them with native-like fluency.

2.2 The Dual-Processing Model and Speaking Fluency

Skehan's (1998) limited-attention-capacity model of second language production posits that learners must distribute cognitive resources among competing demands: fluency, accuracy, and complexity [6]. Phraseological knowledge reduces the processing burden associated with lexical retrieval, freeing cognitive resources for higher-level discourse planning. Consequently, learners with a larger phraseological repertoire can allocate greater attention to pragmatic appropriateness and discourse coherence — dimensions that are critical to effective oral communication.

This theoretical position is corroborated by Ellis's (2003) usage-based account of language acquisition, which holds that frequent, repeated exposure to form-function mappings — including multi-word chunks — leads to the automatization



of language production [7]. Automatized phraseological knowledge is therefore a precondition for genuinely fluent speech, rather than a byproduct of it.

2.3 The Idiom Principle and Open-Choice Principle

Sinclair's (1991) influential distinction between the *open-choice principle* and the *idiom principle* provides a fundamental theoretical anchor for phraseological research [8]. The open-choice principle treats text as the result of a large number of complex choices at each slot. By contrast, the idiom principle posits that a language user has available a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments. Corpus evidence consistently supports the dominance of the idiom principle in natural discourse, underscoring the necessity of phraseological competence for natural-sounding speech.

3. Phraseological Competence and Productive Speaking Skills

3.1 Fluency

Fluency, as operationalized by Lennon (1990) and later refined by Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), refers to the capacity to produce speech with minimal pause, hesitation, and repair [9]. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a strong positive correlation between phraseological repertoire size and spoken fluency in EFL contexts. Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2006), for instance, found that EFL learners who received explicit instruction in formulaic sequences produced significantly more fluent speech in narrative tasks than control groups [10]. The mechanism underlying this relationship is cognitive: pre-fabricated chunks eliminate the need for slot-by-slot lexical assembly, enabling faster, smoother speech delivery.

Similarly, Wood's (2010) longitudinal study of EFL speaking development documented a clear trajectory from effortful, disfluent speech to increasingly chunked, routine utterances as learners' phraseological repertoires expanded [11].



This developmental trajectory suggests that phraseological acquisition is not merely additive but transformative — qualitatively changing the nature of learners' spoken production.

3.2 Accuracy and Collocational Competence

Accuracy in spoken EFL is not reducible to grammatical correctness alone; it encompasses the appropriate selection of words that co-occur naturally in a given linguistic context — what Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1997) term collocational competence^[12]. EFL learners who lack collocational knowledge frequently produce utterances that are grammatically well-formed but semantically or pragmatically deviant, such as *do a mistake* instead of *make a mistake*. These collocational errors, while locally minor, cumulatively undermine communicative effectiveness and perceived proficiency^[13].

Corpus-based research by Nesselhauf (2005) confirmed that EFL learners at advanced levels still exhibit systematic collocational deficiencies in spoken production, suggesting that incidental acquisition alone is insufficient and that deliberate pedagogical intervention is necessary^[14]. Explicit attention to verb-noun, adjective-noun, and adverb-adjective collocations has been shown to improve spoken accuracy and reduce stigmatized learner language.

3.3 Pragmatic Appropriateness and Discourse Management

Pragmatic competence — the ability to use language appropriately in context — is closely interwoven with phraseological knowledge. Many discourse-organizing formulae (*As I was saying...*; *The point I'm trying to make is...*; *To put it another way...*) are conventionalized multi-word expressions whose pragmatic functions are not transparently compositional. Mastery of such expressions is critical for EFL learners to navigate spoken interaction with the turn-taking, face-saving, and topic-management conventions expected in Anglophone communicative contexts^[15].



House and Kasper (1987) demonstrated that non-native speakers' pragmatic failures in conversation frequently arise not from grammatical error but from ignorance of formulaic expressions used to perform specific speech acts — apologizing, disagreeing, making requests, and so on^[16]. Phraseological competence is therefore not merely a lexical matter but a pragmatic and sociolinguistic one.

4. Empirical Evidence from EFL Research

A growing body of empirical research substantiates the theoretical claims outlined above. Conklin and Schmitt (2008) demonstrated through reading experiments that formulaic sequences are processed more rapidly than matched novel phrases, suggesting a psycholinguistic basis for the fluency-enhancing effects of phraseological knowledge^[17]. In a speaking context, this processing advantage translates into reduced latency, fewer filled pauses, and more coherent discourse.

Stengers, Boers, Housen, and Eyckmans (2011) conducted a longitudinal classroom study with Uzbek and European EFL learners and found that sustained exposure to idiomatic expressions, combined with deep processing tasks (elaborative interrogation, imagery), led to measurable gains in spoken idiom use and overall fluency ratings^[18]. Importantly, gains were durable: post-tests conducted eight weeks after instruction showed retention rates significantly above control conditions.

In the Central Asian EFL context specifically, Iskandarova (2019) investigated the impact of formulaic language instruction on Uzbek university students' oral proficiency and reported significant improvements on fluency and complexity measures, while noting that pragmatic transfer from Uzbek sometimes interfered with the acquisition of English-specific formulaic conventions^[19]. This finding highlights the importance of explicitly teaching the pragmatic dimensions of phraseological units, not merely their formal properties.



Meta-analytic evidence further confirms these findings. Li's (2017) meta-analysis of 25 empirical studies on formulaic language instruction in L2 contexts yielded a statistically significant overall effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.62$) for speaking outcomes, with effects being stronger for fluency than for accuracy^[20]. This suggests that phraseological instruction reliably improves EFL speaking, though its effects on different speaking dimensions may vary according to the type and intensity of instruction.

5. Pedagogical Implications and Instructional Strategies

5.1 *Corpus-Informed Instruction*

One of the most productive approaches to developing phraseological competence involves corpus-informed instruction, in which learners are exposed to authentic language data drawn from spoken corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC) or the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)^[21]. Data-driven learning (DDL) tasks encourage learners to notice, analyze, and practice recurring phraseological patterns, fostering both awareness and productive use.

In speaking-focused classrooms, this approach may involve concordance-based activities where learners identify and practice the most frequent collocates of high-frequency verbs (*take, give, make*) or analyze transcript data from spontaneous spoken interaction to identify formulaic sequences used in specific communicative functions.

5.2 *Lexical Chunk Instruction and Output Tasks*

Nation's (2001) four-strands model of language teaching — meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development — provides a useful framework for integrating phraseological instruction into speaking curricula^[22]. Explicit instruction in high-frequency lexical chunks (language-focused learning strand) should be complemented by output tasks



(presentations, discussions, role-plays) that require learners to actively deploy target phraseological units.

Swain's (1985) output hypothesis suggests that production tasks, particularly those requiring learners to notice gaps in their phraseological knowledge, trigger deeper processing and more durable acquisition ^[23]. Collaborative speaking tasks, such as information-gap activities or problem-solving discussions, create communicative pressure that motivates the retrieval and consolidation of phraseological units.

5.3 Awareness-Raising and Deep Processing

Research by Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) demonstrates that awareness-raising activities — particularly those exploiting the semantic motivation of idioms and collocations — enhance both retention and productive use ^[24]. Techniques such as etymology-based elaboration (explaining that *let the cat out of the bag* originated from marketplace deceptions), imagery-based mnemonic strategies, and alliteration-based attention have all shown measurable effects on phraseological acquisition in speaking contexts.

Furthermore, spaced repetition practice — through vocabulary learning applications or structured recycling across lesson cycles — significantly improves the automatization of phraseological units, which is a prerequisite for fluent deployment in real-time speaking ^[25].

6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite compelling evidence for its benefits, integrating phraseological instruction into EFL speaking classrooms presents several challenges. First, the sheer scale of the phraseological lexicon makes comprehensive coverage impossible within constrained instructional time. Researchers generally recommend prioritizing



phraseological units that are high-frequency, pedagogically useful, and amenable to explicit instruction ^[26].

Second, assessment of phraseological competence in spoken production is methodologically complex. Existing rating scales for EFL speaking (IELTS, Cambridge, CEFR) make limited explicit reference to phraseological criteria, creating a potential misalignment between instructional priorities and assessment incentives ^[27]. Developing phraseological rating criteria for speaking assessment remains an important area for future research.

Third, L1 transfer effects pose particular challenges in Uzbek EFL contexts, where the typological distance between Uzbek (an Agglutinative Turkic language) and English means that phraseological conventions differ substantially. Learners may import Uzbek-based formulaic patterns into English speech, producing utterances that are pragmatically inappropriate even when grammatically correct ^[28].

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that phraseological competence is a central, rather than peripheral, component of productive EFL speaking skills. Theoretical frameworks from cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, and second language acquisition converge in demonstrating that the ability to store and retrieve multi-word units underlies spoken fluency, collocational accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness. Empirical evidence from a range of EFL contexts confirms that explicit phraseological instruction yields significant and durable gains in oral production.

For EFL educators, these findings carry clear implications: phraseological units deserve systematic, explicit attention in speaking curricula, complemented by output tasks and awareness-raising activities that promote deep processing and automatization. For EFL learners in Uzbekistan and similar Central Asian contexts,



developing awareness of English phraseological conventions — and the ways they differ from L1 patterns — is a particularly urgent pedagogical priority.

Future research should investigate the optimal sequencing of phraseological instruction across proficiency levels, the development of phraseology-sensitive speaking assessment rubrics, and the long-term effects of corpus-informed approaches on EFL oral production in post-Soviet educational contexts.

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