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Use of Prefabricated Routines in Second Language Learning

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Routines in Aid of Second Language Learners

Most of the second language learners struggle to communicate orally even though they are linguistically competent to a certain extent. If these students are asked to write, they will try something, but they feel embarrassed, get excited and filled with anxiety when they are asked to speak. They are not able to present their subject or general knowledge and feel alienated as they come into contact with English speakers. Even if the students have the knowledge of vocabulary and elements related to it, they struggle because of their lack of knowledge on how to start a sentence or phrase. Second language learners can come out of this problem and can communicate with the help of “routines”.

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Prefabricated Routines in Second Language Learning

The dictionary meaning of the word *routine* is defined as “an unvarying and constantly repeated formula, as of speech or action; convenient or predictable response.” Routines are also known as routine formulae, prefabricated routine, speech formulae, etc. These prefabricated routines can improve the creative aspect of learning. This creation plays a major role in the process of acquisition.

Part-time Users of English

The significance of the *lingua franca* is portrayed by Richards as follows: “The current status of English has turned a significant percentage of the world’s population into part-time users or learners of English” (McDonough 3). These part-time users or learners feel satisfied in their use of second language only if they are able to communicate fairly well. The writer of this paper feels that the best way for a learner to start speaking a second language is with the help of readymade phrases or sentences, that is, with the help of prefabricated routines.

This paper analyzes the use and importance of routines in Second Language acquisition.

Prefabricated Routines

“Prefabricated routines” play a vital role in any conversation. Krashen in his text *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* defines routine as “simply memorized whole utterances or phrases, such as “How are you?” or “Where is your hotel?” (83). He also further explains that it is used by a performer “without any knowledge at all of their internal structure” (83).

The definition for formulaic language or routine formula given by Wray and Perkins is “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning 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” (1). These routines are used unconsciously by any speaker without considering the grammatical rules on which the phrase or sentence has been built.

Criticism against and Support in Favour of Routine Formulae

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Several linguists have emphasized the use of routines in language learning and their interest in that particular area was fast growing till Krashen and Scarcella published their ideas against routines in one of their papers. After the publication of their idea, routine formulae as a central element of second language learning gradually disappeared (Roever 10).

However, Wong-Fillmore's study has "showed how child L2 learners used routine formulae strategically to compensate for lack of general proficiency" (qtd. in Roever 10). Hakuta, another linguist, also came forward with the view that "routinized chunks form the foundation of L2 development as they get increasingly analysed and used for generative purposes." (qtd. in Roever 10). That is, the foundation for second language learning is laid by routine formulae.

Also Hakuta distinguishes prefabricated routines from prefabricated patterns. To him patterns are "partly "creative" and partly memorized wholes; they consist of sentence frames with an open "slot" for a word or a phrase, such as "that's a ____" (pen, knife, banana),..." (qtd. in Krashen 83). Through these definitions it is clear that routines are considered as the fully memorized sentence or phrase whereas patterns are partly memorized and in both the practice memorization plays a major role.

Memorization which has been given a lower significance in the process of acquisition is the basic element of "routine" formulae. If it is so, how language could be acquired through routines? The explanation below attempts to answer this question.

Routines: Language Learning vs. Language Acquisition

The difference between language learning and language acquisition is explained in brief by Krashen: "adults have two independent systems for developing ability in Second languages, subconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning..." (1). Acquisition appears to be much more important than learning. In acquisition language elements are imbibed naturally without any conscious memorization and this conscious memorization is related only with learning. As routines are memorized and used in daily conversation it makes the user to involve in every aspect of speaking. He/she will try to respond to the speech elements knowingly or

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unknowingly with expressions, body language and with known words and this automatic creation of language will lead to language development.

When certain phrases are used in an interactional situation, the learner would easily register in his mind, the words that are used in relation to a particular context. They would also have the knowledge on how to start a conversation or how to respond to the stimulus by using those words. As they participate in such conversations more and more, they will notice a good improvement in their language skill.

Two Benefits of Routine

From the following statement one could identify the two benefits of routine – managing and facilitating: “A routine can be thought of as any procedure, process, or pattern of action that is used repeatedly to manage and facilitate the accomplishment of specific goals or tasks” (Higgins). Routines are very helpful and useful to manage or facilitate any type of conversation.

Most people find it difficult to cope with changing situations which in turn creates stress and frustration. If they encounter some familiar elements they will be feeling comfortable and convenient, and it is believed the use of routine formulae gives such familiarity in those unfamiliar situations. Use of routines lowers the anxiety level of learners.

Some researchers believe routines to be very helpful for second language learners: “Although the notion of routines can be generalized to all learners, predictable routines serve a unique function for second language learners in that using routines allow second language learners to more easily focus on learning a second language by lowering their anxiety levels...” (Johnson-Perrodin).

Routines Help Acquire Appropriate Social Behaviour

Sussman is of the view that “to learn socially appropriate behaviour, the child must have repeated and successful experiences in structured social activities in which he actively participates.” From this statement one could get the idea that to perform well one could have the experience of participation in a structured activity. This experience could be gained only if the

learner participates actively in a formal or informal interactional setting. To participate in any interaction they should have some knowledge of the second language and routines would be so beneficial in such situations. Routines would help the learner not to get alienated. Routine is a type of internal motivation. It makes them to participate in a conversation now and then and also helps them to create new sentences at least with errors.

Krashen quotes Fillmore's idea on the use of routine formulae:

...what he (the acquirer) must do is to acquire some language which will give the impression of ability to speak it, so that his friends will keep trying to communicate with him. The use of formulas by the learners in this study played an important part in their being able to play with English speakers as they did. ...This kind of language was extremely important, because it permitted the learners to continue participating in activities which provided contexts for the learning of new material. (95)

Most of the time the known words and phrases get stuck in their (learners) throat in the middle of their conversation and at times the speaker also get caught unable to begin or respond. This problem can be rectified with the help of memorized phrases, like well done, it's great, it's time to depart, it's getting late, etc.

Routines More Important for Speaking than for Writing

Ellis, Vlach and Maynard give the reason why routine formulas are important for speech than writing: "Speech is constructed in real time and this imposes greater working memory demands compared with writing, hence the greater need to rely on formulas: It is easier for us to look something up from long-term memory than to compute it" (376).

Routine Formulae as Short Units

A research based on usage-based learning theory suggests that children learn first by picking up the small units of language:

Children have to learn how their language ‘works’ without being explicitly told. A usage-based theoretical framework suggests that children do this by first learning ‘pieces of language’ with which to communicate. Once children have learned a number of these, they will start to break them down into productive patterns with slots for either words or inflections, depending on the language. As this process continues, children will start to identify the separate parts of what they are hearing and assign meaning to them. Thus children can be highly productive with language from very early on. (“Language Acquisition”)

Like children, beginners of second language should also be familiarized to the bits and pieces of the new language, that is, routines. Thus as students imbibe more and more routine formulae they will use those formulae to produce sentences of their own and this will help them to improve their interactional skills.

Routines Remove Fear to Speak

Most of the learners may not be able to speak because of fear. The negative effect of fear is presented in the following lines.

When an event causes fear, and fear dominates the amygdala, the brain stops using its full capacity. Fear draws energy from the cortex, where it fuels higher order thinking, to the reflex part of the brain, where it fuels an increase in heart rate and expands airways to make breathing easier. When a college sophomore was asked by an exacting professor of French to conjugate a verb, she froze. So much of energy had drained from the language area in her brain that she was quite literally unable to speak... Many shy students ...suffer in the same way. (Johnson 144 – 145)

These problems of fear could be rectified with the help of these routines. If the learners have some knowledge of the target language, and are able to respond and react to the situation using routines, they would be confident enough to indulge in any type of interaction. Wray along with Perkins explains the purpose of ‘formulaic language: “On the one hand it is a means of

ensuring the physical and social survival of the individual through communication, and on the other it is a way of avoiding processing overload. However, these two are two sides of the same coin” (17). These routine formulae are also called as “survival phrase” by the above mentioned researchers. To them “adult learners, both naturalistic and classroom-based, also need to accumulate a small set of survival phrases that achieve basic socio-interactional functions. Like children, once they have these, they move into a period of relative interactional stability” (Wray and Perkins 23).

Best Step in the Beginning Stage

Wray and Perkins are of the view that “the advantage of creative system is the freedom to produce or decode the unexpected” (11). However, routine formulae are best accepted than creation in the beginning stage because, “a hearer is more likely to understand a message if it is in a form he/she has heard before, and which he/she can process without recourse to full analytic decoding” (Wray and Perkins 18).

Limited Scope

Edelman and Waterfall state that “The availability of a limited number of language parameters and rules flexible enough to be used in numberless language use situations constitutes the creativity of language production (qtd. in Zaid 81). Laskewicz is of the opinion that “language learning is never simply repetition or imitation of ‘correct’ language utterances or even the ‘fishing out’ of the correct language structures from the sound world surrounding the child” (4). Thus the process of creativity and its importance is discussed in various dimensions by many language researchers. Krashen in his article comes to a conclusion that to establish social relationship and to encourage the process of creativity, routines and patterns are very useful. He further says the learning of routine and patterns alone are inadequate for the acquisition of language. According to him routines and patterns play a minor but significant role in the intake of second language (99).

It is concluded that though routines are memorized in the beginning, they lead to acquisition in course of time through the process of creativity: learning of routine formulae forms

the base for creative ability. Every second language learner should know the basic memorized phrases to form new sentences or phrases on their own.

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