



Which Formulaic Sequences to Teach in EFL Classrooms?: Different Types of Lexical Phrases and Their Impact on Perceived Oral Fluency

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The use of formulaic sequences (FSs) is reported to be an important factor in oral production as it helps speakers come across as fluent. Many studies have looked at the impact of FSs on fluency from a quantitative angle. Such studies focus upon the impact of the frequency of FSs upon fluency. However, less attention has been paid to the qualitative question of which kinds of FSs have particular salience in speaker fluency. In this study, I focus on a sub-category of FS called lexical phrases and report on how some of these have a greater effect on fluency than others. Data were collected from 34 EFL university students in Japan. Every week for five weeks they were asked to read a short passage and summarize it orally. They were also given a lecture on how they could use lexical phrases to improve their summaries. The results showed that it was the use of certain types of lexical phrases such as logical connectors and fluency devices in the form of sentence builders that were most salient in contributing to fluency. The study highlights the importance of teaching certain lexical phrases that contribute most to fluency in FL classrooms.

定型的言語表現 (FS) の使用は、流暢に話すために役立つため、スピーキングで重要な要素であると報告されている。多くの研究は、FSが流暢性に与える影響を量的に研究している。そのような研究では、FSの頻度が流暢性に与える影響に焦点が当てられている。しかし、どのような種類のFSが流暢性に最も関係しているかという質的な問題については、あまり注目されてきていない。本研究では、レキシカル・フレーズ (lexical phrase) と呼ばれるFSのサブカテゴリーに焦点を当て、流暢性に特に影響を与えるlexical phrasesについて報告する。データは日本のEFL大学生34人から収集した。協力者は毎週5週間、短い文章を読み、それを口頭で要約した。また、要約を上達させるためlexical phrasesをどのように使えばよいかをレクチャーした。その結果、流暢さの向上に最も貢献したのは、センテンス・ビルダー (sentence builder) の形で使用されるロジカル・コネクター (logical connector) や沈黙を埋めるために使われるfluency deviceの使用であることがわかった。本研究は、FL教室において、流暢性に最も貢献する特定のlexical phrasesを教えることの重要性を示唆する。

Keywords: awareness raising, formulaic sequences, lexical phrases, perceived fluency, speaking skills



Introduction

There has been an established interest among SLA researchers on how the acquisition of standardized multiword expression such as idioms, phrasal verbs, proverbs, collocations, fillers, and discourse markers can contribute to learners' L2 proficiency (e.g. Boers et al. 2006; Coxhead, 2018; de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Stengers et al., 2011; Wood 2006, 2010, 2015). Such standardized phraseology has been given the name formulaic sequences (FSs) by researchers like Conklin and Schmitt (2008) and Wray (2002).

It has been reported that a greater use of FSs corresponds to increased fluency (e.g., Ogawa, 2021; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Skehan, 1998; Tavakoli & Uchihara, 2020; Thomson, 2017; Wray, 2002). It has also been said that raising awareness to FSs can encourage L2 learners to use FSs more frequently in their oral production (e.g., Boers et al., 2006; McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2017; Taguchi & Iwasaki, 2008; Wood, 2006). This study not only looks at whether students' use of such forms increases in line with pedagogical instruction and practice over time, but more importantly pinpoints what types of lexical phrases, pragmatically specialized subset of FSs, are used by students and how these phrases contribute to perceived fluency. Most of the studies to date address how the *quantity* of FSs impacts language proficiency rather than the *quality* or type of FSs which have the greatest impact upon fluency. Speakers simply using more FSs in their speech does not necessarily equate to greater perceptions of fluency. Therefore, it is necessary to understand which types of FSs have greater or lesser impact in perceptions of fluency. In this article, I address this gap, specifically examining how the quality (as well as quantity) of FSs plays a role in perceived fluency. Understanding what kinds of phrases play the most effective role in developing fluency can help teachers have a clear idea about which phrases need to be taught in FL classrooms.

Literature Review

Formulaic Sequences

The term formulaic sequence is used to refer to:

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, p. 9)

Much of our everyday speech is said to be formulaic. In fact, research suggests that around a third to a half of our spoken language is composed of some kind of FS. Foster (2001) reported that 32.3 percent of speech was made of FSs. Erman and Warren (2000) suggest that on average, around half of written texts (55%) consist of prefabricated speech. There are at least three reasons why the use of FSs is important. First, it is cognitively less onerous to chain together automatized chunks than to assemble utterances or sentences in a word-by-word manner. This is because when uttering ready-made sequences, speakers are able to free up attention for other areas such as discourse organization and thinking about what to say next (Skehan, 1998). Secondly, skillfully combining FSs can allow speakers to maintain a certain pace and rhythm to speech which can enhance fluency and intelligibility (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Finally, FSs often have pragmatic value (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). Expressions such as *on the other hand* for example, prepare the listener to anticipate a contrasting idea.

Formulaic sequences as a term covers a wide range of overlapping research, ranging from work based on: corpus analysis (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2008); phonological coherence and idiomaticity (e.g., Wray & Namba, 2003; Wood, 2006); as well as work which examines lexical bundles and lexicalized stems (e.g., Cortes, 2004; Pawley & Syder, 1983). For the purposes of using a transparent operational definition of the term FSs, and lexical phrases as a subset of FSs, I will refer to the taxonomies posited in the seminal work of Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), which I will discuss in greater detail later.

Instruction and FS Acquisition

Competence in using FSs is important for L2 learners if they are to become proficient and fluent speakers (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012). However, studies have reported that unlike their native speaker (NS) counterparts, non-native speakers (NNSs) do not seem to possess a large stock of FSs (e.g., Zipagan & Lee, 2018). For instance, a study by Kashiha and Chan (2014) found that NNSs' included a significantly larger stock of lexical bundles. Moreover, the tendency for NSs to use more lexical bundles and with a greater variation than NNSs seems to be the same in written discourse (e.g., Adel & Erman, 2012; Karabacak & Qin, 2013; Nam, 2017).

Given the advantages of possessing a wide range of FSs, it is of practical significance to find out how language teachers can encourage L2 learners' acquisition and use of FSs. While still limited, there are some studies that have investigated whether instruction can increase the use of foreign language learners' use of FSs and if so whether that leads to improved perceived fluency (Boers et al., 2006; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2017; Ogawa, 2021; Stengers et al., 2011; Taguchi, 2007; Taguchi & Iwasaki, 2008; Tavakoli & Uchihara, 2020; Wood, 2006, 2015). Boers et al. (2006), for example, conducted a study to find out whether an instructional method that emphasizes noticing of FSs can help L2 learners add such phrases to their linguistic repertoire and thus contribute to their oral proficiency. In their study, the participants in the control group ($n = 15$) and the experimental group ($n = 17$) received 22 hours of instruction spread over eight months in which they were exposed to authentic language input using course material. The learners in the experimental group had their attention directed to FSs while those in the control were not. After the completion of the eight-month period, the students were asked to take part in an interview. The students' conversations were recorded and judged by two NSs who rated them in terms of perceived proficiency. At the same time, two other judges listened to the recordings and counted the number of multiword chunks they considered intuitively to be standard FSs. The findings revealed that the judges perceived the students in the experimental group, who produced a greater repertoire of FSs, to be more proficient than the students in the control group. The researchers noted that being able to use FSs with ease may have helped speakers in the experimental group to sound more nativelike considering the idiomatic nature of FSs.

Another study conducted by McGuire and Larson-Hall (2017) examined the effect of a more deliberate practice of FSs on learners' fluency. In their study, the students in the control group ($n = 8$) underwent five weeks of treatment in which they heard authentic English and practiced speaking using a task-based approach. The students in the experimental group ($n = 11$) underwent the same practice but deliberate attention was made to the FSs, and moreover, these students were given the opportunity to practice using some of the FS forms in the class. The researchers hypothesized that explicitly teaching FSs to L2 learners would increase the use of FSs and would therefore result in increased fluency measured both objectively (i.e., speech rate and mean length of runs) and subjectively (i.e., judges rating fluency). As for the results, it was found that only the participants in the treatment group were able to increase their use of FSs. As for fluency, when the pretest and posttest results were analyzed, they found that students in the treatment group made statistically significant gains in regard to speech rate (i.e., syllables per minute) and mean length of run (i.e., number of syllables found in the longest stretch with no pauses). This gain was found to be greater than the control group.

These studies indicate that (a) FSs can be acquired to some degree if students are explicitly taught or have their attention drawn to them, and (b) the use of FSs can help learners improve fluency. While one can draw certain conclusions from this body of research based on quantity and frequency of use in FSs, the more frequently FSs are used the more fluent one sounds, this does not tell us which particular FSs have the greatest salience in terms of fluency, or otherwise achieving any sort of communicative goal.

Lexical Phrases

For an operational definition of FSs used in this study, as well as to address the question of quality (i.e. which FSs affect perceived fluency more than others), the present study narrowed the scope of FSs to those that fit the definition of a specialized subset of FSs called lexical phrases, defined by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) below:

we might describe lexical phrases as “chunks” of language of varying length, phrases like *as it were*, *on the other hand*, *as X would have us believe*, and so on. As such, they are multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time. (p. 1)

Focusing on lexical phrases in particular, rather than the much broader category of FSs in general, enabled a more manageable and systematic approach to identifying and analyzing formulaic language. Here, I have followed Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) work on lexical phrases where it is not only the formulaic nature of language which is of concern (as with all FSs), but also the pragmatic and functional aspects of language which distinguish lexical phrases from other FSs. Unlike other conventionalized forms like idioms and proverbs, lexical phrases must perform pragmatic functions. An idiom like *it's raining cats and dogs*, for example, does not count as a lexical phrase because it does not have any particular pragmatic function. Another point that sets lexical phrases apart from other types of FSs such as lexical bundles is that they can come in all shapes and sizes. They can be in the form of: (a) polywords, which operate as single words, allowing no variability or lexical insertions (e.g., *for the most part*); (b) institutionalized expressions which are sentence-length, invariable, and mostly continuous (e.g., *how are you?*); (c) phrasal constraints, which allow variations of lexical and phrase categories, and are mostly continuous (e.g., *the _____ er the er / “the sooner the better”*); and (d) sentence builders, which allow construction of full sentences with fillable slots (e.g., *I think that X / “I think that it's a good idea”*). For the purposes of this study, the taxonomy set out by Nattinger and DeCarrico, detailed in the method section, was used as a reference point for identifying lexical phrases in the analysis stage.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Can students make greater use of lexical phrases if they are explicitly made aware of those forms in the classroom?
2. Does greater frequency of use of lexical phrases affect perceived fluency?
3. Are some types of lexical phrases more salient than others in terms of affecting fluency? If so, which kinds of lexical phrases contribute to perceived fluency the most?

Method

Participants

The pool of participants, a snowball sample, comprised of 34 university students (ages 18-20; 15 male and 19 female) majoring in economics, commerce, or management in universities in Japan. The students were, at the time of the data collection, all enrolled in the researcher's academic writing class which was held once a week; however, they had other English classes outside of this one. They were all placed at the highest-level class based on the placement test (i.e., TOEIC IP test scores between 700 and 850 points).

Assessing Speaker Fluency

Two sets of judges were used in the experiment, one set to judge fluency, and a second, separate set to detect lexical phrases in the transcript data. The first set comprised of three NS judges who were recruited to assess students' speech (in the form of audio recordings) in terms of fluency. These judges were all full-time teaching faculty members teaching English in universities in Tokyo. They were all male, each with over six years of English teaching experience in higher education. While using objective measures for fluency such as calculating the mean length of runs or speech rate would have been more clearcut, I was interested in how the use of lexical phrases may contribute to perceived fluency because L2 learners are usually judged subjectively. It is not the case, that those who speak the fastest, or with the fewest pauses, are *necessarily* seen as the most fluent, or as good communicators *per se*. Indeed, speech without appropriate length of runs and pauses might seem robotic, difficult to comprehend, or as aimless rambling. There are, however, problems with measuring oral proficiency subjectively as it can be interpreted very differently by individuals. Therefore, to obtain an acceptable level of reliability, the judges took part in a training session prior to the assessment where they were provided with guidelines for how to assess fluency on a five-point scale (see Appendix A). The rubric used for the assessment followed part of the band descriptors of the speaking section of the IELTS test. During the training session, the judges practiced rating six sets of five oral summaries (30 summaries in total), which were not part of the data, to calibrate their assessment according to the rubric and through member checking. After that session, the judges, separately, assessed 170 recordings over a span of two days.

Lexical Phrase Counts

Besides the judges for fluency, a second set of two NS (male) judges read the transcripts of the audio recordings along with the researcher to detect lexical phrases used by the students. These two NSs were also full-time faculty members teaching English in universities in Tokyo. The detection of lexical phrases by the researcher and the two judges followed Nattinger & DeCarrico's (1992) taxonomy which characterizes lexical phrases in terms of a functional aspect, and a structural aspect (see Tables 1 and 2 below). In identifying lexical phrases from the data, judges referred to these taxonomies, and only language which met both the functional and structural aspect of a lexical phrase in Nattinger & DeCarrico's taxonomy, were included in the data. Agreement among the judges in identifying lexical phrases was high (95%).

As I have said, lexical phrases used by the students in the study were categorized into different types based on their functional characteristics as well as their structural characteristics. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico's taxonomy, lexical phrases can be categorized according to their function into three groups: social interaction; necessary topics; and discourse devices. Because the data collected for this study were monologues, many of the lexical phrases found in the dataset were those that belong to discourse devices. Lexical phrases which belong to this category include logical connectors (e.g., *as a result*), temporal connectors (e.g., *and then*), spatial connectors (e.g., *around here*), fluency devices (e.g., *you know*), exemplifiers (e.g., *for instance*), and relators (e.g., *not only X but also Y*) to list a few. Table 1 provides the definition (taken verbatim from Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992, pp. 60-66) and some examples of lexical phrases which fit into each categories.

TABLE 1
Functional Aspects of Lexical Phrases

Types	Definition	Examples
Social interaction	Markers that describe social relations. They can be either (a) categories of conversational maintenance or (b) categories of functional meaning relating to conversational purpose.	<i>excuse/pardon me?</i> <i>well, that's about it</i> <i>see you later</i>
Necessary topics	Topics about which learners are often asked, or ones that are necessary in daily conversations.	<i>for a long time</i> <i>across from</i> <i>lots of</i>
Discourse devices	Markers that connect the meaning and structure of the discourse.	<i>All in all</i> <i>I think that</i> <i>it depends on X</i>

As for structural characteristics, lexical phrases were categorized as being one of the following: polywords, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints, or sentence builders. Which of these categories a lexical phrase may fall into was determined by four structural criteria: (1) the length and grammatical status of the phrase; (2) whether the phrase has a canonical or non-canonical shape; (3) whether the phrase is variable or fixed; (4) whether the phrase is continuous or discontinuous. Table 2 provides the definitions of each of the structures taken verbatim from Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992, pp. 38-44) along with some examples. While words such as *however*, appear as single words they are recognized as a special class of polywords which have over time come to be written as single lexemes (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992, p. 39).

TABLE 2
Structural Aspects of Lexical Phrases

Types	Definition	Examples
Polywords	(1) Polywords short phrases which function very much like individual lexical items. (2) They can be both canonical and non-canonical. (3) They allow no variability. (4) They are continuous.	<i>for the most part</i> <i>by the way</i> <i>however</i>
Institutionalized expressions	(1) Institutionalized expressions are lexical phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances. (2) They are mostly canonical. (3) They are invariable. (4) They are mostly continuous.	<i>let me think</i> <i>there you go</i> <i>that's all for now</i>
Phrasal constraints	(1) Phrasal constraints are short- to medium-length phrases. (2) They can be both canonical and non-canonical. (3) They allow variation of lexical and phrasal categories (NP, VP, AdjP, AdvP, N, V, Adj, Adv, etc.). (4) They are mostly continuous.	_____ <i>as well as</i> _____ <i>a year/day ago</i> <i>in <u>short/summary</u></i>
Sentence builders	(1) Sentence builders are lexical phrases that provide the framework for whole sentences. They contain slots for parameters or arguments for expression of an entire idea. (2) These phrases can be both canonical and non-canonical. (3) They allow considerable variation of phrasal (NP, VP) and clausal (S) elements. (4) they are both continuous and discontinuous.	<i>I think (that)</i> <i>not only X, but also Y</i> <i>it seems (to me) (that) X</i>

Finally, as I was interested in finding out how the use of a variety of lexical phrases contributes to oral fluency, sequences were counted by type instead of token. This means that sequences that recurred in a student's discourse were counted only once. This would help differentiate between a student who uses the same lexical phrase multiple times from a student who used multiple types of lexical phrases. All lexical phrases that were uttered erroneously (e.g., *in the other hand*) were excluded from the data.

Treatment

At the time of the data collection, the students were practicing summary writing in their writing class. The students were given a passage of about 320 words to summarize. The passages were taken from previous tests administered in the Test in Practical English Proficiency or *EIKEN*, a widely used language qualification test in Japan. In the first week, students were given a passage to take home to read. In the following week, they checked their understanding of the passage with a partner in class. This took about 15 minutes. After that, they were asked questions about the passage by the teacher (i.e., researcher), which took about 10 minutes. Students were also given the opportunity to ask the teacher any questions they had about the content at this time. After they had confirmed their understanding, they then wrote key information about the passage in note format; this took about five minutes. Using only their notes, they then recorded their oral summary lasting between one to two minutes.

Each week, after the oral summary was submitted, the teacher gave a lecture on how the use of lexical phrases such as logical connectors (e.g., *first of all*), exemplifiers (e.g., *_____ is a good example of _____*), and topic markers (e.g., *this article is about*) could be used to make the speech more coherent. These phrases were given to them as a list that they could take home and study each week. Some of the NS judges and the researcher had also summarized the passages themselves and the students were given the opportunity to listen to and read transcripts of the NS oral summaries in class, paying attention to how NSs used lexical phrases to make their utterances smooth, coherent, and fluent. This exercise was expected to help them improve their subsequent summary. As the participants were university students, it is likely that they had knowledge of many of these expressions already; however, by raising awareness in class it was assumed that they would be encouraged to use these expressions more in their speech. After the lecture, a new passage which the students would summarize next was provided and the same process mentioned earlier took place. This process was repeated four times. The procedure the students underwent is summarized in Table 3, with the titles of each passage in parentheses.

TABLE 3
Schedule for the Participants

Week	Schedule
Week 1	Read Passage 1 (Bike Sharing) as homework
Week 2	Step 1: Comprehension check with peers Step 2: Comprehension check with the teacher Step 3: Note taking Step 4: Oral summary Step 5: Read Passage 2 (Seagrasses) as homework
Week 3	Steps 1-5 above Step 6: Read Passage 3 (Superbugs) as homework
Week 4	Steps 1-5 above Step 6: Read Passage 4 (Cassina) as homework
Week 5	Steps 1-5 above Step 6: Read Passage 5 (Hostile Architecture) as homework

Analytical Procedure

To answer the first research question, the weekly increase or decrease of the students' use of lexical phrases were analyzed using a one-way repeated measures ANOVA. To answer the second research question, students who received a high score from the judges (mean score of 4 or higher) were compared with their counterparts (mean score of less than 4). Specifically, an independent-sample *t*-test was run to determine whether there was a difference between the frequency of lexical phrases used by the students in the two groups. As for the third research question, all of the lexical phrases were categorized based on their

structural and functional characteristics. This categorization was then used to observe whether there was a difference in the distribution of its usage depending on the students' fluency scores.

Results

Research Question 1

In answer to the first research question, it seems that the frequency of students' use of lexical phrases did not particularly increase as a result of awareness raising in the classroom. On average, students used about four different types of lexical phrases in the first week. After the first intervention, the average students' use of lexical phrases went up to about six different types. This, however, is the highest number, and although students continued to receive lectures on the use of lexical phrases, the use of such phrases went back down to about four different types in the following two weeks and an increase to five different types in the final week. The descriptive statistics is provided in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Descriptive Statistics for the Lexical Phrase Counts for the Five Passages

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Week 1	4.32	1.89	0.32	3.67	4.98
Week 2	6.15	2.51	0.43	5.27	7.02
Week 3	4.38	2.47	0.42	3.52	5.25
Week 4	4.59	1.97	0.34	3.90	5.28
Week 5	5.15	2.14	0.37	4.40	5.90

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the weekly increase or decrease in the students' use of lexical phrases was statistically significant. The p -value was set at .05. There were no outliers and the data was normally distributed at each time point, as assessed by boxplot and Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > .05$), respectively. The assumption of sphericity was met, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 4.85, p = .847$. The results of the repeated-measures test revealed that the difference in the amount of lexical phrases used each week was significantly different, $F(4, 132) = 6.40, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.16$. Post hoc analysis revealed that students' increase in the use of different types of lexical phrases from the first week to the second week was significant ($p < .001$), and the drop in the usage of such forms from the second week to the third week as well as to the fourth week was significant ($p = .005$ and $p = .002$, respectively).

The fact that students did not continue to use a wider variety of lexical phrases at first glance may suggest that students did not learn to use many lexical phrases even after the interventions. However, this result should not come as a surprise given that the oral summaries they produced for this study were all within two minutes in length, meaning there may be a threshold to how many different types of lexical phrases can be uttered in a short time span. Furthermore, the results of the qualitative analysis show that the instruction provided during the intervention did not go unnoticed. That is to say, while students had a tendency to rely on the same kinds of lexical phrases, some of them began to expand their repertoire overtime. For example, rather than always using "moreover" to add information some students would use a more lengthy expression like "on top of that" in their subsequent summaries. So, while the number of types of lexical phrases used in the short oral summaries may not have increased, the selection of lexical phrases changed. This point will be discussed in more detail later.

Research Question 2

The answer to the second research question regarding whether greater frequency of use of lexical phrases affect perceived fluency, is yes, although this only partly explains why some students may be perceived as being more, or less fluent. Students were categorized into one of the two groups for this part of the analysis: lower fluency or higher fluency groups. This was determined using the mean scores of the three judges for each summarizing tasks. Students receiving a mean score of less than four were categorized as “lower-fluency group” and those with a mean score of four or higher will be categorized into a group called “higher-fluency group”. Table 5 shows the mean number of lexical phrase types uttered by students in the lower-fluency group and those in the higher-fluency group across the five time points. In general, students who were perceived to be more fluent used a wider variety of lexical phrases than their counterparts. An independent-sample *t*-test was then run to determine if the difference between the two groups was significant. The results showed that the difference in the number of lexical phrase types used to summarize the passages provided in the second and fifth weeks were significantly different. This result is presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Types of Lexical Phrases Used by Higher and Lower Fluency Groups

	Higher Fluency Group			Lower Fluency Group			<i>t</i> (32)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Week 1	21	4.67	2.08	13	3.77	1.42	1.37	0.182	1.86
Week 2	23	6.74	2.56	11	4.91	1.97	2.09	0.045	2.39
Week 3	24	4.83	2.68	10	3.3	1.49	1.69	0.1	2.41
Week 4	23	4.96	1.99	11	3.82	1.78	1.61	0.117	1.93
Week 5	28	5.5	2.03	6	3.5	2.07	2.19	0.036	2.03

While it is not hard to understand why students may be perceived as more fluent if they use a wider variety of lexical phrases as in the cases for summaries produced in Weeks 2 and 5, there remains a question about summaries produced in Weeks 1, 3, and 4. That is, if the students in the lower-fluency group and the higher-fluency group did not use significantly more or fewer types of lexical phrases for the summaries produced in Weeks 1, 3, and 4 what factor(s) played a role in how they were perceived as more or less fluent? This brings us to the third research question regarding whether some types of lexical phrases are more salient than others in terms of affecting fluency. In other words, there is a possibility that the type of lexical phrase is as important as the quantity (amount or frequency) when judging whether a speaker is fluent or not.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked whether the type of lexical phrase used influenced perceptions of speaker fluency. The answer to this seems to be yes, and goes some way towards explaining the mismatch between frequency of lexical phrases and judgements of fluency mentioned above. The students' use of lexical phrases was examined more closely for passages summarized in Weeks 1, 3, and 4.

According to the scores given by the judges for the passage summarized in the first week, there were 11 students who received a mean score of less than four and 23 students who received a mean score of four or more. When the transcription of the oral summaries was analyzed, 19 different kinds of lexical phrases were found in the lower-fluency groups' transcriptions and 35 by the students in the higher-fluency group. While the number of types of lexical phrases used by the students was more or less constant, the particular types of lexical phrases used differed between levels. As mentioned earlier in this article, lexical phrases have pragmatic functions. For instance, *this is because* is a phrase used to present reasons and *in addition to this* is used to add information. The students in the higher-fluency group had a tendency to use such phrases which function as logical connectors more than their counterparts in the lower-fluency group. In

fact, almost half (47%) of the lexical phrases found in the higher-fluency students' data was composed of logical connectors. Table 6 lists the logical connectors that appeared in (a) both the transcripts of the lower- and higher-fluency groups, (b) only in the lower-fluency group, and (c) only in the higher-fluency group. Like this, many kinds of logical connectors were found in the summaries collected by the students in the higher-fluency group.

TABLE 6
Logical Connectors Used by Students in the Two Groups

Lower-Fluency Group	Lower- & Higher-Fluency Group	Higher-Fluency Group
in fact	however	furthermore
	on the other hand	due to
	because of	therefore
	as a result	the reason why... is because...
	it/that is because	the reason was that
	and finally	in addition to
		one of the reasons is that
		and what's more
		... even though ...
		as well

Students in the lower-fluency group relied heavily on lexical phrases that would be labelled as temporal connectors (e.g., _____ *years ago*) and spatial connectors (e.g., *anywhere in* _____). In fact, about half (52%) of the lexical phrases found in the lower-fluency students' data was composed of such phrases. Table 7 is the breakdown of the kinds of lexical phrases used by the two groups in regard to the functional property.

TABLE 7
Lexical Phrases Appearing in Lower and Higher Fluency Groups (Functional Aspect)

	Lower-Fluency Group		Higher-Fluency Group	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Spatial connectors	4	21.05%	6	17.14%
Temporal connectors	6	31.58%	4	11.43%
Logical connectors	7	36.84%	16	45.71%
Quantifiers	1	5.26%	1	2.86%
Fluency device	1	5.26%	0	0.00%
Exemplifiers	0	0.00%	2	5.71%
Topic markers	0	0.00%	2	5.71%
Relators	0	0.00%	3	8.57%
Reporting	0	0.00%	1	2.86%
Total	19	100.00%	35	100.00%

Presented next are the use of lexical phrases by the students in the two fluency groups appearing in the summaries completed in the third week. The students in the lower-fluency group produced a total of 18 different kinds of lexical phrases while those in the higher-fluency group produced a total of 40 different types. While the number of types of lexical phrases do not seem to increase from the first to the third passages, the variation has increased. This is due to the fact that students had already received instruction on the use of lexical phrases twice prior to summarizing this passage. Table 8 is a breakdown of the different types of lexical phrases used by the two groups.

TABLE 8

Lexical Phrases Appearing in Lower and Higher Fluency Groups (Functional Aspect)

	Lower-Fluency Group		Higher-Fluency Group	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Spatial connectors	2	11.11%	3	7.50%
Temporal connectors	2	11.11%	2	5.00%
Logical connectors	4	22.22%	14	35.00%
Quantifiers	1	5.56%	3	7.50%
Fluency device	4	22.22%	2	5.00%
Exemplifiers	1	5.56%	4	10.00%
Topic markers	2	11.11%	3	7.50%
Reporting	0	0.00%	4	10.00%
Comparators	1	5.56%	1	2.50%
Identification	1	5.56%	0	0.00%
Frequency	0	0.00%	2	5.00%
Topic shifter	0	0.00%	1	2.50%
Rhetorical question	0	0.00%	1	2.50%
Total	18	100.00%	40	100.00%

The use of a wide range of logical connectors by students who received a higher fluency score can be seen again. Furthermore, the transcripts of students in the higher-fluency group revealed another point that may contribute to perceived fluency: The logical connectors found in their data were in the form of sentence builders. It was found that some students began to implement the use of logical connectors and exemplifiers which took the form of sentence builders (e.g., *let's take _____ for example*) that were taught during the treatment rather than polywords or phrasal constraints (e.g., *for example*). To show the difference in the use of sentence builders between the two groups, Table 9 lists the sentence builders that appeared (a) in both the transcripts of the lower- and higher- fluency groups and (b) only in the higher-fluency group.

TABLE 9

Sentence Builders Used by Students in the Two Groups

Lower- & Higher- Fluency Group	Higher-Fluency Group
The/This/ article/text is about	It is said/believed that
I will/I'm going to talk about	It is estimated that
This/it is because	Let's take _____ for example
The more _____, the more _____	Let me take an example of _____
	The reason why _____ is that _____
	One reason is that _____
	The first/second/third reason/cause is (that) _____
	Studies have shown that _____
	It was found that _____
	I'd like to talk about _____
	Let me talk about _____

Finally, I will look at the lexical phrases appearing in the summary produced in the fourth week by the students in the two groups. Table 10 shows the breakdown of the lexical phrases used by the students.

TABLE 10
Lexical Phrases Appearing in Lower- and Higher-Fluency Groups (Functional Aspect)

	Lower Fluency Group		Higher Fluency Group	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Spatial connectors	2	6.67%	2	5.26%
Temporal connectors	8	26.67%	11	28.95%
Logical connectors	14	46.67%	9	23.68%
Fluency device	2	6.67%	8	21.05%
Exemplifiers	1	3.33%	1	2.63%
Topic markers	2	6.67%	2	5.26%
Reporting	0	0.00%	1	2.63%
Relators	0	0.00%	2	5.26%
Identification	1	3.33%	0	0.00%
Advice	0	0.00%	1	2.63%
Clarification	0	0.00%	1	2.63%
Total	30	100.00%	38	100.00%

The main difference that stood out between the students who were perceived to be more fluent and those who were less fluent for this passage was the use of fluency devices. While it was not rare to see students struggle to find appropriate words and expressions to summarize the passage every week, this particular passage seemed to be somehow especially difficult. It was indeed the way students overcame this struggle which may have played a part in how the students were perceived as more or less fluent. During the interventions, students were taught expressions that can be used to fill pauses when facing problems such as not being able to recall the content or finding words to convey what they wanted to say. Such fillers are called fluency devices and include expressions such as *let me see*, *I mean*, and *you know*.

Summary of the Results

Generally speaking, the students in the present study were not able to increase their frequency or range of use of lexical phrases during the study. This, however, should be interpreted with caution as the study had only one experimental group and lacked a control group due to logistical limitations. Nevertheless, this study has highlighted the importance of looking into the type of lexical phrases in addition to the amount or frequency of their usage. As was mentioned earlier, certain lexical phrases seem to contribute to fluency more than others. For instance, using a number of lexical phrases that function as temporal or spatial connectors in the form of phrasal constraints may not contribute to fluency as much as using the same number of lexical phrases that function as fluency devices or logical connectors in the form of sentence builders.

Discussion

From the results of the study, we can determine that some types of lexical phrases have a greater impact upon perceived fluency than others. From the data, it seems that the use of logical connectors in the structural form of sentence builders, and combinations of lexical fillers are traits common to those speakers who received a higher fluency score in the data. These points will be discussed sequentially in more detail using examples from the students' actual summaries.

Logical Connectors

One apparent trait in the use of lexical phrases which was found in the utterances produced by the students who received a high fluency score was the use of a wide range logical connectors, or discourse

devices which help link ideas logically. Observe below (Example 1) a transcript of the oral summary produced by a student who received a high fluency score. The summary was produced in the first week:

Example 1: A summary by a student in the higher fluency group in Week 1

Seattle is famous because it is **a** environmental friendly city but the first bike sharing service there which is called Pronto has failed. The disappointing responses from the residents made the service need to be purchased. (...) **And finally** (*logical connector/phrasal constraint*), it was abandoned **20 in 2017** (*temporal connector/phrasal constraint*). **However** (*logical connector/polyword*), another service which is called Spin has succeeded because it doesn't need docking station, can be operated on smartphones to unlock the bike. **And what's more** (*logical connector/polyword*), Spin expanded its ah its service and to where to where where were lack of access to Pronto and public transportations. In 2018, the city introduced introduced ah service introduced a new service and received positive comments from riders and negative feedback from companies **because of the fees** (*logical connector/phrasal constraint*). **And finally** (*logical connector/phrasal constraint*) Spin withdrew the service from Seattle.

As shown in the example, the student uses a variety of logical connectors such as *and what's more*, *and finally*, and *because of*. Such connectors are also called macro-organizers (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992, Flowerdew & Miller, 1997) and facilitate smooth transitioning from one point to another, contributing to cohesion and coherence. Segalowitz (2010) mentions cognitive fluency, which refers to “the fluid operation (speed, efficiency) of the cognitive processes responsible for performing L2 speech acts” (p. 7), in other words, a speaker's ability to efficiently plan and execute their speech. Cognitively fluent speakers, such as the student in the example above, are able to talk coherently are better able to operationalize a logical structure in their mind as they speak through the use of logical connectors. When communication flows smoothly and coherently, listeners are able to follow the speaker easily, giving an impression of a fluent speaker (Lennon 1990). Classes which aim to increase fluency in speakers then, might consider focusing on the use of logical connectors as a means to help learners organize their thoughts, and improve their fluency of speech, especially in tasks that require the summarizing or referencing of other events or texts as in the above example.

Sentence Builders

The second trait which was shared among students who received a high fluency score was the use of lexical phrases which were in the form of sentence builders, or phrases which help jump start a sentence. Logical connectors and other types of discourse devices such as exemplifiers and topic markers may play a greater role in fluency when produced in the form of sentence builders, which occur at the beginning of utterances, and are usually longer than polywords (e.g., *however* and *moreover*). Example 2 is a transcription of another student who received a high fluency score. The transcript is a section of the summary produced in the third week.

Example 2: A summary by a student in the higher fluency group in Week 3

This talk is about superbugs (*topic marker/sentence builder*). Superbugs are bacteria ah which have resistance for antibiotics. **The more opportunity bacteria exposed to antibiotics the more the resistance the stronger resistance they get** (*comparator/sentence builder*). Ah (...) **let's take India for example** (*exemplifier/sentence builder*). [. . .]. **The second reason is that** (*logical connector/sentence builder*) [. . .]. **The third reason is that** [. . .].

These sentence builders (e.g., *this talk is about*) are beneficial as they can help L2 learners create quite lengthy runs. Ogawa (2021) mentions the benefits of these kinds of chunks as well. In her study, students practiced a 3/2/1 task 11 times. The students in one of the two experimental groups (i.e., the input

enhancement group) received teacher-led model passages which had the target lexical phrases (referred to as formulaic language in her study) underlined to raise awareness to those forms. The students in the other experimental group (the input + peer-check group) received the same treatment as the first experimental group but was different in that while the speakers engaged in the 3/2/1 task, their peer listeners exerted pressure to use the target lexical phrases. These target lexical phrases were mainly in the form of sentence builders and institutionalized expressions (e.g., *personally speaking*, *I think* and *how come?*). The results indicated that the students in the two experimental groups improved fluency more than the students in the comparison group because they spoke with greater mean length of runs due to increased use of longer chunks. These results taken together with the findings of the present study suggest that in cases where fluency is the target then, it would seem that aiming for longer sentence building chunks of language, especially as a means to begin utterances, could be the focus of instruction.

Fluency Devices

Finally, it was found that students who use fluency devices strategically were perceived as fluent speakers. Fluency devices, especially in the form of longer lexical chunks such as *let me think* are able to buy time for what to say next while avoiding awkward pauses (Tavakoli et al., 2016). Below is part of a summary produced by another student in the higher-fluency group in the fourth week (Example 3).

Example 3: *A summary by a student in the higher-fluency group in Week 4*

However, European importa importers of black tea were afraid of that ... were afraid that ... let me see what I mean is ... European importers of black tea thought that cassina might replace black tea.

The student stops after finishing a clause, and while thinking of what to say next uses fluency devices to buy time. A pause at clausal boundaries is said to reflect a breakdown in conceptualization-related process, such as content planning (e.g., Skehan et al., 2016). While not all fluency devices may lead to perceived fluency, as it may represent a lack of proficiency, it may be the case that fluency devices positioned between clausal boundaries come across as a natural phenomenon and may even be regarded as a strategy contributing to perceived fluency.

Another noteworthy point is the use of the combination of fluency devices. Some students, such as the one in the previous example, were found to use two fluency devices together (e.g., *Let me see. I mean* and *You know. Let me see*). While the use of consecutive fluency devices might come across as a speaker lacking fluency (struggling to think of what to say next, or stalling for time), in fact the use of two consecutive fluency devices seems to be a trait of those speakers who were perceived as more, rather than less fluent. A similar trait was found in the speech samples collected by Wood (2010). Students in his study watched three silent-films and then recounted the stories. The researcher then analyzed the students' fluency both quantitatively (e.g., mean length of runs) and qualitatively (i.e., observing how FSs are used in monologues). He found that some of the students in his study strategically used fluency devices in the form of self-talk and fillers consecutively, as in the case of the student in Example 3, to increase the length of runs considerably. A pedagogical implication that can be drawn from these findings is that learners could be instructed to combine different multi-word phrases as a means to develop fluency.

Conclusion

While there are limitations to this study such as the lack of a control group, short time frame, limited pedagogical intervention to a small number of weeks, and limited sample size, this study can be used as a jumping-off point for future work looking into how certain types of FSs can contribute to fluency. This study focused on FSs that fit the criteria posited by Nattinger and DeCarrico; however, it would be interesting to reanalyze the data taking into consideration other FSs such as lexical bundles and idioms in relation to perceptions of fluency.

The findings from this study provide an important pedagogical implication. We already know teaching formulaic language can help students become more fluent, but what we are beginning to see from studies such as this, is that there is a qualitative aspect to this. Particular kinds or types of lexical phrases have more impact in terms of speakers coming across as fluent in particular communicative tasks (such as summarizing as in this study), and it is perhaps on these that further research might focus, and teachers might focus on in their instruction. As I have said in the discussion section, the use of logical connectors, especially those structured as sentence builders, was present among speakers who were perceived to be more fluent, as was the use of combinations of fluency devices.

One area for further investigation however is in the repetitive usage of logical connectors, and other FSs and what impact this has on fluency. The lower scores for fluency of students who repetitively used *for example* suggests this is an area worthy of attention. Finally, this study has asked the question of which lexical phrases contribute most to fluency within the bounds of a particular task, which is a monologue summarizing a text. Of course, there is a multitude of other contexts and purposes for which language can be used and taught, and so we should be wary of generalizing too quickly from results such as these and making claims that particular kinds of formulaic language improve fluency universally. Ultimately, while researchers, teachers, and learners in general appreciate the importance of formulaic or ‘chunk’-like language in using and learning language, there remains room for details on exactly which particular kinds of FSs should be focused on for specific purposes and communicative tasks.

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Appendix A

Fluency Scale

Score	Description
5	Speaks at a natural speed Rare repetition and/or self-correction Hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar The speech flows in a logical and coherent manner
4	Occasional repetition and/or self-correction May demonstrate language-related hesitations at times Overall coherent Speech is not always smooth
3	Speaks slowly Produce simple speech fluently but more complex one causes fluency problems Noticeable repetition, self-correction, and/or hesitation noticeable Demands some patience from listener Lacks coherency
2	Speaks very slowly with long pauses Frequent hesitation, repetition and/or self-correction Demands great patience from listener Frequently unable to convey basic message Frequently unable to make complete sentences
1	Pauses lengthily before most words Unable to convey basic message