

Multiword Lexical Units and Their Relationship to Impromptu Speech

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Abstract

Public speaking can be very threatening to any native speakers of English, not to mention non-native EFL learners. Impromptu speech, perhaps the most challenging form of public speaking, is however being promoted in every city of the EFL countries. The case in Taiwan is no exceptional. Every year, dozens of impromptu speech contexts are held throughout the island. Over the past decade, many studies have investigated the strategies and techniques successful EFL impromptu speech contestants adapted. Hardly has any study touched upon the language used by the prize-winning contestants. Also at the same time, a growing number of studies on second language speaking acquisition have pinpointed that multiword lexical units (i.e., lexical collocations, fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, and idioms) could be the key to better speaking proficiency. Therefore, the study intends to examine the possible relationship between MLUs and impromptu speeches.

Data of the current study draws on the biggest annual national impromptu speech contest of Taiwan where EFL contestants competed to show their language proficiency as well as skills in delivering spoken messages. The 11 participants are English majors of technological universities in Taiwan and have never lived in an English speaking country for more than 6 months. In the contest, each contestant selected a topic 15 minutes before going on the stage, and each had 3 minutes to deliver a speech in English. The researcher video-taped, transcribed, and analyzed all the impromptu speeches. The data were examined to answer the three research questions for correlations (1) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of lexical collocations, (2) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, and (3) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of idioms. By examining the correlations between MLUs and impromptu speeches, this study aims to find an additional way to help EFL learners to become a better speech constant in particular and improve college EFL learners' speaking proficiency in general.

Keywords: multiword lexical units, impromptu speech, EFL education

1. Introduction

In a country where English has been the official first foreign language, students of Taiwan devote tremendous time and energy to their learning of such target language. Grabbing every opportunity to improve one's English is common among students at all ages. Speech contests, among many others, are perhaps the most recognizable activity in which they demonstrate, polish, and reevaluate their language skills in the current learning environment. Within speech contests, impromptu speeches are always considered the most challenging as they required the contestants to speak on a sudden assigned topic with a limited time for preparation (Seleskovitch, 1982; Wood, 2001).

Impromptu or spontaneous speeches can be threatening enough if delivering in a mother tongue. The fear and challenges to an EFL speaker can be overwhelmingly unbearable when giving an on-the-spot impromptu speech in a foreign language. Thus, it is at the heart of EFL Taiwanese learners to search for the most effective ways in presenting an impressive and convincing impromptu speech with a great command of English.

In the past, studies on speech contests came mainly from L1 researchers. The emphasis has been placed on public speaking in general with various minor concentrations on preparation process and speech quality (Daly, Vangelisti, and Weber, 1995), anxiety (Bippus and Daly, 1999), and speech assessment (Carlson and Smith-Howell, 1995). Studies conducted with second language learners on the same issue are limited. Particularly, the case with Taiwanese EFL learners is still in its infancy (Fang, 2005). Several studies reported by scholars in Taiwan have investigated speech apprehension (Her, 1984, 1986), speech evaluation (Ing, 1987, 1993), improvement in public speeches (Katchen, 1996, 2002) or the strategies and techniques successful EFL impromptu speech contestants adapted (Fang, 2005). It is interesting that none of the studies focused on "the English language" used by the prize-winning contestants. EFL learners may be wondering and curious about, after knowing so much on mental readiness, assessments, strategies and techniques, how successful impromptu speech contestants actually use their English to outperform the rest. Almost at the same time, a growing number of studies on second language speaking acquisition have pinpointed that multiword lexical units, such as lexical collocations, fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, and idioms¹, could be the key to better speaking proficiency (Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Nation and Newton, 1997; Nattinger, 1980; Smith, 1983; Sung, 2003).

In an attempt to understand the language components uniquely used in the English of impromptu speech contestants, this study proposes to take a closer to first look at the

¹ Moon (1997) used "multi-word items" to describe this group of longer and somewhat prefabricated lexical phrases; in the current study, no differences are made between "multi-word items" and "multiword lexical units (MLUs)."

spoken messages conveyed by the contestants and further examine the possible relationship between the contestants' use of MLUs and impromptu speeches. It is the goal of the current study to find out new possible ways which future Taiwanese or worldwide EFL students can adopt if determined to not only become proficient English speakers but also competitive impromptu speech contestants.

2. Review of the Related Studies

2.1 Empirical Studies on Impromptu Speeches with EFL Learners in Taiwan

Up to this moment, merely four studies have been undertaken to specifically investigate Taiwanese learners' performance on impromptu speeches. Liu (2003), an elementary school teacher, was the first to bring in classroom activities with impromptu speeches. Her systematic and consistent public speaking training had improved students' cognition, ability, and psychological preparation for making impromptu speeches.

Strictly speaking, Liu's study can not be seen as an EFL-focused because the instructional language as well as the language for speech presentation was students' first language (i.e., Chinese Mandarin). The official pioneer EFL study in Taiwan was carried out by Chou (2003). By introducing a series of formal public speaking mini courses, Chou reported that the adult learners in the class were found to have improved their communicating skills in general. Adapting a wide variety of instructional tools (such as peer feedback and speech self-reflection), another college teacher, Huang (2004), also indicated that explicit instruction on impromptu speeches could actually enhance EFL learners' speaking fluency.

In addition to the first few attempts to empirically study how direct teaching of impromptu speeches might have affected EFL students' language skills, Fang (2005) went beyond the scope of previous studies. Conducting a nation-wide interview-based research, he aimed to investigate Taiwanese college students' strategy use in making impromptu speeches. Fang's analysis of 19 contestants' videotaped speeches and face-to-face interviews with 10 contestants from the 2003 National English Speech Contest in Taiwan brought out many interesting results. His findings can be summarized as below: (1) the less successful contestants used more communication strategies but fewer public speaking strategies; (2) the more successful contestants employed a greater variety of organizational strategies; and 3) many factors also affecting the contestants' use of strategies, including language proficiency, knowledge structures, and contexts among others.

To sum up, it is not too difficult to see the limited number of studies conducted particularly in the EFL setting of Taiwan. The findings so far fall into two categories: "the integration of impromptu speeches into second language learning" and "the use of

strategies upon delivering a speech.” It will be too early to draw down any conclusion either on the teaching effect of impromptu speeches or public speaking trainings or strategy use observed during many speeches.

2.2 Empirical Studies on the Relationship between MLUs and Speaking Fluency

Research on the role of multiword lexical units (MLUs) is just starting to receive some attention in recent years, but the current consensus is best described by Moon (1997) as she indicated:

The appropriate use and interpretation of multi-word items by L2 speakers is a sign of their proficiency, . . . particularly with regard to the creative exploitation and manipulation of multi-word items. . . . these items are hard, but they need to be acquired at some stage (p. 58).

Overall, L2 researchers, TESOL pedagogists, and classroom teachers tend to agree that MLUs can help improve language learning (Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Kjellmer, 1991; Lewis, 1993, 1997, and 2000; Low, 1988; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Pawley and Syder, 1983; Woolard; 2000).

The empirical studies examining the relationship between multiword lexical units and EFL learners’ speaking fluency, however, are just about to begin. Only two researchers, Sung (2003) and Chiu (2006), have had empirical evidence to support that learning collocations (the majority of MLUs, according to Moon, 1997)² seemed to somewhat enhance EFL learners’ speaking fluency.

Sung (2003) was the leading scholar who investigated the relationship between collocations and speaking fluency. She explored knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in their relation to speaking proficiency. In her experiment, 96 university students in the United States, 24 native and 72 non-native English speakers, were invited to participate. Each subject had to complete two tests: one collocation test and one speaking test. The collocation test was used to measure the subjects’ knowledge of lexical collocations while the speaking test was used to elicit the subjects’ use of lexical collocations and measure their speaking proficiency. Her results showed that there was a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and the subjects’ speaking proficiency.

In Taiwan, Chiu (2006) conducted the first study to explore the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations and their relation to speaking proficiency of Taiwanese EFL university learners. Data for the study were collected from 56 junior

² Moon (1997), taking perhaps the broadest perspective, equated “multi-word items” with “extreme collocations” (p. 63) and included “compounds,” “phrasal verbs,” “idioms,” “fixed phrases,” and “prefabs.” Nevertheless, in the studies of Sung (2003) and Chiu (2006), only lexical collocations were investigated in relation to EFL students’ language skills.

English majors at a national university of science and technology in southern Taiwan. Each student was asked to take three tests: (1) one lexical collocation test, measuring the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations; (2) one English speaking test, administered to collect the subjects' use of lexical collocations and measure their speaking proficiency; (3) PhonePass spoken English test, a standardized oral test, used to measure the students' speaking proficiency. Test results were examined to answer 3 major questions for correlation (1) between the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency, (2) between their use of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency, and (3) between their knowledge of lexical collocations and their use of lexical collocations. Findings of the study showed that only a significant correlation existed between Taiwanese EFL learners' knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency. Chiu concluded that knowledge of lexical collocations was more likely to be an indicator for determining the degree of speaking proficiency than the subjects' use of lexical collocations.

Based on the two studies, it is still necessary to accumulate more evidence to determine whether there is a persuasive cause-and-effect relationship between collocations and the improvement of speaking ability. Nevertheless, the findings from Sung's and Chiu's studies have specified a possible direction for later research: the relation between MLUs and EFL learners speaking fluency. Sung collected her subjects' spoken English data from a film-describing test while Chiu used the same instrument along with one additional standardized oral test, PhonePass. They inspired the present study to investigate further if there could be some connection between EFL speakers' collocational proficiency and speaking performance in impromptu speeches (also a form of speaking in a different discourse).

2.3 Significance of the Study

Le Feal (1982) defined impromptu speech as it is characterized by the simultaneous processes of ideation (i.e., the elaboration and structuring of reasoning by the speaker as he/she improvises) and expression in the speaker. Many other components tag along with this characteristic, such as segmented speech flows, acoustic sounds in the form of word stress following a pause, and both accidental and intentional redundancy. It is the presence of all of these characteristics that helps the listener to understand the speaker's meaning. Seleskovitch (1982) described impromptu speech as a kind of modified talk specifically adapted to the listeners; it is characterized by a constant interconnection between cognitive competence and language competence and between sound and meaning. When written texts are delivered orally, these characteristics disappear and the listeners' cognitive awareness is also being diminished. Impromptu speech is an unusual spoken discourse which

involves the interaction between the speaker and his/her audience. This could be one of the major reasons that impromptu speech may seem simplified and easier to understand than prepared speech

Noticing the features of successful impromptu speeches, an English conversation teacher and speech researcher, Wood (2001), drew us to emphasize on the automatic processing and importance of retrieval of a repertoire of formulaic language units in spontaneous speech. He posited that any contestant is understood and appreciated because he/she rapidly and effectively retrieves longer and formulaic lexical units or chunks which affect both perception and comprehension of the speech, facilitating the entire processing of language.

These scholars' suggestions all direct to the same possibility: an impromptu speech contestant might win over the judges' hearts if demonstrating his/her efficiency and accuracy in retrieving MLUs in the processing and delivering of speech within a limited given time. No previous study has ever investigated the relation between MLUs and impromptu speeches. The present one is aimed to look at such connection in general and specifically intended to answer the three research questions for correlations:

- (1) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of lexical collocations,
- (2) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of fixed-/semi-fixed expressions³, and
- (3) between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of idioms⁴.

3. Research Method and Analysis

Data of the current study were collected from the biggest annual college-level impromptu speech contest, 2006 National English Speech Contest of Taiwan. The contest was conducted in a 2-round process, i.e., a qualifying and a final. To be eligible, a contestant must be a Taiwan citizen who has never lived in an English speaking country for more than 6 months and needed to win the contest in his/her own institute first. Nation-wisely, only 40 EFL students of English majors from colleges and universities in Taiwan were accepted to compete in order to advance to the 20 spaces of the final round. In the contest (at both stages), each contestant selected a topic 15

³ Fixed- and semi-fixed expressions both consist of word groups used in a particular context; often they are used as longer institutionalized phrases attached with specific social functions or pragmatic meanings. Fixed expressions differ slightly from semi-fixed expressions in that they allow no replacement in any of their components (Gillard, 2003; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Lewis, 1993, 1997); they are treated as 1 single group in the study.

⁴ The current study investigated only 3 types of MLUs, lexical collocations, fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, and idioms, because other MLUs were not found in the contestants' spoken data.

minutes before going on the stage, and each had 3 minutes to deliver a speech in English. At the final round, the researcher video-taped, transcribed, and analyzed the impromptu speeches of 11 contestants. Eight contestants gave up their chance upon the contest while the last one's speech was lost due to the mechanical problem of the camcorder. Altogether, the data were based on the 11 participants' speeches. Pearson correlation (i.e., SPSS 13.0) was also adapted in order to investigate if there were connections between the subjects' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of the 3 MLU types. Descriptive statistics was used to report the study findings.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

As the study looked at the use (i.e., frequency or quantity) of MLUs, the number of MLUs recorded in the 11 contestants' impromptu speeches was counted manually from the videotaped transcripts. Table 1 lists the contestants' names⁵, ranking as awarded by the judges⁶, their use of each type of MLU, total MLUs, and total words of each speech.

Table 1

Contestants' Performance and Use of MLUs

Names of Contestants	Ranking*	Lexical Collocations	Fixed-/Semi-fixed-Expressions	Total MLUs	Total Words
Wen	11	42	9	51	451
Chung	10	43	8	51	393
Lee	9	30	20	50	456
Tai-ke	8	20	8	28	282
Ai	7	46	6	52	445
Neg	6	38	4	42	339
Mei	5	30	3	33	338
Nan	4	29	3	32	348
Frame	3	28	20	48	339
Abo	2	24	9	33	334
Tong	1	24	3	27	615

Note. The number 11 indicates the champion while 1 refers to the worst speech performance.

⁵ Pseudo names are used to protect the contestants' identity.

⁶ The ranking goes completely opposite to the real one for the use of Pearson correlation. Typically, the champion receives the smallest number, 1 or the 1st place, whereas he/she should receive the largest number in the table in order to show the best performance.

A quick look at Table 1 indicates two interesting findings. First, none of the contestants used any idiom at all. This was completely unexpected. In addition, the length of each speech (total word), in a 3-minute period, differed greatly from one contestant to another. The last position was even given to the contestant who spoke the longest.

4.2 Speech Contestants' Performance of Impromptu Speeches and Their Use of Multiword Lexical Units

To find out the possible connection between the 11 contestants' speech performances and their use of MLUs, correlations were further examined between the 2 sets of variables. In Table 2, Pearson correlations are adapted to describe the relationship between contestants' rankings and variables of the other 4 groups; namely, lexical collocations, fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, total MLUs, and total words of each speech.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations between Rankings and Frequency of Three MLUs

	Lexical Collocations	Fixed-/Semi-fixed-Expressions	Total MLUs	Total Words
Rankings	.589*	.190	.623*	-.084

Note. * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 2 clearly shows that significant correlations can be found between the contestants' rankings and their quantity of lexical collocations, and between the rankings and their quantity of total MLUs. The findings could suggest: (1) a significant correlation is likely to exist between impromptu speech contestants' performance and their use of lexical collocations, and (2) a stronger correlation might also possibly exist between contestants' performance and their use of MLUs as a whole.

The findings observed in the current study were partially supported by Sung (2003). Her results showed that there was a moderately significant correlation between the quantity (i.e., use) of lexical collocations and the subjects' speaking proficiency among her non-native speakers residing in the United States. On the contrary, such findings differ from the 2 studies from Hsu (2005) and Chiu (2006), both of which asserting that correlations can be only found between EFL learners' knowledge of lexical collocations (as measured by blank-filling tests) and their speaking fluency.

Many possible factors could be all at play, drawing a convincing conclusion is beyond the scope of the study. For instance, it can be due to the different focuses on the categories of MLUs. Sung (2003) included all 7 subtypes of lexical collocations in her recording of students' spoken data while excluding the other possible groups of MLUs.

In this study, the researcher both looked at the subjects' 7 subtypes of lexical collocations as well as the other types of MLUs which are more than Sung's. In contrast, while Hsu (2005) collected his spoken data from a business English course, Chiu (2006) obtained hers from a telephone-based oral test and a film-describing spoken test. The researcher here relied on a collection of 3-minute only impromptu speeches. The diverse sources of spoken data could have affected the comparability among these study results. The relationship between MLUs and speaking fluency is still far from being fully understood. Therefore, further larger scale research could investigate the correlation between the two variables.

4.3 Speech Contestants' Performance of Impromptu Speeches and the Density of Their Multiword Lexical Units

One additional worth investigating point in this study is the interaction between the contestants' performances and their density of MLUs since the frequency of each MLU type is observable. The concept of "MLU density" derives from "lexical density" proposed by Laufer and Nation (1995) (cited in Schmitt, 2000, p. 75). It is a tool to determine the relative simplicity of a text. "Lexical density" is measured by the formula: *number of content words/total number of words in the text X 100*. In the present study, "MLU density" is therefore measured by the formula: *number of MLUs/total number of words in the text X 100*. Table 3 illustrates the MLU density for each MLU type along with the contestants' names and their rankings.

Table 3

Contestants' Rankings and MLU Density

Name of Contestants	Ranking	Collocation Density	Fixed-/Semi-fixed-Expressions Density	MLU Density
Wen	11	9.3%	1.9%	11.2%
Chung	10	10.9%	2%	12.9%
Lee	9	6.5%	4.3	10.8%
Tai-ke	8	7.1%	2.8	9.9%
Ai	7	10.3%	1.3	11.6%
Neg	6	11.2%	1.1	12.3%
Mei	5	8.8%	0.8	9.6%
Nan	4	8.3%	0.9	9.2%
Frame	3	8.2%	5.9	14.1%
Abo	2	7.1%	2.7	9.8%
Tong	1	3.9%	0.5	4.4%

Again, Pearson correlation was used to describe the relationship between contestants' speech rankings and their MLU density of each type. Table 4 lists the results of the correlations. Compared to the results from the frequency of MLUs, it seems that MLU density has not much to do with the contestants' rankings. It could be concluded that there did not seem to be a significant correlation between an EFL Taiwanese impromptu speech contestant's performance and his/her MLU density recorded in the speech.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations between Rankings and Density of Three MLUs

	Collocation Density	Fixed-/Semi-fixed- Expressions Density	MLU Density
Rankings	.509	-.218	.474

Note. * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

5. Conclusion

5.1 Concluding Remarks

This current study examined the relationships between Taiwanese college EFL speakers' performance of impromptu speeches and their use of lexical collocations, fixed-/semi-fixed expressions, and idioms respectively. Pearson correlation was used to describe such possible connections. The study findings showed that:

- (1) a significant correlation seemed to exist between the 11 impromptu speech contestants' performance and their use of lexical collocations;
- (2) no significant correlations could be found between this group of contestants' speech performance and their use of fixed-/semi-fixed expressions or idioms (as no idiom was used);
- (3) and an observable correlation somewhat existed between this group of contestants' speech performance and their use of total MLUs.

It could be concluded that the frequency of MLUs, especially lexical collocations, might be the key that affects the overall performance of college/university EFL speakers' performance while competing in an impromptu speech.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Obviously, the biggest limitation in the study was that only 11 subjects were involved. Had all the 20 contestants advancing to the final rounds been included, this study would have been able to provide more evidence. To present more convincing

findings, it is best if a bigger group of EFL speakers of all levels in Taiwan can be invited and selected randomly for the purpose of a quantitative study of this kind.

Another limitation of this study is related to the scope of MLUs investigated. This study only examined 4 types of MLUs and did not include the others, such as compound nouns and phrasal verbs. As a result, the recorded MLUs might have been comprised and did not represent their overall knowledge and use of the subjects' MLUs.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Studies on longer lexical units have just started. Only a limited number of reports can be found even up to this moment. The majority emphasized heavily on the role of lexical collocations. Still too much has been ignored on the role of other MLU categories. The current study merely found that the subjects' use of lexical collocations and total number of MLUs seemed to have some possible connections with their speech performance. Several recommendations may be made for future research.

First, a strong relationship was found between the use of lexical collocations and speaking proficiency among the Taiwanese university EFL learners in the study. However, the subjects' use of fixed-/semi-fixed expressions and idioms did not show significant correlation with their speaking proficiency. Thus, Taiwanese EFL learners' use of fixed-/semi-fixed expressions and idioms could be further examined. A longer speech time or a new format speech (like a prepared speech) may reveal different results.

Besides, the relationship between MLUs and EFL learners' language fluency is also a worth exploring direction. Many possible studies can be further undertaken to investigate whether the knowledge or use of MLUs relates to the overall proficiency of EFL learners' listening, reading, or writing skills.

Lastly, merely a very small number of studies were conducted on the role of English idioms. Whether teachers should encourage explicit or implicit instruction on idioms in a classroom setting is also controversial. The connection between acquisition of idioms and language proficiency can be another study direction future research can take on.

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