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Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Urmia University

Reading-Based Incidental vs. Intentional Focus on Lexis and Development of L2 Phraseological Competence

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ABSTRACT

Emergentist, usage-based L2 research has witnessed that emphasizing formulaic sequences as entry points in meaning-based instructional contexts contributes to the development of linguistic comprehension and production. Related studies have thus far striven to find the most effective methods of highlighting these word strings. This study explored the effects of the focus on lexis (FonL) approach on L2 learners' development of phraseological competence. Furthermore, it probed whether incidental and intentional FonL approaches result in any differential effects on the learners' development of phraseology. Participants were 60 L2 learners in three intact classes randomly assigned to one control and two experimental FonL groups. Their general language proficiency was measured by administering a Cambridge PET Test. Additionally, a pre-test was used to measure their prior knowledge of phraseology. The control group received the mainstream typical instruction, whereas the experimental groups received incidental versus intentional FonL, differentially heightening noticing of conventionalized lexis expressions in L2 reading. A parallel post-test was administered to measure the development of learners' phraseological competence. ANCOVA results indicated that the lexis groups made greater gains in their phraseology as compared to the control group. Moreover, differential effects were evidenced specifically in favor of the use of intentional FonL. The findings indicate that the varied amount of attention L2 learners pay to aspects of formulaicity in language use can influence the extent to which lexis-based input and interaction lead to intake. Theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study are discussed at the end.

Keywords: lexis; formulaic chunks; phraseological competence; focus on lexis (FonL); usage-based language learning theories

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 14 Nov. 2020 **Revised version received:** 10 June 2021

Accepted: 11 Feb. 2022 **Available online:** 1 July 2023

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10.30466/ijltr.2023.121329

Introduction

Second or foreign language (L2) pedagogy has for long been mostly restricted to teaching and learning grammatical structures, and vocabulary has been largely considered as secondary. However, just near the turn of the century, scholars gradually began theorizing that much of the language a native speaker uses consists of conventionalized chunks, not original sentences driven from grammatical structures. Specifically, in 1993, Michael Lewis introduced the Lexical Approach (LA) to address such fundamental concerns in L2 learning and teaching, as an alternative to grammar-based approaches. Lewis claims that language, quintessentially, comprises grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar. He emphasizes an early holistic, exemplar-based learning of phraseological expressions or lexical chunks. These chunks, in turn, provide the raw data through which learners construct basic linguistic patterns traditionally viewed as grammar (Lewis, 1993). LA draws on the item/exemplar- or usage-based theories of language acquisition which posit that language structures arise from real-life or simulated language use and experience (Tomasello, 2003).

Psycholinguistic research has documented that language is, to a large extent, acquired, stored and processed as whole, unanalyzed chunks (e.g., Conklin & Schmitt, 2008, 2012; McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2017; Meunier & Granger, 2008). Specifically, drawing upon associative-cognitive mechanisms of computing statistical probabilities, frequency, prototypicality, saliency, entrenchment (MacWhinney, 2013), chunking, and parsing (N. Ellis, 2008a; N. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009; N. Ellis & Sagarra, 2011), language learners pick out the cues, notice form-meaning mappings (Auer & Pfänder, 2011; Tyler, 2012), and convert sparsely distributed lexical items into grammaticized linguistic constructions (Tomasello, 2000). This process has largely been referred to as 'grammaticalization,' which occurs when a lexical item gradually transforms and attains a grammatical status (Dörnyei, 2009). It thus seems sound to contend that lexis or formulaicity should hold a central position in instructed second language acquisition (SLA). SLA researchers (e.g., N. Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, Römer, O'Donnell, & Wulff, 2015; Mirzaei, Beyzaei, & Roohani, 2018; Vercellotti, Juffs, & Naismith, 2021) argue that phraseological units, including formulaic multiword sequences, lexical bundles, idioms, statistical collocations and phrasal verbs, play a major role in language proficiency and fluency. Comparably, lack of phraseological knowledge may lead to communication breakdown by encumbering comprehension or production.

N. Ellis (2012) contends that, in spite of the fact that recurring formulaic sequences make significant contribution to language acquisition, they are challenging for L2 learners. Hulstijn (2001) points out that learning lexis has always been a burden and thus a concern to L2 learners. Incidental and intentional types of learning are the two main approaches empirically considered in Focus on Form (FonF) frameworks, which can be employed to raise learners' consciousness about formulaic expressions in L2 use. Intentional learning takes place as a deliberate attempt to memorize new information through rote learning and mnemonic techniques (Hulstijn, 2003). On the other hand, incidental learning occurs when the learners' attention is not deliberately directed toward a specific form. Up until now, ample research (e.g., Hulstijn, 2001, 2003; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000) has been carried out on incidental and intentional learning of vocabulary and their effects on different language skills. Moreover, many studies (e.g., Bestgen & Granger, 2014; Meunier & Granger, 2008; Paquot, 2018; Szerszunowicz, 2007; Wood, 2009) have worked on phraseological competence and its role in idiomatic language use. Despite the large body of research into intentional and incidental learning, few studies have addressed any differential effects of incidental and intentional FonF on L2 learners' development of phraseological competence. Thus, this study sought to address this lacuna and explore the issue of incidental versus intentional L2-formulaicity learning from a FonF perspective.

Theoretical Background

Focus on Forms (FonFS) vs. Focus on Form (FonF) Instruction

Traditionally, language learning was viewed as grammatical forms and structures to be explicitly taught in the classroom, and grammar was the essence of L2 learning and teaching. After the development of the Natural Approach by Krashen and Terrell (1983) as well as the advent of the 'strictly-no-grammar' Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the early 1970s, this traditional Focus on Forms (FonFS) instruction was challenged. Krashen (1982) believes that conscious knowledge of sentence-bound grammatical rules does not account for language fluency or communicative language use. He hypothesizes that language is acquired implicitly when learners understand the authentic, comprehensible input by focusing on situational meaning rather than forms.

In spite of the significance CLT and other naturalistic accounts attached to the purely meaning-oriented, implicit learning approach, L2 research and pedagogy began to practically recognize that focus on meaning should not be bought at the expense of form (Cook, 2000). Actual classroom experience with CLT failed to meet with full success in SLA (Dörnyei, 2009), with certain aspects of input failing to become intake and, as a consequence, L2 learners' interlanguage states fossilizing at non-native end-states (N. Ellis, 2008a). Such interlanguage 'holes,' according to N. Ellis (2008a), could occur due to one (or an interplay) of factors such as contingency, cue competition, over-shadowing, salience, or perceptual learning, all shaped by L1 (i.e., first language) interference. Considering the failure or limitations of meaning-based L2 learning, N. Ellis argues that the ubiquity of such processes can well substantiate why greater level of explicit awareness of the L2 constructions as well as form-focused instruction is necessary.

Therefore, SLA researchers, such as Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995), called for a 'transformed' or 'principled' CLT–one which in a way reinstated attention to language form. However, this felt necessity of noticing form did not have the pendulum swing all the way back to traditional FonFS, but paused at a half-way position between a concern for situational meaning and language code (Dörnyei, 2009). This ever-increasing shift of attention towards both meaning and form thus brought with itself an integrated 'Focus on Form' (FonF) approach which aimed to strike a balance in between (Long, 1988, 1991). Long differentiates FonF from FonFS arguing that the former "draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (1988, p. 45), whereas the latter deals with the teaching of isolated linguistic forms.

According to N. Ellis (2008a), FonF creates a dialectic tension between the learner's current interlanguage states and the developmentally-advanced explicit form-focused instruction, and then, by resolving the tension through boosted attention, allows further development to take place. 'Form' in this integrated, emergent sense, obviously, transcends the traditional 'only-grammar' notion and includes other dimensions of usage (N. Ellis, 2008a; R. Ellis, 2016): phonotactics, orthotactics, reading, lexis, formulaicity, comprehension, grammaticality, production, pragmatics, and morphosyntax.

L2 Formulaicity and Language Learning Process

Despite such theoretical developments, in most educational contexts, still a 'core grammar' was deemed to be central, and lexis was subservient to grammar. Additionally, all the debates were about approaches and techniques which could serve best in learning linguistic forms. As it is implied by Widdowson (1987), knowing a language is more than knowing grammatical structures and producing correct statements; in fact, knowing a language entails knowing how to use it in

real communication. Although formulaicity (or phraseology), for some time, was overlooked and considered as irrelevant to the creative language process (e.g., Krashen & Scarcella, 1978), later SLA researchers (e.g., Meunier, 2012; N. Ellis, 1996, 2008b), following Sinclair's (1991) 'idiom' principle, argued that knowledge of phraseology "lies at the core of a wide range of research areas which all contribute to a better understanding of language, be it in terms of cognition, description, acquisition, or teaching" (Meunier & Granger, 2008, p. 15). In N. Ellis et al.'s (2015) sense, knowledge of formulaicity is the database for language acquisition. Formulaic expressions are then recurring sequences of lexical units of language which are stored and retrieved from mental lexicon as unanalyzed wholes (Jeong & Jiang, 2019). These word strings constitute a large part of spoken and written discourse, and they perform multiple discourse functions (Csomay, 2012). In Lewis's (1993) Lexical Approach, language instruction should be mainly focused on "word grammar rather than sentence grammar as a means to extend students' communicative power" (p. 143).

Despite this premium put on phraseological knowledge, simply knowing or substantiating the fact that language is mainly formulaic may not necessarily be music to L2 learners' (as well as teachers') ears (Meunier, 2012). That is, although it may be interesting to find out that formulaicity is omnipresent in language or that advanced knowledge of phraseology denotes proficiency in an L2 (Boers et al., 2006), teachers and learners find it challenging or even daunting to achieve native-like competency in their control or use of L2 formulaicity (De Cock, 2010; Meunier, 2012). Therefore, to acquire an L2 successfully and sound sufficiently proficient in the language, learners need to be assisted in learning the formulaic chunks and focus on different lexical, phraseological exemplars. By scaffolding L2 learners' noticing and learning of lexical formulas, teachers, in effect, deter learners' emerging interlanguages to simply stabilize at premature end-states. More than that, they provide learners with quintessential entry points for language acquisition (N. Ellis, 2008a). This way, L2 learners will be capable of performing different language functions efficiently, simply by drawing upon their readily-accessible and well-rehearsed repertoire of phraseology (Cowie, 1992; Cowie, 1992).

FonF: Incidental vs. Intentional Learning

After Long's (1988, 1991) original characterization of FonF, SLA researchers well seized on the perceived need to procedurally strike a balance in allocating attention to form and meaning in a communicative teaching context and expanded the scope to a question of incidental or intentional noticing of form in response to varied contextual L2 exigencies or peculiarities. Based on the premises underlying incidental FonF, in incidental (vocabulary) learning, learners' attention is drawn to linguistic features as the need naturally arises in activities or lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (R. Ellis, 2016; Gholami & Gholami, 2020; Long, 1991). In this view, therefore, learners can 'pick up' vocabulary and structures simply by engaging in diverse communicative activities such as reading or listening, and tasks or exercises in the communicative activity may not be directly related to learning target form. Learners are left to their own devices noticing, for instance, new lexis, and no explicit attempt is made by the teacher or the teaching materials to direct students' attention to form (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013). However, in the case of intentional FonF or learning, teachers promote learners' attention to form explicitly by using different strategies. In terms of lexis, for instance, learners are encouraged to employ rehearsal, mnemonic techniques or other learning strategies to memorize and retain meanings of the target words to prepare for a forewarned retention test on the code features to which they are exposed (Dörnyei, 2009; Hulstijn, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2013).

A plethora of research has been done on incidental and intentional learning to probe the controversial underpinning premises of the two approaches (e.g., Bordag, Kirschenbaum, Rogahn, & Tschirner, 2017; Godfroid et al., 2018; Puimège & Peters, 2019; Ruiz, Tagarelli, & Rebuschat, 2018; Schmitt, 2008; Szudarski & Carter, 2016). The field remains divided on this

concern though, which points to the need for continued theorizing and research on this vital domain. Ruiz, Tagarelli, and Rebuschat (2018), for instance, studied the simultaneous acquisition of vocabulary and grammar of an artificial language by adult learners under incidental versus intentional exposure conditions. They measured knowledge gains and type by means of a grammaticality judgment test and an untimed sentence production task. Their results showed that learners developed basic syntactic knowledge while processing meaning-focused input for novel vocabulary at both exposure conditions. That is, incidental versus intentional learning conditions made no difference in terms of either vocabulary or grammar learning gains. Interestingly, findings also revealed that learners in both conditions developed explicit, rather than implicit, knowledge of lexis and syntax.

Other studies (e.g., Ender, 2014; Godfroid, 2016; Godfroid et al., 2018; Leung & Williams, 2012; Puimège & Peters, 2019; Sadeghi, Khezrlou, & Modirkhameneh, 2017), on the other hand, reported evidence more in favor of incidental learning stimulated by implicit mechanisms such as input flooding, exposure frequency, extensive reading, text-picture glossing (or hypertext), and audio-visual input conditions, respectively. Ender (2014), for instance, found superior students' vocabulary gains or retention through incidental learning while reading than through intentional learning while doing explicit lexical work. Similarly, Godfroid (2016) reported gains in L2 German learners' development of strong vowel-changing verbs measured through word monitoring and controlled oral production tasks during and after input flooding.

Still, an increasing number of studies in recent decades have drawn upon Schmidt's (1995, 2001) noticing hypothesis and yielded evidence in favor of the intentional learning condition (Meganathan et al., 2019; Szudarski & Carter, 2016; Webb, Yanagisawa, & Uchihara, 2020; Zhang & Graham, 2020). Szudarski and Carter (2016), for instance, compared an incidental input-only condition with a more intentional input-flood plus input-enhancement condition and found that the latter treatment through which Polish EFL learners' attention was intentionally focused on target L2 collocations led to significant relevant knowledge gains at both form-recall and form-recognition levels. Meganathan et al. (2019), similarly, found more vocabulary-learning gains for the intentional group receiving extensive reading of storybooks plus vocabulary enhancement activities. Interestingly, Le-Thi, Dörnyei, and Pellicer-Sánchez (2020) submitted indirect evidence in favor of intentional instruction arguing that motivational techniques (e.g., making learners aware of the instrumental value of formulaic sequences) were successful in facilitating vocabulary learning because, based on learners' interviews, they fostered their heightened attention to the target formulaic sequences and, as a consequence, focused their attention or visualization process. In Iran's L2-teaching context, Kaivanpanah, Akbarian, and Salimi (2021) found that explicit, awareness-raising plus pushed-output activities helped EFL learners notice, learn, and retain L2 vocabulary better and longer than implicit instructional techniques such as input flooding. Finally, Webb et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis concluded that intentional vocabulary-learning, such as using flashcards and word lists, leads to relatively large gains in making form-meaning connection of words while writing. However, they cautioned against a conclusion that intentional learning is the solution to L2 lexical development or that learning gains are generalizable across all such activities. Therefore, the findings as to the efficacy of intentional versus incidental learning activities for L2 vocabulary learning still remain inconclusive.

L2 Formulaicity and FonF: A Call for FonL

Besides revisiting inconclusive findings in FonF research, namely, the efficacy of intentional versus incidental conditions for L2 learning, future research should take into account two further epistemologically relevant issues which have hitherto been partly overlooked: dimensions and substance. The first concern deals with what critical dimensions should be put into place to operationally set the two realms of learning apart. One superficial approach towards the intentional and incidental distinction reflected in the literature has been treating the attentional

boundary between the two merely in terms of the presence or absence of intention to learn or to remember. Scholars have well warned against this in their recent accounts of the debate in the field (e.g., Hulstijn, 2013; Leow, 2015a, 2015b; Leow & Samora, 2017). Care must thus be exercised in setting parameters to this blurred boundary more in terms of subsequent processes that matter, such as repeated activation, learner engagement, and selective attention, as much of the noted controversy seems to have originated from here.

The second issue concerns the substance of the FonF instruction, that is, what aspects of linguistic form to be focused on. The question of 'what of language' extends beyond mere pedagogy or procedure and enters the realms of philosophy or psycholinguistics. As noted, just over the last decades, scholars have turned their attention from rule-based grammar and vocabulary dichotomy towards formulaic sequences or lexis, arguing that knowledge of formulaicity is basic to language development and processing (e.g., Meunier, 2012; N. Ellis, 2008). Most of the theoretical or empirical accounts of FonF or incidental versus intentional learning (e.g., Godfroid et al., 2018; Hulstijn, 2013; Zhang & Graham, 2020) have been largely restricted to a traditional view of language as lexicalized grammar and single words (or word lists), when it comes to vocabulary. Little attention has been paid to formulaicity aspects of language form as the object of foci in FonF frameworks. An incomplete picture has thus been provided, further adding to the inconclusiveness emanating from the mixed results, as noted, yielded by this line of inquiry.

Notably, Gholami, Karimi, and Atai (2017) as well as Gholami and Gholami (2020) are amongst the few available studies that have responded to this call and tried to revisit FonF and learners' uptake through the formulaicity lens. To this end, both studies collected naturally-occurring data from classroom teacher-student FonF episodes (FFEs) in communicative EFL contexts of Iranian private language institutes. Gholami et al. (2017) found that, despite the fact that formulaicity was not originally of interest and that non-formulaic linguistic forms outweighed formulaic ones in 1102 instances of FFEs, a substantial proportion of the FFEs still dealt with L2 formulaicity forms (about 38%), including collocations, idioms and lexical bundles. Further, pre-emptive formulaic FFEs outnumbered reactive, incidental ones, and formulaic episodes were also found to be more frequently initiated by students. In Gholami and Gholami's (2020) study, interestingly, formulaic FFEs (collocations and idioms) resulted in more successful uptakes, especially those initiated by students.

These two studies, although observational in nature, helped redirect attention to the ubiquity and, from a usage-based standpoint, centrality of formulaicity in pedagogical or theoretical frameworks as a constituent of language form. More interventionist studies are thus needed to bring language formulaicity, FonF, and incidental versus intentional dichotomy out from a 'lexico-grammar always goes first' shadow. This and other concerns dealt with so far have fundamentally inspired the first author, here and elsewhere (e.g., Mirzaei, Rahimi Domakani, & Rahimi, 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2018), to explicitly call for a 'focus on lexis' (FonL), not as a replacement to FonF, but rather as a directional, epistemological supplement to the framework and a reminder of the necessity to reconceptualize the notions in light of more recent views of language and language learning, such as emergentism, LA, and usage/exemplar-based theories.

The Study

Despite the theoretical support for integrating FonF and L2 formulaicity, little research is yet done on how to implement the approach, simultaneously, accounting for the roles of attention, awareness levels (or lack thereof), cognitive or mental effort, and processing depth, as portrayed in recent L2 theories (Leow & Zamora, 2017). Further research has to probe various aspects of the FonL approach in light of the current SLA theoretical notions, such as incidental and

intentional FonF. Thus, this study sought to address this lacuna and explore the issue of incidental vs. intentional learning of phraseological competence from an FonL perspective. In brief, the following research questions guided this study:

1. Does FonL in L2 reading have any significant effect upon Iranian EFL learners' development of phraseological competence?

And, if that is the case:

2. Do incidental and intentional approaches of FonL have differential effects on the learners' development of phraseological competence?

Method

Participants

The participants of the current study were 60 young adult EFL learners (with the age range of 11-13 years old) with a similar language proficiency level in three different intact classes of Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Shahrekord, center of Chaharmahal Bakhteyari Province, southwest of Iran. ILI has nationwide offshoots in all provinces, almost all cities, and most towns. ILI is funded and (strictly) regulated by Iran's Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, a subset of Iran's Education Ministry. There was a control group and two experimental groups (i.e., incidental vs. intentional). Due to ILI regulations, male and female learners attended separate classes (in separate buildings). The participants consisted of 40 females in two classes and 20 males in another class. Institutionally, at the end of each term, the learners' final scores (the average score of their classroom-based assessments and final exam scores) are calculated to decide if they can advance to a higher level based on a cut-off score. In addition to the institutional placement criteria for assigning students to one class based on similar language proficiency, Cambridge's Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered to the three groups and, after running a one-way ANOVA, it became clear that the classes were homogeneous (Elementary level) in terms of general proficiency. The groups' PET means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1 below.

Students attended the classes two days a week for 20 sessions during a season. Each session lasted 90 minutes, and 4 sessions were assigned to listening and speaking evaluation during which the learners took their oral exams. Two instructors officially hired by the ILI system conducted the classes: the second researcher (for the lexis groups) and a colleague-instructor (for the control group). The information about the three groups is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Relevant Information for the Three groups

Groups	*N*	Age Range	Gender	Language Level	PET Mean	SD
Control	20	11-13	Male	Elementary	50.15	3.51
Exp-Incidental	20	11-13	Female	Elementary	51.15	4.1
Exp-Intentional	20	11-13	Female	Elementary	49.75	3.5
Total	60	11-13	Female	Elementary	50.35	3.7

Instrumentation

Cambridge PET Test

The language proficiency level of the participants in the three groups was checked by administering a PET test originally developed by Cambridge Assessment English (2010). This exam has two versions: PET and PET for schools. The format of the two versions is the same, but the content is different and aligned for the target population. In terms of format, both tests comprise three parts: reading and writing, listening, and speaking. Since the participants were all young adults, the PET for schools was used (without the speaking section). The test included 25 listening questions and 40 reading and writing questions in multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank forms. One-way-ANOVA results indicated that all the three groups were homogeneous in terms of general language proficiency. The Cronbach's alpha value of the PET was estimated to be .86.

Phraseological Tests

A phraseological competence test was constructed and validated to measure the participants' prior knowledge of phraseology. In order to develop the phraseological competence test, first, the related theory was reviewed (Erman & Warren, 2000; Lewis, 1993, 2008; Meunier & Granger, 2008; Mirzaei et al., 2018; Paquot, 2018; Szerszunowicz, 2007). Next, the subscales of phraselogical competence including the knowledge of collocations, formulaic sequences, idioms, phrasal verbs, lexical bundles, and other institutionalized multiword expressions (e.g., similes) were determined. After receiving expert judgements on the test blueprint (from two associate professors of Applied Linguistics), the instrument was constructed. The test items comprised 20 collocations, 10 polywords, 10 idiomatic expressions, and five institutionalized expressions. There were three types of questions: multiple-choice, fill-in the-blank, and matching items. Four items were revised and three items were substituted based on the expert judgements. As noted, the content validity of the test was ensured through a thorough perusal of the related literature as well as expert judgments. In order to check the concurrent validity, the pre-test was piloted with 20 EFL learners with similar characteristics in another class in the institute. Two days later, the vocabulary section of another test originally developed by ILI and used for in-house placement purposes up until 2018, which was suitable for the students' proficiency level, was also administered. The computed correlation of the two sets of scores was 0.75, which is considered acceptable. The Cronbach's alpha value was estimated to be 0.82. After checking the test reliability and validity, it was administered to the three groups in the study. At the end of the course, a parallel phraseological post-test was given to the three groups in the study in order to investigate the probable effect of intentional and incidental FonL on the development of phraseological competence. As to validity and reliability of the test, similar processes to those of the pre-test were undertaken. The (concurrent) correlation was .75, and the estimated Cronbach's alpha was .80.

Instructional Materials and Activities

The textbook for language learners at this stage in ILI is *English Time* series. *English Time* (Rivers & Toyama, 2003) is a six-level communicative course for children and young adult learners. The participants of this study studied the first five units of Book 5. The book contains 10 units which are taught in two levels (called Reach 1 and 2), five units for each level. Each unit of the book consists of six parts: Conversation Time, Word Time, Focus Time, Practice Time, Reading Time, and Your Time. The first two parts deal with a new dialogue and the related new words and phrases, the second two parts present and provide practice on the grammar point, and the last two parts include a reading passage followed by some questions and pairwork activities focused

on reading comprehension. Each unit is planned to be covered in three sessions. The FonL approach was mostly implemented with the dialogues and reading passages of each unit.

Procedure

Initially, the PET scores were statistically analyzed through computing a one-way ANOVA. The results did not show any significant differences in language proficiency among the groups supporting their homogeneity (F (2, 57) = .14, p = .86). The three intact classes were then randomly assigned to control, incidental, and intentional groups. Before giving the instructions, a pre-test measuring the participants' phraseological competence was administered to the three groups in the study. Subsequent ANOVA results run on the pre-test ensured that there was no statistically significant difference in terms of the groups' prior phraseological knowledge (F (2, 57) = .09, p = .91). Then, the control and the experimental groups received their related mainstream and FonL instructions, respectively, as follows.

The Control Group

In the control group, the learners were taught based on the mainstream approach endorsed by ILI nationwide. As noted, each unit of the coursebook (i.e., *English Time 5*) consists of six parts. The first two parts deal with a new dialogue and the related new words or phrases, the second two parts present and practice the grammar point, and the last two parts include a reading passage followed by comprehension questions and pair-work activities. Conventionally, new words and expressions are listed in the supplementary book, which are to be read out by the teacher; then, students are supposed to look them up in monolingual dictionaries at home. In the following session, the instructor checks their answers and provides further explanations, if needed. New grammatical points are introduced deductively and further emphasized through subsequent structural drills. Teaching each unit to this group, the instructor put almost equal focus on all form-related aspects of language, including but not restricted to grammar, lexis, and phonology. No special attention was given to the phraseological units, and no FonL follow-up activities were employed. Each unit was covered in three sessions.

The Intentional FonL Group

In the intentional FonL, besides the coursebook-based work described above for the conventional ILI approach, the participants' attention was intentionally drawn towards the phraseological units such as statistical collocations, lexical bundles, phrasal verbs, idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions in conversations, reading passages, and related exercises. This was initially achieved by the instructor through raising her voice when pronouncing or reading them out, repeating them as unanalyzed chunks, highlighting or underlining them, and explicit negotiations of meaning and form in pair or group work, thereby enhancing the units' aural as well as textual saliency in L2 usage. After initial triggering attempts, following R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001), subsequent repeated activation was planned by having the learners practice using the phraseological units of each section in related written or oral individual or choral exercises. Explicit corrective feedback was then provided on all problematic uses of L2 lexis. Specifically, extra memory-consolidating assignments, such as making sentences, developing scripts for dyadic conversations in class, and making flash cards with idioms and proverbs, were given targeting further use or practice of formulaic sequences in class and at home. In brief, the kind of intentional FonL was mostly intensive and pre-emptive, that is, dealing with a lexis feature even before any error occurred in the output (Nassaji & Fotos, 2007). Lastly, following Dörnyei (2009) and Hulstijn (2013), as one of the dimensions that sets intentional learning apart from incidental, learners were forewarned that they would be tested (i.e., post-tested) on the phraseology worked in class by the end of the course.

The Incidental FonL Group

In the other experimental group, besides implementing the instructional procedures underscored by ILI, incidental focus was put on the phraseological units through aural-oral input enhancement, unobtrusive reformulations, or recasts. Auditory input enhancement was achieved through artificially manipulating the ways in which the items were articulated, for instance, increasing the volume slightly or slowing down the speed of reading the lexis out. Oral input enhancement was implemented through orally enhanced recasts. Further feedback moves were offered in the form of clarification requests (demanding the very lexis parts of interest) and comprehension checks, without making any explicit attempts to raise learners' consciousness. In other words, while the primary attention of the learners and the teacher was on covering and understanding different parts of *English Time* units, incidental, reactive (Nassaji & Fotos, 2007) FonL was fulfilled when they came across the phraseological units in different sections or when the need arose as they experienced problematic lexis uses in subsequent occurrences. Finally, they were not forewarned that they should expect a test (Dörnyei, 2009).

At the end of the course, a parallel post-test was given to the classes. The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed by a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and post-hoc Bonferroni-adjusted group comparisons.

Results

To examine the groups' gains in developing phraseological competence from the pre-test to post-test time, descriptive statistics were obtained, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Groups' Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Group	Test	*N*	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
Control	Pre-test	20	7.00	15.00	11.60	2.43	-.25	-.83
	Post-test	20	21.00	32.00	25.60	3.45	.48	-.90
Intentional	Pre-test	20	6.00	17.00	11.40	3.01	-.13	-.87
	Post-test	20	35.00	44.00	38.70	2.81	.24	-.94
Incidental	Pre-test	20	7.00	16.00	11.25	2.46	.31	-.72
	Post-test	20	25.00	37.00	30.65	3.61	.33	-1.08
Total	Pre-test	60	6.00	17.00	11.42	2.61	-.12	-.81
	Post-test	60	21.00	44.00	31.65	6.34	.10	-1.08

As shown in Table 2, the Kurtosis and Skewness values of the groups' scores on both pre-test and post-test were well within the range of ±1.5 which indicated an acceptable normality distribution. With regard to the participants' pre-test scores (Min = 6 and Max = 17), the mean scores were almost the same, 11.60 for the control group, 11.40 for the intentional group, and 11.25 for the incidental group. This initial similarity suggested that that the groups were fairly homogeneous in terms of prior L2 phraseological knowledge. However, there was a noticeable difference in the post-test scores between the groups. The difference between the mean scores was 25.60 for the control group, 38.70 for the intentional group, and 30.65 for the incidental

group. To check if the differences were statistically significant or not, further analysis was conducted.

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the effects of the three instruction types on the participants' phraseological competence (i.e., dependent variable in the ANCOVA), while controlling for pre-test differences as the covariate in the analysis. The grouping, or independent variable, in the analysis was type of instruction, including mainstream grammar-based, and two lexis-based groups, one with intentional and the other with incidental FonL.

Preliminary checks were undertaken to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliability of the covariate measurement scale for running ANCOVA. First, Kolmogorov-Smirnov significance values for the control, incidental and intentional groups were .35, .42, and .45, respectively, which were greater than .05, suggesting no violation of normality. Further, the computed Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the covariate measure (i.e., .82) was satisfactory. Scatterplots were then requested to inspect linearity between the covariate and the dependent variable. As seen in Figure 1 below, there was no violation of linearity for the three groups.

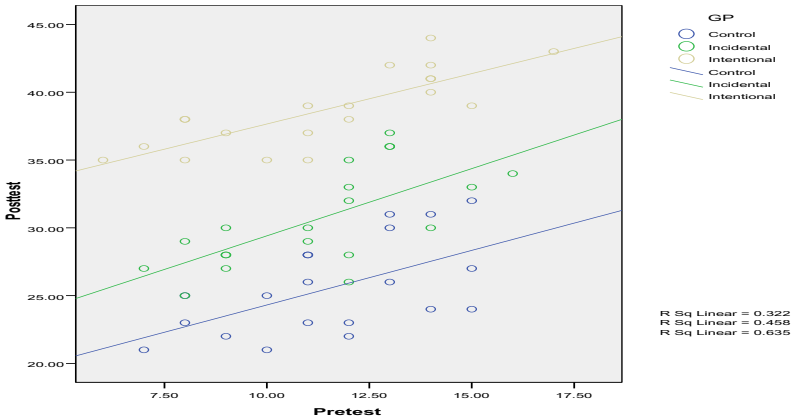

Figure 1. Scatterplot for the Groups' Linearity

As to the last assumption, namely, homogeneity of regression slopes, as shown in Figure 1, was again consulted and, as displayed, rather similar slopes were obtained pointing to the existence of slope homogeneity. Additionally, the interaction between the covariate and the dependent variable was not statistically significant F (2, 54) = .35, p > .05, thus, suggesting no violation of the assumption. After meeting all the assumptions, ANCOVA was run to examine group-mean differences while simultaneously controlling for the pre-existing differences between the groups.

Table 3
ANCOVA Results for the Groups' Phraseological Competence

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2023.969	3	674.656	108.66	.00	.85
Intercept	1437.07	1	1437.074	231.46	.00	.80
Pre-test	277.869	1	277.869	44.75	.00	.44
Group	1781.006	2	890.503	143.43	.00	.83
Error	347.681	56	6.209			
Total	62475.000	60				

Note: *R* squared = 0.85 (Adjusted *R* Squared = 0.84)

ANCOVA results (Table 3) demonstrate that the differences amongst the groups' post-instruction phraseological competence test scores were statistically significant, F (2, 56) =143.43, $p < 0.005$. Furthermore, the obtained effect size value was sufficiently high (i.e., 0.83) indicating that the variance in the dependent variable (post-tests) can be explained by the type of instruction employed for the groups. To this aim, post hoc (Bonferroni-adjusted) pairwise comparisons were employed to examine which instruction was most effective. The results are displayed in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Post-Hoc Pairwise Comparisons for Different Groups

Instructions (I-J)		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	*Sig.*[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[a]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Exp-int	Control	13.10*	1.04	.000	10.52	15.68
Exp-inc	Control	5.05*	1.04	.000	2.47	7.63
Exp- int	Exp-inc	8.05*	1.04	.000	5.47	10.63

Note: Based on observed means
* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level. [b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

As Table 4 displays, there were significant differences among all the three groups in the study ($p < .05$). The results from the post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that both lexis groups outperformed the non-lexis control group. Therefore, it can be inferred that FonL instructions, focusing on formulaic sequences as integral building blocks of language, can noticeably enhance the phraseological competence of the EFL learners.

As demonstrated in Table 4, both lexis groups (intentional and incidental FonL) performed way better on the post-test as compared to the control group. More importantly, intentional FonL (i.e., explicit instruction of formulaic sequences and practicing their use) resulted in significantly greater gains of phraseological knowledge than incidental FonL, simply heightening L2 formulaicity aurally or orally in L2 instruction or communication. Figure 2 clearly portrays the

progress of the three groups involved in the study in terms of their development of phraseological competence after receiving different types of instructions:

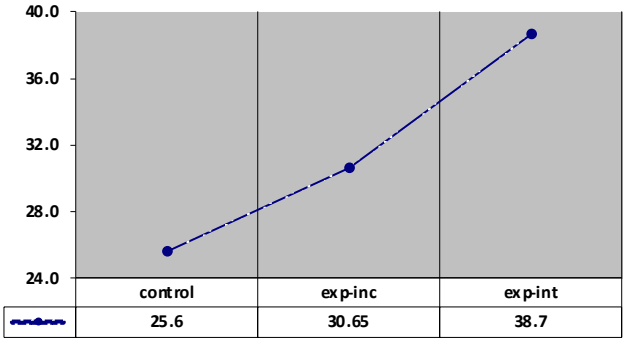

Figure 2. Development Plot for the Groups' Phraseological Competence

In brief, the intentional FonL group demonstrated more noticeable improvement on the post-test in comparison to the other two groups. To conclude, emphasizing formulaicity or lexis in L2 classrooms, either intentionally or incidentally, seems to have optimally influenced learners' development of L2 phraseological competence. Furthermore, the group with intentional FonL had higher gains in their post-test compared to the group with incidental FonL.

Discussion

This study aimed to apply the FonL approach in EFL classrooms to examine its effects upon L2 learners' development of phraseological competence. Moreover, it aimed to explore how the FonL approach could be more effectively implemented within a macro FonF framework (i.e., incidental vs. intentional FonL) in EFL reading classrooms.

The results related to the first research question indicated that the participants in both FonL groups outperformed those in the control group in developing phraseological competence. The finding was in line with previous similar lexis studies (Boers et al., 2006; Erman, 2007; Mirzaei et al., 2016; Taguchi, 2007; Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Wood, 2009), corroborating the view that lexis-based L2 instruction, emphasizing lexical items or formulaic chunks, can influence different dimensions of language comprehension and production. In the current study, a noticeable association, as noted, was found between FonL and L2 learners' development of phraseological competence, as measured by a type of form-recognition test. The study adds to the accumulating research and theory postulating that language learning is exemplar-based (Taguchi, 2007), or in Lewis's (2008, p. 7) sense, that "language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text." In concrete terms, it was shown that proficiency in standardized phraseology can be established through (intentionally or incidentally) focusing on recurrent institutionalized multiword expressions not through learning grammatical structures. Developing phraseological competence is by itself of paramount importance as such patterning prevails language use (Schmitt, 2004), and mastery of it helps the L2 learner come across as a proficient, native-like language user (Boers et al., 2006).

Similar studies on formulaicity have provided support to the view that teaching isolated words is not as worthwhile as teaching formulaic sequences or lexical chunks (e.g., Boers et al., 2006; Foster, 2001; Hilton, 2008; Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007; Mirzaei et al., 2016, 2018; Schmitt & Carter, 2004; Taguchi, 2007). Taguchi (2007), for instance, submitted that learners' representations of phraseology greatly facilitate L2 comprehension and production. Boers et al. (2006) found that developing a phraseological repertoire can contribute to improving L2 learners' (perceived) oral proficiency. Further, Mirzaei et al. (2016) reported that computerized FonL led to EFL learners' greater knowledge of new L2 vocabulary in their coursebooks. Given the quintessential role of formulaicity in communication and language representation, developing knowledge of these lexical chunks, however, is very slow in comparison to other areas of language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012). EFL learners, especially beginners, may not easily recognize the word strings on their own. Lexis-oriented teaching approaches are needed to promote learners' development of lexical chunks.

The second research question in the current study, as noted, aimed to particularly address this lacuna and probe the effects of intentional versus incidental FonL in L2 reading on learners' development of phraseological competence. It was found that the difference between the post-test mean scores of intentional and incidental groups was statistically in favor of the former approach, namely, input plus lexis enhancement, noticing, repeated activation, and retention intention, as employed with the intentional FonL group. Firstly, this finding adds to the ever-growing evidence supporting Schmidt's (1995, 2001) observation that, for linguistic elements in input to become intake, they have to be registered under the learner's conscious attention. Secondly, the finding resonates with LA's basic theoretical premises that it "requires a much more principled system of introducing and exploiting lexis, and even simple vocabulary, in the classroom" (Lewis, 1993, p. 117) than a random presentation or, in turn, incidental picking up of vocabulary through, say, reading. In other words, it is of prime importance to direct learners' attention towards the sequences which pervade coherent discourse, a central process in LA referred to as chunk-noticing by Lewis (1993).

As to the usefulness of intentional versus incidental FonF approaches, L2 literature has already witnessed much controversy, especially, in L2 vocabulary learning contexts. Overall, although the debate in the field is still far from resolved, the cumulative research in this area (e.g., Hamrick & Rebuschat, 2014; Leung & Williams, 2012; Rebuschat & Williams, 2012) has generally been more in favor of intentional learning as an intentional task highlights the goal-oriented nature of the process (Dörnyei, 2009) and is thus of motivational (as well as cognitive) memory effects. In this study, rich contextualized input (e.g., reading) drew learners' attention to both meaning and form (repeatedly) in an integrated fashion, forewarned of an upcoming retention task (or test), and, consequently, motivated them to process L2 formulaicity elaborately (i.e., look up the meanings, process their form-meaning relationships elaborately, and rehearse or reactivate them again after reading through the 'input-plus' condition). This condition can cognitively create more lasting, retrievable memory traces (Bordag et al., 2017; Hulstijn, 2013). In this sense, the intentional FonL framework lent itself better to contextualized lexis building than its incidental counterpart, which was designed based upon rudimentary 'input-only' processes. Our findings support other research studies such as Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) that point to the effects of contextualized exposure, noticing and processing form-meaning relationship elaborately, retention-stimulating tasks, and repeated-activations of prefabricated formulaic sequences on long-lasting retention and use of L2 phraseology. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) submit, incidentally noticing a word sequence just once or twice is hardly enough to leave lasting memory traces.

Despite the more substantial effects found for the two FonL approaches, in general, and the intentional FonL, in particular, on L2 learners' development of phraseological competence, a word of caveat is in order. This study only measured the development of phraseological

comprehension, and no productive tests of form- or meaning-recall of the target lexis were employed. Furthermore, due to the constant variability of class populations each seasonal term in ILI, it was not possible to locate all different groups' participants in the new term and measure their phraseological retentions using delayed post-tests. Therefore, it is highly advisable that future studies take these dimensions into account.

Conclusions

Overall, this study strove to argue and call for the integration of an under-researched yet essential aspect of language form, namely, formulaicity or lexis, into FonF, as a key feature of L2 theory and pedagogy. Both notions are, in principle, highly commensurable, but a synergy between them has for long been neglected. Accordingly, FonF should not be restricted to the explicit or implicit presentation of discrete linguistic features of a structural syllabus (R. Ellis, 2016). In other words, the approach and the notion 'form' seem to remain trapped in the traditional lexico-grammatical circularity unless they further evolve beyond the limits to allow for more recently theorized meaning-form-and-process-based linguistic exemplars, such as formulaic sequences. The notion of FonL was, therefore, proposed as an FonF offshoot to fill the perceived formulaicity void.

Finally, it was noted that the intentional FonL approach can provide a useful, principled teaching and learning space to promote the learning of formulaic sequences. Within this framework, various activities and techniques proposed by L2 research (e.g., Lewis, 1993, 2008) may be easily used: recording formats (i.e., recording lexical items, chunks, or collocations typical of a particular field of discourse), collocation boxes, cloze procedures, pattern displays (i.e., recording useful expressions containing the de-lexicalized word, such as *have*), and lexical phrase drills (i.e., introducing lexical phrases and repeating them several times in the form of a drill-activity). Such activities, in a nutshell, can help achieve the 'chunk-noticing-and-promoting' goal of FonF/FonL. In short, further L2 research is needed to explore different aspects of implementing this principled approach (FonL) through these lexis-based techniques and even other more innovative ones, especially in light of recent advances in Information Technology (IT) as well as Artificial Intelligence (AI).

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