

Linguistic cliches at the crossroads of controversy: Their impact in teaching english as a foreign language

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Abstract

The acute reliance on cliches reflects on the one hand a general and inevitable but intrinsic feature of language (Amossy, Herschberg Pierrot 2011), inscribed in its "genetic code". On the other hand, from the perspective of social psychology, it reflects a broader phenomenon that marks the human mind, in order to simplify the complex set of stimuli from the environment. Apparently, linguistic cliches arise only negative reactions, especially from stylistics', being disqualified and strongly perceived as a deviation from the aesthetic imperatives promoted under the auspices of the Romanticism. However, this paper tries to investigate if these types of linguistic patterns or the so-called frozen discourse (cliches, stereotypes, lexical phrases, sayings, collocations) can have a major impact on teaching and learning a foreign language. Informed by the theoretical perspective of Dufays (1994), Riffaterre (1979) and Eco (2007) on the constructive function of stereotypes and cliches in the process of reading, the present paper will report the results of a survey conducted on a group of middle school teachers learning English as a foreign language through an innovative method (flipped classroom) and by exploiting the potential of cliches. As a result of attending a teacher trainer course at Bell Cambridge, we have designed a series of workshops which explores different ways of teaching and learning English by using creatively prefabricated language chunks. Language acquisition specialists have pointed out that the competence to use prefabricated units is vital to the language learner. Furthermore, linguistic cliches can trigger more easily adhesion to the target culture. We aim at promoting the positive value of cliches in teaching, since, besides their cultural overtones, they can help learners achieve the ideal standard of expressing oneself as a native speaker.

Keywords: cliché, positive function, frozen language, teaching and learning, foreign language

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1. Introduction

In the past, linguistic cliches channeled only negative reactions, especially from stylistics', being disqualified and strongly perceived as a deviation from the aesthetic imperatives promoted under the auspices of the Romanticism: the cult of individual creative expression, the obstinate rejection of banality associated with *topoi*. Initially, the object of stylistics, subsequently of poetics, the linguistic cliché has been dealt, predominantly, in pejorative terms, through the critical lens of its aesthetic dimension. However, in the recent decades, these *prefabricated language* structures have ignited heated debates among researchers, since the status of cliches has been reevaluated by sociology (as vital structures in the coagulation of modern fractured society (Zijderveld 1969) and other related disciplines, through theoretical contributions that highlight cliches' functions and role in text processing (Eco 1979; Riffaterre 1979).

2. The linguistic cliché: a snapshot of a transdisciplinary notion. Literature review

The scientific interest in studying the linguistic cliché - as a species of linguistic automatisms, under the conceptual umbrella of the phenomenon of stereotypes - is reflected in a puzzling variety of relevant theoretical contributions, derived either from social disciplines (Berger 2011; Zijderveld 1979), the sciences of language (Amossy & Rosen, 1982; Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot: 1997, 2011; Bagnall 1985; Olson 1985; Stark 1999), literary studies (Riffaterre 1979) and even theories of text processing (Eco 1979, 2007) or didactics of reading (Dufays 2010). It is interesting to note that Dufays has the merit of having developed an innovative didactic methodology in teaching reading by exploiting verbal automatisms. Thus, he has demonstrated, through his systematic investigation, the constructive function of stereotypes and cliches in the process of reading. Undoubtedly, all these studies highlight the complexity of the phenomenon and its dominant role on a cognitive level as well as on socio-cultural or aesthetic one. The present study will draw on research from the previously mentioned fields (linguistics, literary studies, social psychology or pragmatics) in an attempt to evaluate the linguistic cliches' impact in language acquisition.

The complexity of this linguistic phenomenon is visible in the diversity of perspectives through which it has been studied, as well as in the polymorphous nature of the concept, able to enter into relationship of partial synonymy with a number of related terms. In the context of this conceptual nebulosity, it is required to rethink the fuzzy boundaries and relationship between cliches and related concepts, frequently used within current linguistic studies and perhaps, even refine the theory of cliché from the new perspectives of social psychology, psychology, sociology of mass communication.

On a very basic level and through a narrow perspective, cliches are perceived only as over-used, outworn expressions, being rejected and infused with negative connotations.. However, recently, cliches have been positively resemantised and assigned an argumentative, functional as well as phatic function.

"When the writer uses a cliché, the writer participates in a kind of recognizable cultural substratum. Admittedly, as a commonplace expression, the cliché does not create new epistemic insights, and it does not give rise to tremendous aesthetic pleasure. What the cliché does accomplish in discourse is a sometimes slight, sometimes powerful connective pathos, or what Kenneth Burke referred to similarly as identification with others" (Stark, 1999: 454).

3. Terminological distinctions

For the purposes of the present study a distinction is made between cliches and related terms like *language stereotype, lexical phrase, idioms, topoi, template, verbal automatism, topoi, matrix, pattern, repeated discourse, commonplace, ready-made phrase, prefabricated language* (given as semantic equivalents in many cases), which have been the focus of previous research in linguistics.

“ (...) *cliches*, namely, frozen figures provoking an impression of déjà-vu, of repetition, banal effects of style condemned as such. They differ from *topoi* or received ideas in that they appear in a lexicalized, formally recognizable verbal shape” (Amossy and Rosen, 1982 *apud* Amossy, 2002: 481).

Nattinger (1980:338) makes a pertinent distinction between idioms and cliches: “Cliches are similar to idioms in that they too consist of patterns that are relatively frozen; they are unlike them in that the patterns usually consist of larger stretches of language and that their meaning is derivable from the individual constituents: there’s no doubt about it; a good time was had by all”.

A brief lexicographical insight [DEX 1998; LE PETT Larousse 1996; LE ROBERT 2002, OED online, Cambridge online] is useful in rendering the basic profile of the cliché. Despite the terminological nebulosity between cliché and its partial synonyms, the recurrent ideas in defining cliches coagulate around the following main semes: frequent use that cause irritation, wear, lack of originality, predictability of an overused pattern. Thus, not all idioms or ready-made phrases can be labelled under the category of cliches, only those linguistic items defined by the main features previously mentioned.

By cliches in second language acquisition we understand those predictable linguistic patterns (ranging from semi-fixed to fixed ones) and characterized by high frequency. Thus, as cliché would qualify a wide range of prefabricated language, formulaic language ranging from sayings, catchphrases, idioms, lexical phrases.

For the purpose of this investigation a distinction is made between cliches, in their general negative broad meaning and the positive role in learning and teaching a foreign language.

4. Cliches, a type of prefabricated language. Their role in second language acquisition

Language acquisition specialists have highlighted the importance of prefabricated linguistic structures at any level of language learning (Fargha& Obiedat 1995; Nattinger, & DeCarrico, 1992; Santiago Araujo 2004; Sidtis 2004; Schapira 1999; Nesselhauf 2004, Wray 2005; Wray, A., & Perkins 2000).

“The knowledge of and the ability to use prefabricated units are (thus) essential for the language learner; unfortunately, however, they also pose considerable difficulties, even for the advanced learner” (Nesselhauf 2004 *apud* Baidier).

Furthermore, knowing and using linguistic cliches should not be underestimated “since such processes trigger recognition and acceptance within the target culture” (Baidier 2013: 1170). Thus, they have a cultural and phatic dimension.

Linguistic cliches can be powerful tools to develop fluency and communicative competence as well as intercultural competence by becoming better familiarized with the target culture. Baidier suggests a sociolinguistic approach based on the well-known SPEAKING model (Hymes 1974), syntactic and semantic patterns.

Our view is further supported by language acquisition specialists who identify or label cliches among prefabricated language: “cliches also called situational or routine formulas, formulaic speech, stereotyped expressions, conversational or linguistic routines, among others, are those expressions used by speakers of a certain language which have become stereotyped and commonplace due to repetitive use (Tagnin 1989: 57). Quotations, set phrases and proverbs are those which most commonly appear as cliches. Cliché expressions have lost their original meaning, acquiring a function in social interactions and communication (Araujo 2004: 162).

5. Methodology

The present study was designed to investigate the impact of a type of prefabricated language like linguistic cliches (particularly sayings and situational formulas) on a group of Romanian EFL adult learners's strategies of acquiring vocabulary and thus, developing fluency. To this end, 50 adult learners (subject teachers with elementary up to lower-intermediate English level) were selected from "Avram Iancu Secondary" School. They were divided up to lower-intermediate English level) were selected from "Avram Iancu Secondary" School. They were divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group attended a series of English workshops, *English for International Projects*, (which were designed and implemented after the trainer had followed the professional development course *Becoming a Teacher Trainer* at Cambridge, as a result of winning a European Erasmus+ 2014 KA1 scholarship). The primary objective of these modules was, however, to develop fluency and communicative skills by exploiting the potential of language cliches. These sessions integrated student-centered approaches with an innovative method, the *flipped classroom*, which allowed time for active practice in the class (role-plays and active methods, all centered on using and recycling language cliches, lexical, phrases, sayings) and self-study at home using websites and online courses recommended by the trainer (BBC* Learning English Course, English Today). Another aim of this method was to raise awareness of the importance of prefabricated language (cliches, idiomatic phrases, sayings) in developing fluency and enriching vocabulary.

The control group attended the same workshops but using this time traditional methods (textbook, classroom discussion) without activities to develop fluency by actively learning and using language cliches.

6. Research questions:

More specifically, the study was focused on the following research questions:

- Is vocabulary absorbed better and easier through cliches-based approach in teaching?
- Are the students aware of the importance of linguistic cliches?
- What is the impact on teaching and learning English through *prefabricated language* chunks, the word patterns that would qualify in English as cliches? (the so-called *frozen discourse*: cliches, stereotypes, idiomatic phrases, collocations)?

7. Research methods

In this paper it was made use of both qualitative (structured oral interviews, direct observation) and quantitative (cloze-tests) data instruments. Both groups had elementary to lower-intermediate English level and were given a pre-test and post-test to reveal better if there is any impact on their language proficiency.

8. Research design and data analysis

For this study, there were tested 50 adult learners, subject teachers at "Avram Iancu" School for their ability to recognize and use ready-made phrases. A random sampling was used for selecting the

* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/course/lower-intermediate/>

participants. Both groups (experimental and control, divided equally in two parts) were given a pre-test and a post-test. We chose from the wide range of cliches those recurrent word-patterns with a major impact in developing fluency: 10 sayings (for example *Better late than never*, *You can't judge a book by its cover*, *A picture is worth a thousand words*, *Actions speak louder than words*, *Honesty is the best policy*, *Two heads are better than one* etc) and 10 routine speech formulas (*I beg your pardon*, *you must be kidding*, *you know what I mean*, *hold your horses for a minute*, *have a nice day* etc.). We wanted to focus on "pragmatic combinations," (which according to Cowie (2001: 2) function sententially as proverbs, catchphrases and slogans and routine formulae) because of their effect in easing the flow of communication.

We devised a cloze test designed to determine whether the learners are able to produce correctly the target language (common pragmatic combinations which we labelled in our study as cliches). The cliches were selected according to their pragmatic, functional dimension, their potential to contribute easily to enhancing fluency and communication skills.

The survey asked respondents to supply the missing words in each of the 20 cliches. Then, they were given an oral test (a structured interview) in which they had to keep the conversation going on using as props pragmatic cliches (sayings, speech formulae) for at least 2 minutes. We present bellow the results of our written and oral tests.

Table 1. The results of the pre-test for the experimental group

Correct answers out of 20	Number of learners out of 25	Percentage (%)
19-20	0	0%
17-18	0	0%
15-16	1	4%
13-14	1	4%
11-12	3	12%
9-10	2	8%
7-8	4	8%
5-6	6	24%
3-4	3	12%
1-2	3	12%
0	2	4%

Table 2. The results of the pre-test for the control group

Correct answers out of 20	Number of learners out of 25	Percentage (%)
19-20	0	0%
17-18	0	0%
15-16	1	4%
13-14	1	4%
11-12	2	8%
9-10	3	12%
7-8	5	20%
5-6	5	20%
3-4	2	8%
1-2	4	16%
0	2	8%

Table 3. The results of the post-test for the experimental group

Correct answers out of 20	Number of learners out of 25	Percentage (%)
19-20	3	12%
17-18	2	8%
15-16	5	20%
13-14	3	12%
11-12	2	8%
9-10	2	8%
7-8	3	12%
5-6	4	16%
3-4	0	0%
1-2	1	4%
0	0	0%

Table 4. The results of the post-test for the control group

Correct answers out of 20	Number of learners out of 25	Percentage (%)
19-20	0	0%
17-18	2	8%
15-16	1	4%
13-14	2	8%
11-12	4	16%
9-10	3	12%
7-8	5	20%
5-6	3	12%
3-4	3	12%
1-2	1	4%
0	1	4%

Additionally, the oral tests' results validated our hypothesis according to which vocabulary can be absorbed better and easier through cliches-based approach in teaching and if the students are aware of the importance of prefabricated language or ready-made phrases in developing fluency and their language level. Thus, 64% of the learners from the experimental group were able to keep the conversation (with a partner, on general topics) going on for at least 2 minutes, integrating the common speech formulas, sayings or recurrent word-patterns they have learnt while less than half of the control group (41%) succeeded in performing the speaking task.

9. Conclusions and suggestions

It could be concluded that the treatment given to the experimental group had a positive impact on enhancing learners' fluency and developing vocabulary since nearly three fourths (68%) of them were able to produce from 10 to 20 correct answers (out of 20) while less than half (48%) from the control group was able to give between 10 and 20 right answers.

Of course, we are aware of the limitations of the present study (small sample of participants) and in order to understand better the connection between cliches and language proficiency we suggest a

similar investigation, but on a larger scale. We think that it would be interesting if, in the future studies, other variables are taken into account as, for example the age of learners, to check whether or not this factor can influence the results at the test scores.

In conclusion, we firmly believe that the ability to use cliches (as a sub-class of prefabricated language) is positively connected with the learner's level of language (at least, as our survey suggests at elementary up to lower-intermediate level) and can significantly improve their fluency and communicative competence. Linguistic cliches can be powerful tools to develop fluency and communicative competence as well as intercultural competence by becoming better familiarized with the target culture.

10. Recommendations:

Teachers should

- encourage their students to notice cliches or any type of prefabricated language or ready-made phrases in authentic texts.
- teach cliches in context and not in isolation, by using active student-centred methods in combination with digital resources.
- give more priority to vocabulary acquisition rather than grammar.
- They have to expose their students to common patterns since the elementary level and make them aware of the importance of prefabricated patterns in communication.

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