

# Dialogue Recitation and CFL Learners' Production of Formulaic Expressions

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## Abstract

This study examined American learners' spoken production of formulaic expressions in Chinese after receiving ten weeks of instruction comprised of dialogue recitation and question-answer drills. Students' speech samples were collected through an oral interview test at the end of the instruction period. The results suggested a positive effect of dialogue recitation on learners' spoken production of formulaic expressions. The follow-up interviews with the selected high-performing and low-performing learners revealed that high performers used more deep mental processing strategies to make associations and elaborations when learning formulaic expressions, whereas low performers tended to remain in the stage of rote memorization and hence had difficulties in the application of the expressions to a new situation. The results indicate that rote memorization offers the time needed to process the new formulaic expression, while association and elaboration provide the chances of long-term retention and the ability of application.

## 1.

### Introduction

Recent second language acquisition research has seen a noticeable increase of interest in a specific type of multiword units commonly referred to as formulaic expressions. A number of researchers have agreed that this type of multiword units plays a central role in language acquisition and can be seen as fundamental to the creative use of language (Coulmas, 1981; Ellis, 1996; Kuiper, 2004; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, Pawley & Syder, 1983; Schmitt, 2004; Sinclair, 1991; Wood, 2010; Wray, 2001, 2004). According to these researchers, a large number of formulaic expressions are stored in memory so that they can be used "ready-made" in language

production. This compensates for the limits of working memory and helps speakers to cope with the demands of real-time language processing while maintaining fluency.

The plea for second/foreign language learners to pay attention to formulaic expressions is not new, but the challenges that learners face in developing a sizable repertoire of formulaic expressions are enormous, especially in terms of the heavy burden placed on memory that is involved in learning. How to help the learner go from noticing the formulaic expressions in input to constructing a long-term memory becomes a challenging question for language instructors and writers of teaching materials. However, much of the current research tends to focus either on how learners' use of formulaic expressions differs from native production or on the contribution of formulaic expressions to learners' perceived proficiency and fluency (Eyckmans, 2007; Stengers, 2009; Wood, 2006). This line of research suggests the importance of formulaic expressions in foreign/second language learning, but it fails to address how formulaic expressions can be taught to learners; in particular, how classroom instruction and practice can be designed to enhance the learning of formulaic expressions and thus promote learners' spoken language development.

As reported by Durrant and Schmitt (2010), one of the shortcomings of previous studies on formulaic expressions is that they look only at the product of learning, focusing entirely on what learners know and failing to provide any consideration of input. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) also pointed out that previous literature mainly focused on the training of learners' strategies for noticing useful formulaic expressions and left the question of how to help learners remember these expressions unanswered. However, according to the evidence of incidental vocabulary acquisition, incidental learning vocabulary in input requires multiple encounters with the word in various contexts and/or a good deal of mental processing. Exposure to authentic input containing formulaic expressions alone may not lead to the learning of the expression. Although giving them strategies to notice the expression may raise learners' awareness of the expression, this does not mean that

learners are able to store the expression in long-term memory and retrieve it when necessary. The question of how to help learners to go from noticing to really remembering the expression remains unanswered. In other words, further research should be conducted to examine what kinds of mental processing learners should engage in to aid retention.

The current study aimed to fill in this gap through an investigation of beginning-level learners' production of formulaic expressions after receiving 10 weeks of instruction on formulaic expressions through dialogue recitation and question-answer drills. Individual interviews with a group of selected learners were also conducted to investigate their perceptions of the learning experience and the strategies they adopted to learn formulaic expressions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 A Pedagogical Definition of Formulaic Expression**

Although the phenomenon of recurrent multiword units has been well recognized, researchers differ in what they consider to be a recurrent multiword unit; hence, there is no single definition for this phenomenon. A wide range of terms are used in the existing literature to designate these recurrent multiword units: Formulaic expressions/sequences, frozen phrases, ready-made expressions, routine formulae, lexical phrases, fixed expressions, formulaic speech, amalgams, recurring utterances, chunks, composites, conventionalized forms, multiword units, stock utterances, formulas, etc.

The term that researchers use with the highest frequency, "formulaic expression," was proposed by one of the field's authoritative figures, Alison Wray (2001). According to her, a formulaic expression 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" (Wray, 2001: 9). Wray's (2001) definition is as inclusive as

possible, incorporating not only lexical phrases such as idioms, proverbs, collocations, social-routine formulas (e.g., How are you?), genre-typical clichés or terminologies (e.g., economic crisis), and discourse organizers (e.g., on the other hand), but also poetry, rhythms, classicisms, or any other memorized texts.

Given the consideration that the ultimate goal of this study is to propose some suggestions for foreign language teaching and learning, this study adopts a pedagogical definition of formulaic expression. A formulaic expression as discussed in this study is a string of words that are best learned as a single unit because 1) they may not be appropriately understood or used without the holistic processing, 2) they occur so frequently that the learning is facilitated when the words are learned as one unit, or 3) because the word string is routinely employed for a specific purpose in communication or discourse other than or in addition to, conveying the meaning of the words themselves. This kind of formulaic expressions can be wholly fixed phrases, such as “自我介绍一下 zìwǒ jièshào yíxià. (Let me introduce myself),” or phrases with open slots allowing for possible insertions, such as “.....做什么工作? ..... zuò shénme gōngzuò? (What does ..... (someone) do for a living?).”

## 2.2 Different Training Techniques for the Learning of Formulaic Expressions

In previous literature, very few empirical studies examined the question of how to help learners to go from noticing to really remembering formulaic expressions. These studies investigated the effects of different training techniques on the learning of a certain type of formulaic expressions, such as idioms or collocations, and most of them were conducted in laboratory settings. Up to date, three types of training techniques were examined in previous literature: 1) the stimulation of mental imagery, 2) verbatim repetition, and 3) the memorization of relatively long stretches of text.

The stimulation of mental imagery was often used to promote learning figurative idioms through the use of drawings or pictures; however, previous empirical studies showed inconsistent results regarding the efficacy of pictures on the retention of idioms. A study by Boers, Piquer, Stengers, and Eyckmans (2009) suggested that the presence of pictures might distract learners from paying sufficient attention to the form of unfamiliar words. In contrast, Szczepaniak and Lew (2011) reported a highly positive role of pictures as an aid for learners to remember not only the meaning of idioms but also the word forms needed in idiom completion tests.

The second type of training technique, verbatim repetition, was reported as an effective input practice for learners' retention of collocation (Durrant & Schmitt, 2010). In this study, L2 learners of English were exposed to collocations in a sentence under three different conditions: 1) exposure to collocations in a sentence context one time only, 2) verbatim repetition after exposure to collocations in a sentence once, and 3) presentation of target collocation in a different set of sentences after exposure to the same collocation in a sentence once. Durrant and Schmitt (2010) reported that the two groups under the repetition condition outperformed the non-repetition group; further, the verbatim repetition group showed better performance than the third group in recalling target collocations. This study suggested the potential benefit of learning activities involving verbatim repetition for learning collocations. However, this experiment only tested learners' short-term retention of the target collocation in a laboratory setting. Future studies should be conducted to examine the efficacy of verbatim repetition on the retrieval of target collocations from long-term memory in appropriate contexts.

Previous studies also showed that memorization of relatively long stretches of text enhanced learners' ability to recall formulaic expressions. Wray (2004) described how an absolute beginning-level learner of Welsh managed to recall a number of formulaic expressions to enable her to perform a cooking demonstration on TV in Welsh after four days of instruction through memorizing the scripts. Yu (2009) conducted an experiment on the learning of the

formulaic expression “Despite + Noun” by college-level Chinese learners of English. She found that memorization of paragraphs containing the target expression was more effective than explicit instruction on the grammatical rule in engendering procedural knowledge of this expression. She further claimed that the memorization group treated the phrase “Despite + Noun” as a lexical phrase and therefore enhanced their production of correct sentences. In a larger-scale study by Dai and Ding (2010), a group of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners were asked to memorize texts, usually verbatim, during daily independent study time in the course of a school term while another group just read the English texts during their independent study time. The former group’s use of formulaic expressions was more varied and more accurate than the use of the latter in their end-of-term writing assignments.

In summary, previous studies imply that verbatim repetition and memorization of stretches of texts may facilitate the learning of formulaic expressions; however, most of the studies were conducted in laboratory settings and focused on only one type of formulaic expression (e.g., Boers, et al., 2009; Durrant & Schmitt, 2010; Szczepaniak & Lew, 2011; Yu, 2009), on limited language production (e.g., Wray, 2004), or on learners’ written production (e.g., Dai & Ding, 2010). More research is needed to explore whether learning activities involving memorization and verbatim repetition (such as dialogue recitation) can facilitate long-term retention and the application of formulaic expressions in a new context. To our knowledge, there are no studies available to date examining the effect of dialogue recitation on learners’ spoken production of formulaic expressions, especially on English-speaking learners’ spoken production in Chinese. It is also worth investigating how the high-performing learners are distinguishable from the low-performing learners in terms of their spoken production of formulaic expressions and what strategies are used by them to learn formulaic expressions. Research results that compare the learning strategies adopted by high-performing and low-performing learners would provide useful insights on what kinds of mental processing learners should engage in to aid learning.

### 3. The Study

#### 3.1 Research Questions

In order to address the issues revealed in the literature review, the present study aimed to investigate the following research questions:

1. Does dialogue recitation have a positive role on learners' spoken production of formulaic expressions?
2. How are the high-performing learners distinguishable from the low-performing learners in terms of their production of formulaic expressions?
3. Are there any differences in preferred learning strategies between high-performing and low-performing learners?

The first question examines whether dialogue recitation promotes learners' spoken production of formulaic expressions. The hypothesis is that if dialogue recitation has a positive role in the learning of formulaic expressions, learners will produce more of the formulaic expressions appearing in the recited dialogues than the expressions not appearing in the dialogue. The second and third questions explore the possible factors that contribute to the success of high-performing learners.

#### 3.2 Participants

Participants of the study included 30 beginning-level learners enrolled in the first quarter of an elementary Chinese language course in a university located in the Midwestern US. They were all undergraduate students at the university and ranged in age from 18 to 24 years. Of these, 11 of them were female and 19 of them were male. All were native speakers of English. None of them had previously studied Chinese in a formal setting. Two of them were exposed to Cantonese at home, but they were included in the study

because the university's placement exam indicated that they spoke Mandarin Chinese at an elementary level.

### 3.3 Instruction

The participants were enrolled in a beginning-level Chinese course that met five times per week for 50 minutes in each class. The primary goal of the course was to develop learners' ability to conduct a set of communicative functions, such as introducing oneself to a third party; exchanging basic information about oneself and others; describing peoples' appearance and personality; and using numbers with days, dates, and other related matters.

The textbook used in the course was *Chinese: Communicating in the Culture*. It contained a main dialogue in each lesson (1–2 minutes in length ranging from 2–6 lines). Learners were required to recite this main dialogue before class by following audio recordings of the main dialogue. After recitation, learners were required to practice the target formulaic expressions not appearing in the dialogue by doing drills orally. Each target formulaic expression is practiced through four to five tightly controlled question–answer drills. In each drill, after listening to a question or a statement recorded in the aural stimuli, learners orally responded to or formed a question using the expression being practiced based on the cues presented in the illustration, for example:

#### A question-responding drill:

##### Target expression

有一点 *yǒu yídiǎn* + *adjective* (a little; a bit + adjective)

(*Illustration: a picture of a busy person*)

##### Question recorded in the aural stimuli:

小王最近怎么样？

*XiǎoWáng zuìjìn zěnmeyàng ?*

How is Little Wang lately?



**Answer responded by the learner:**

他有一点儿忙。

*Tā yǒu yì diǎnr máng。*

He is a little busy.

**A question-forming drill****Target expression:**

...是哪国人 *shì nǎguó rén?*

(Which country is ... (someone) from?)

(*Illustration: a picture of a man*)

**Statement recorded in the aural stimuli:**

王先生是中国人。

*Wáng xiānshēng shì zhōngguó rén.*

Mr. Wang is Chinese.

**Question formed by the learner:**

王先生是哪国人?

*Wáng xiānshēng shì nǎguó rén?*

Which country is Mr. Wang from?

During class time, the instruction in each class typically began with a paired practice of the dialogue, followed by contextualized drills of the target formulaic expressions appearing in each lesson. The practice of the dialogue required learners to act out the dialogue as if they were acting out a movie. The in-class contextualized drills usually included a dialog variation drill to practice the formulaic expressions appearing in the dialog, and two drills to practice the formulaic expressions not appearing in the dialogue. In this way, each of the two sets of formulaic expressions (formulaic expressions

appearing in the dialog and expressions not appearing in the dialog) approximately received half of the instructional time in each class.

Specifically, the dialog variation drill modified some of the contextual information of the dialog (e.g., time, place or speaker's name and title, etc.) and required the students to apply the expressions appearing in the dialog to the adapted context. For

example, the target expression “自我介绍一下 zìwǒ jièshào yíxià (Let me introduce myself.)” appeared as

“自我介绍一下，我是清华大学的张荣 zìwǒ jièshào yíxià , wǒ shì Qīnghuá dàxué de Zhāng Róng. (Let me introduce myself. I am Zhang Rong from Tsinghua University)” in the dialog. The dialog variation drill substituted the speaker's identity and required the learners to apply the target expression to different variations, such as

“自我介绍一下，我是北京大学的张同生。Zìwǒ jièshào yíxià , wǒ shì Běijīng dàxué de Zhāng Tóngsheng. (Let me introduce myself. I am Zhang Tongsheng from Beijing University.)” or

“自我介绍一下，我是南京大学的杜秋。Zìwǒ jièshào yíxià , wǒ shì Nánjīng dàxué de Dù Qiū. (Let me introduce myself. I am Du Qiu from Nanjing University.)” The drills which practice expressions not appearing in the dialog usually simulated situations that learners might encounter in real life. For example, learners were required to ask each other's telephone number to practice the target expression

“...的电话号码(是)多少?... de diànhuà hàomǎ (shì) duōshǎo? What is ... (someone's) telephone number?”

### 3.4 Data Collection

Participants' speech samples were collected in an oral interview test with their instructor after they received the ten weeks of instruction described in the above section. The researcher recorded and transcribed the oral interview tests. In order to create the test items, twenty-four expressions were selected for five instructors of Chinese to judge if each selected expression was considered to be a formulaic expression

according to the pedagogical definition given in this study. All the five instructors had taught Chinese for at least two years at the time of study. The expressions that were judged as formulaic expressions by all the instructors were retained. As a result, twenty formulaic expressions were tested in the oral interview test (see Appendix A). Ten of the tested expressions appeared in the dialogues in the textbook and hence were practiced outside of class by the learners through dialogue recitation. Ten of them didn't appear in the dialogues in the textbook and hence were practiced outside of class by the learners through drills. Each of the tested expressions received equal instructional time in class. Five situations were created to elicit the twenty selected target expressions: introducing oneself; exchanging basic information about oneself and others; describing peoples' appearance and personality; introducing a third party; and naming the number of students in one's school. The tested situations were created to elicit each of the twenty target expressions twice.

In the oral interview tests, the learners received descriptions of the tested situations and developed a free-flowing conversation with the instructor based on each given situation. The description of each situation contained an explanation of the context in English and illustration(s) of the situation. The learners did not have time to prepare before the oral interview test. For example, the situation of describing peoples' appearance aimed to elicit two formulaic expressions - "...是谁shìshuí (Who is ...?)" and "又yòu + adjective1 + 又yòu + adjective2 (Adjective 1 and adjective 2)" twice. The following instruction was presented to the learners to ensure their understanding of the context. Illustration 1 was used to elicit the expression: "这个又高又瘦的男人是谁? zhègè yòu gāo yòu shòu de nánrén shì shuí? (Who is this tall and skinny male?)" Illustration 2 was used to elicit the expression "这个又高又漂亮的女人是谁? zhègè yòu gāo yòu piāoliang de nǚrén shì shuí? (Who is this tall and pretty female?)"

**Context:** You are browsing your friend's Facebook photo album. You don't recognize a person in the picture. Describe the appearance of that person to your friend and ask who the person is.

**Illustration 1:** a picture of a tall and skinny male

**Illustration 2:** a picture of a tall and pretty female

In the test, the instructor played the role of the interlocutor and was allowed to repeat or rephrase the question several times until the learners' response demonstrated their understanding of the question. This practice was used to ensure that the learners' unsuccessful production of formulaic expressions was not the result of the incomprehension of the instructor's question. The oral interview test examined the learning outcomes of the formulaic expressions, but such outcomes might also be influenced by learners' beliefs toward language learning, their practice of dealing with input, and the strategies they made an effort to employ. A sample of 30 learners in the study may not provide a solid foundation for broad generalizations about individual differences, but case studies of learners might give us some insights into how the high-performing learners are different from the others.

Given this consideration, in the second stage of this study, six learners were selected for case studies based on the scores they received in the oral interviews. Two of the selected learners were high-performing learners who received the highest scores in the oral interview test, two of them were low-performing learners who scored the lowest in the oral interview test, and the rest of them were average-performing learners who received a score ranking in the middle (50%). One week after the oral interview, a semi-structured interview was conducted with these learners about their ways of reciting the dialogues and their strategies to learn the target formulaic expressions. The researcher interviewed each of the six selected

learners in English about their learning experience and the strategies they adopted in their learning process.

### 3.5 Analysis Method

The study began with a quantitative analysis of the number of formulaic expressions successfully produced by the learners in the oral interview test. The accurate production rates for the target expressions appearing/not appearing in the recited dialogues were calculated to examine whether the learners were more likely to produce the target expressions practiced through dialogue recitation. In the analysis, only formulaic expressions that contained no grammatical, lexical, and usage errors were regarded as accurate production. Two native Chinese speakers trained in Chinese linguistics were asked to mark the errors in the transcript while listening to the speech samples collected in the oral interview test. Only the accurate productions agreed upon by both of the native speakers were used to calculate the accurate production rate. The statistical results based on this raw data were obtained using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 18.

In order to investigate how the high performers are distinguishable from the low-performers, the study categorized the learners into three groups according to the average production rate of formulaic expressions they received in the oral interview test. Learners who received an average production rate ranking in the top 30% were considered to be high-performing learners. Learners who received an average production rate ranking in the bottom 30% were considered to be low-performing learners. The rest of the participants were considered to be average-performing learners. The study compared the performances of the three groups of learners to examine why the high performers learned more. Following the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis was conducted to analyze the interviews with the selected high performers and low performers.

#### 4. Result

##### 4.1 Does Dialogue Recitation Have a Positive Role on Learners' Spoken Production of Formulaic Expressions?

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the accurate production rate of formulaic expressions appearing and not appearing in the recited dialogues. The data shows that, on average, each learner was able to successfully produce 72.3% of the target expressions that appeared in the recited dialogues, while only 47.3% of the target expressions that did not appear in the recited dialogues were successfully produced. The accurate production rate of the expressions appearing in the dialogue ranged from 33.3% to 100%, while the accurate production rate of the expressions not appearing in the dialogue only ranged from 0% to 66.7%.

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Expressions appearing in the dialogues	72.3%	0.175	33.3%	100%
Expressions not appearing in the dialogues	47.3%	0.159	0%	66.7%

*Table 1:* The Accurate Production Rate for Formulaic Expressions Appearing/Not Appearing in the Recited Dialogues

A paired t-test revealed a statistical difference between the learners' accurate production rates for formulaic expressions appearing in the recited dialogues and expressions that did not appear in the recited dialogues ( $t(29) = 5.838, p = .000 < 0.01$ ). This finding

suggested a positive effect of dialogue recitation on learners' spoken production of formulaic expressions.

#### 4.2 How Are the High Performers Distinguishable from the Low Performers?

As stated in the section of analysis method, the learners were categorized into three groups according to the average production rates of formulaic expressions they received in the oral interview test. The comparison of the performances of the three groups indicated that what makes the high performers distinguishable from the low performers relied on three aspects: 1) the use of the formulaic expressions that did not occur in the recited dialogues, 2) the range of the formulaic expressions used in their speech, and 3) the application of formulaic expressions to a context different from the recited dialogue.

	Expressions appearing in the dialogues	Expressions not appearing in the dialogues	Range of Expressions
High Performers	86.9%	72.3%	15.3
Average Performers	70.8%	50.3%	12.9
Low Performers	58.02%	32.5%	9.3

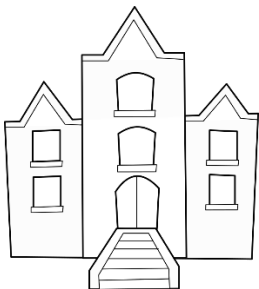
*Table 2: The Mean Accurate Production Rate and Range of Expressions by Three Groups of Learners*

Table 2 summarizes the accurate production rates of the target formulaic expressions by the three groups of learners. Learners

across the three groups all produced more expressions that occurred in the recited dialogues than the expressions that did not occur in the dialogues. A closer look at the data indicated that high performers successfully produced more than 70% of the target formulaic expressions not appearing in the dialogue, while low performers were only able to produce 32.5% of the expressions not appearing in the dialogue. On the other hand, even the low performers were able to produce 58% of the expressions appearing in the recited dialogues. This suggests that low performers might be able to mechanically memorize the formulaic expressions in the dialogues, but that they lack the ability to recall and use the formulaic expressions not occurring in the recited dialogues.

Another major difference between high and low performers was the range of formulaic expressions produced in their speech, calculated per the types of formulaic expressions produced by each learner. On average, the low performers were only able to produce nine types of target formulaic expressions, whereas the high performers were able to produce 15 types of the target expressions. The range of formulaic expressions produced by the average performers fell to 13 types. This suggests that high performers' use of formulaic expressions was more varied than that of the other learners.

In contrast to high performers, low performers also failed to apply the target formulaic expressions to a new context. Their use of the target expression tended to be limited to the context in which the expression was initially introduced to them, typically, the dialogue surrounding the target expression. As shown in the example, the learners were given an illustration of the university with cues indicating the number of total students and the number of Chinese students enrolled at the university. They were asked to respond to the teacher's question based on the cues given in the following illustration.



University enrollment

Total students: 40,010

Chinese students: 3,015



**The Low Performer:**

Teacher: 你的大学有多少学生?  
*Nǐ de dàxué yǒu duōshǎo xuéshēng?*  
 How many students are there in your college?

Student: 差不多四万。  
*Chàbùduō sìwàn。*  
**About** forty thousand.

Teacher: 有多少中国学生?  
*Yǒu duōshǎo zhōngguó xuéshēng?*  
 How many Chinese students are there?

Student: 呃, ... 呃, ... 三, ... 呃, ... 呃, 三万。  
*e, ... e, ... sān, ... e, ... e, sānwàn。*  
 Ehh, ...ehh, ... three, ... eh, ... eh, thirty thousand.

**The High Performer:**

Teacher: 你的大学有多少学生?  
*Nǐ de dàxué yǒu duōshǎo xuéshēng?*  
 How many students are there in your college?

Student: 差不多四万。  
*Chàbùduō sìwàn。*  
**About** forty thousand.

Teacher: 有多少中国学生?  
*Yǒu duōshǎo zhōngguó xuéshēng?*  
 How many Chinese students are there?

Student: 呃, 差不多, ... 呃, 差不多 三千。  
*e, chàbùduō, ... e, ... chàbùduō sānqiān。*

Ehh, **about**, ... ehh, ... **about** three thousand.

The low performer was only able to use the target expression “差不多 *chàbùduō* + number (about...)” to answer the question of the number of students at the university, which was exactly the same as it was in the dialogue. However, the high performer was able to apply the target expression “差不多 *chàbùduō* + number (about...)” to the context of asking how many Chinese students were at the university. His use of the target expression granted him extra time to think about how to say the number, whereas the low performer was not able to apply the target expression to the context different from the recited dialogue and could only use the target expression in the context where the expression was initially introduced.

The ability to produce more formulaic expressions not appearing in the dialogue, to use a variety of formulaic expressions, and to apply instructed formulaic expressions to a new context makes the high performers achieve more in class.

#### 4.3 Are There Any Differences in Preferred Learning Strategies Between High Performers and Low Performers?

Following the quantitative analysis, six learners were selected for a semi-structured interview to examine their experiences of dialogue recitation and their strategies to learn the target formulaic expressions. The selection was based on learners' performances in the oral interview test and their voluntary participation. Although a case study may not provide a solid foundation for broad generalization, it can still reveal some factors that might lead to the differences between the “strong” and the “weak” learners.

The two selected high performers are Dillon and Linda (all the names used in this study are pseudonyms), who scored the highest in the oral interview test. Dillon and Linda both earned an “A” in the Chinese course at the time of the study. Dillon had no experience of foreign language learning before taking Chinese; he

only took Latin in high school. Linda took Spanish for four years in high school. The two average performers are Sara and Keith, who both earned a “B” in the Chinese course. They both fell into the average group in the oral interview test. Sara took French for three years in high school and Keith took German for four years in high school. The two low performers are Kate and Seth, who scored the lowest in the oral interview test. Overall, Kate received a “C” and Seth received a “C-” in the Chinese course. Both Kate and Seth took Spanish for four years in high school. All of the selected learners had not received any formal Chinese language instruction before taking the Chinese course in this study.

#### 4.3.1 Different ways to recite a dialogue

The semi-structured interviews with the six learners indicated that the ways they adopted to recite a dialogue enabled the high performers to produce more accurate and varied formulaic expressions. Specifically, the high performers adopted three strategies to recite a dialogue: 1) chunking the dialogue, 2) imitation, and 3) cross-checking with the textbook drills.

Linda and Keith adopted the first strategy—they both produced more than 80% of the target formulaic expressions appearing in the dialogue. When asked about their normal procedure to recite a dialogue, they said the following:

I will go through the dialogue and break it down, and try to memorize each chunk. And then put the chunks together. . . . Like when people speak, each person speaks, that's a chunk, and within that, there are sentences. Sometimes, in sentences, I will divide like, different phrases. I will divide sentences into phrases, and I will just memorize that. (Linda)

Usually I chunk (the dialogue) into the largest meaningful units I can. In the beginning, the very beginning, I really don't analyze it. I just do it. But once I have a fair amount of grammar we studied. That's where I started to analyze it. So I can look at the overall structure of the language. (Keith)

Chunking the dialogue into meaningful units enabled Linda and Keith to notice the relationships among words and facilitated their holistic processing of the target expression. Sara, who successfully produced more than 82% of the expressions appearing in dialogue, adopted the strategy of imitation to recite a dialogue:

I listen to the audio file first, and imitate the way they said it. It took an hour or two to memorize. It is very important to imitate what we hear, not just make them up by ourselves, cause more than likely, it won't be right. (Sara)

With the strategy of imitation, Sara's tone in Chinese was one of the best in the class. The high-performing learner, Dillon, used drills to make sense of the dialogue. He recalled that he often cross-checked with the drills in the textbook to enhance his understanding of the dialogue.

I will first listen to the audio and listen to the explanation. Repeat word for word and do like the backward sentence build up pattern. I would usually kind of get the dialogue understood for most of the part. Maybe I was a little confused on something. And then I do the drills for a while and I come back to the dialogue, and I go "Oh, now, I got this." (Dillon)

However, the two low performers reported none of these strategies. They described their dialogue recitation as follows:

I feel like when I am reciting, what I am just doing is to memorize. I don't actually learn why I am saying things for the most part. I can understand the dialogue by memorizing it, but I just..., I'm not thinking why I am saying it. I am thinking which word comes next, which is probably the problem. (Seth)

I will repeat the first line over and over again, making sure not losing any unit, and thinking about the English meaning.

I will just repeat it over and over again until I have it done.  
(Kate)

As mentioned by Sousa (2006), a critical component in the transference of information from working memory to long-term storage is rehearsal—the continuing processing and reprocessing of information. Sousa (2006) suggested two major factors that should be considered in evaluating rehearsal: the amount of time devoted to it and the type of rehearsal carried out, which can be rote or elaborative. Rote rehearsal occurs when the learner remembers information exactly as it is entered into working memory. Elaborative rehearsal is used to associate the new learning with prior learning to detect relationships.

The low performers just mechanically recited the dialogue as it was entered into working memory without any analysis or association. Consequently, only rote rehearsal was involved in the learning process. By contrast, high performers like Dillon often cross-checked the dialogue with the drills when reciting the dialogue. This process enabled him to associate the target dialogue expression with the expressions appearing in the drills. Additionally, Linda and Keith chunked the dialogue into meaningful units when reciting the dialogue. This strategy enabled them to form the associations among words and facilitated the holistic processing of the target formulaic expression. The high performers promoted dialogue recitation from rote rehearsal to associative rehearsal, whereas the low performers remained in the stage of rote rehearsal for the entire time. As a result, the low performers recalled that what they were doing during dialogue recitation was just memorizing, and they tended to have difficulties in applying the dialogue expressions to new contexts.

### 4.3.2 Different strategies for learning the target expressions

Interviews with the six selected learners also showed that even at the beginning stage of Chinese language learning, they adopted a number of strategies to learn the target formulaic expressions, but the low performers seemed to use fewer strategies than did the other learners. The low performers, Kate and Seth, only reported two strategies to learn the target expressions: repetition and flash cards. They articulated this as follows:

I always use flash cards, put them in English and try to translate them in Chinese. I use them over and over again. (Seth)

I think the best thing I can do is constantly hearing it and try to repeat it as often as possible. (Kate)

However, the rest of the interviewees reported four other strategies, including 1) learning from peers, 2) memorizing sample sentences, 3) making associations, and 4) creating mental images. One high performer and both of the average performers reported that they were able to better understand the use of the target formulaic expressions by hearing how their peers responded to the instructor's question and by noticing the corrections their peers received in class:

Hearing someone saying it [the formulaic expression] in class will give me an "a-ha" type of moment. "Okay, that makes sense now." (Sara)

I especially listen to my classmates, the structure, the response to the question, and how they said it. Really, in class, I spent most of my time copying the structures of the corrections at my classmates. (Keith)

Hearing other people practicing and making mistakes kind of helps the learning too. (Linda)

The high performers also mentioned that they memorized some sample sentences to learn the target expressions. This strategy helped them with fluency and accuracy when reusing the expression. Linda elaborated upon this strategy:

I try to pick up lines I want to be able to say from English to Chinese. I'll try to remember how to say those. It's kind of like dialogue memorization, but it's really small, maybe sentences or phrases, structures I am not really familiar with and I think I can use them. (Linda)

The high performer Dillon adopted the strategy of making associations among the expressions distributed in the different textbook drills. As he described, this strategy helped him with learning word order in Chinese:

Most of the information that comes after the verb of English comes before the verb in Chinese and they [the textbook writers] introduce the different things that come before the verbs in a lot of different drills and they review it a lot. Once I knew that pretty much everything comes before the verb in Chinese that would come after in English, then I would say, "Okay, I knew that the places came before the verb." For example, one drill said place comes before the verb, "我在...地方工作<sub>wǒ zài ... dìfang gōngzuò</sub> (I work at ... place)." Then, maybe there is another drill that was talking about time "我在...时间工作<sub>wǒ zài ... shíjiān gōngzuò</sub> (I work at ... time)." (Dillon)

Another high performer, Sara, contextualized the target expressions and created a mental image of the context to help her remember them:

I put the expressions in contexts. For example, when we learned "这封信怎么办? <sub>zhè fēng xìn zěnmě bàn ?</sub> (How do we deal with this letter?)," I think of a lady walking into the office and said this to her tired colleague. (Sara)

## 5. Discussion

One of the challenges that learners face in building a repertoire of formulaic expressions is the transference of the newly learned expression to long-term memory. Learners often complained that they tended to forget the old expressions quickly after they learned them. The transference of information from working memory to long-term storage requires adequate time to process and reprocess the new information. The practice of dialogue recitation provides enough time for learners' brains to process new vocabulary and grammar patterns in contexts and to build a basis to internalize the formulaic expressions. As a result, in the oral interview test, learners were more likely to produce the formulaic expressions appearing in the recited dialogues than the formulaic expressions that did not appear.

Learners also confirmed the benefit of dialogue recitation in the interviews about their learning experience. They reported that dialogue recitation helped them not only to build up fluency, but also to internalize the target formulaic expressions. Some learners complained that the time required for dialogue recitation was too much, but actually, the required recitation time was necessary to transfer information from working memory to long-term storage.

The depth of mental processing also determines the storage of formulaic expressions in long-term memory. In order for new information to be retained in long-term memory, some form of deep/rich processing is needed. Normally, this kind of processing is achieved by association and elaboration. Therefore, the interviews with the learners revealed that the high performers were able to use strategies to associate the new target expression with prior learning. They chunked the dialogue into meaningful units and cross-checked with the drills in the textbook to enhance their understanding of the dialogue. They were even able to elaborate by creating a mental image of the target expression. These strategies enabled the high performers to better retain the target expressions, and more importantly, to apply the target expressions to new contexts.



In contrast, the low performers remained in the stage of rote memorization. As recalled by the low performers, when they were reciting the dialogue, what they were doing was from memorization only. There was neither association nor elaboration involved. Consequently, the range of formulaic expressions they produced was much narrower than that of the high performers, and difficulties in applying the formulaic expressions to new contexts were observed among the low performers.

## 6. Conclusion

The quantitative analysis of learners' production in the oral interview test showed that formulaic expressions appearing in the recited dialogues were more likely to be produced by the learners than those that did not appear in the recited dialogues. This finding lends empirical support to the claim that dialogue recitation is effective in engendering learners' ability to orally produce formulaic expressions. Comparisons between high and low performers addressed individual factors in relation to participants learning formulaic expressions. These comparisons revealed that the former used more strategies to make associations and elaborations when learning the formulaic expressions, while the latter tended to remain in the stage of rote memorization. As a result, low performers produced fewer instructed formulaic expressions in the oral interview test and had difficulties in applying the instructed expressions to new contexts.

This study is limited in several aspects, and future studies are called for. First, the study only adopted conversational tasks in the oral interview test. Future studies should incorporate more task types, such as narrative tasks, to examine whether task types affect learners' production of the instructed formulaic expressions. Second, some of the expressions not appearing in the recited dialogues are more grammatically advanced than the ones appearing in the recited dialogues. They might be more challenging to acquire than their counterparts appearing in the dialogs. Further studies should randomly assign the participants to the two instructional conditions - dialog recitation and question-answer drills - and examine whether

the same set of formulaic expressions will be acquired differently under the two instructional conditions. Third, this study examined a small population of beginning-level learners recruited from one university over a short period of instruction time (10 weeks). Future research should investigate a larger participant population over a longer period of instruction time to generalize the present findings. Such longitudinal examination can provide more interesting and robust findings, particularly with regard to the incremental development of learners' manipulation of formulaic expression.

**Appendix A: The Target Formulaic Expressions Selected in the Oral Interview Test**

Expressions appearing in the recited dialogues	Expressions not appearing in the recited dialogues
1 自我介绍一下。 <i>zìwǒ jièshào yíxià.</i> Let me introduce myself.	我给你们介绍一下。 <i>wǒ gěi nǐmen jièshào yíxià.</i> Let me introduce you all.
2 ...结婚了没有? ... <i>jiéhūn le méiyǒu?</i> Is ... (someone) married?	...还没有结婚。 ... <i>bái méiyǒu jiéhūn.</i> ... (someone) is not married.
3 差不多 <i>chàbùduō</i> + number About + number	有一点 <i>yǒu yídiǎn</i> + adjective A little + adjective
4 ...姓什么? ... <i>xìng shénme?</i> What is ... (someone's) surname?	你呢? <i>nǐ ne?</i> How about you?
5 ...叫什么名字? ... <i>jiào shénme míngzì?</i> What is ... (someone's) full name?	这位是... <i>zhèwèi shì ...</i> This is ... (someone's name).
6 ...怎么样? ... <i>zěnmeyàng?</i> How about ...?	...是谁? ... <i>shìshuí?</i> Who is ...?
7 A比 <i>bǐ</i> B + adjective A is ... (adjective) than B	<i>Xi</i> <i>yòu</i> + adjective1 + <i>Xi</i> <i>yòu</i> + adjective2 Adjective 1 and adjective 2

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 8  | ...是哪儿的人? ... <i>shì nǎr de rén?</i><br>Where is ... (someone) from?                                    | ...是哪国人? ... <i>shì nǎguó rén?</i><br>Which country is ... (someone) from?                                |
| 9  | 你喜欢不喜欢 + <i>Verb Phrase?</i><br><i>nǐ xǐhuān bu xǐhuān + Verb Phrase?</i><br>Do you like to ... or not? | ...做什么工作?<br><i>...zuò shénme gōngzuò?</i><br>What does ... (someone) do for a living?                    |
| 10 | 你在哪儿 + <i>Verb Phrase?</i><br><i>nǐ zài nǎr + Verb Phrase?</i><br>Where do you ... (verb phrase)?       | ...的电话号码(是)多少?<br><i>... de diànbuà hàomǎ (shì) duōshǎo?</i><br>What is ... (someone's) telephone number? |
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