Fostering Speaking in the EFL Classroom:

The Role of Formulaic Language in Low Proficiency L2 Learners of English

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Abstract

Research in SLA has been exploring how to foster speaking in an EFL classroom for years. In this sense, the role of formulaic language is key to improve students' communication and language competence. Studies conducted by Myles (2014), Wood (2002) and Nation and Newton (2008) state that formulaic sequences have an important impact on learner's oral production and enhance their motivation towards communicative situations. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of formulaic language in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom in a Catalan context. Data was collected by means of a pedagogical intervention done with students from first of primary and pre/post-tests were used to analyse the learners' progress. Findings seem to suggest that formulaic sequences play a significant role in L2 learners with short time of exposure to the language.

Key words: Formulaic Language, Second Language Acquisition, Communication, Low Proficiency, EFL, Young Learners.

Resum

La recerca sobre l'adquisició de segones llengües fa anys que explora com afavorir la parla en una aula on l'anglès es treballa com a llengua estrangera. En aquest sentit, el paper que tenen les fórmules lingüístiques és clau per millorar la comunicació i la competència lingüística. Els estudis realitzats per Myles (2014), Wood (2002) i Nation & Newton (2008), demostren que les seqüències prefabricades tenen un impacte important a l'hora de promoure les produccions orals de l'aprenent i en incentivar la seva motivació envers les situacions comunicatives. Aquest treball pretén investigar l'eficàcia de les fórmules lingüístiques en una aula on es treballa l'anglès com a llengua estrangera, en el context català. Les dades es van obtenir mitjançant una intervenció pedagògica amb estudiants de primer de primària i es va utilitzar un test inicial i final per a analitzar el progrés dels aprenents. Els resultats suggereixen que les seqüències prefabricades tenen un paper important en els estudiants d'una segona llengua amb poca exposició a aquesta.

Paraules clau: fórmules lingüístiques, adquisició de segones llengües, comunicació, baix domini, EFL, aprenents joves.

1 Introduction and justification

Several studies have focused on how to improve speaking teaching techniques in young L2 learners. According to Al Hosni (2014), English learners do not have many opportunities to practice the L2 outside the classroom. As a consequence, the author suggests that schools should provide learners with more opportunities for output in the L2 by making use of a communicative language teaching approach.

Consequently, there has been a growing interest in the importance of formulaic language in second language acquisition. To refer to the topic, many authors, like Myles (2014) or Wood (2002) have made reference to the role that formulaic expressions play in an EFL classroom. Both authors claim the significance of those sequences and the benefits that they provide when starting to communicate in the target language.

According to Myles, Hooper and Mitchell (1998), formulaic language is beneficial to improve communication in the early stages because it provides learners with tools to start communicating even though their knowledge of the language does not allow them to do it. Moreover, as Sirkel (2017) highlighted, this fact raises the learners' self-esteem because they feel more confident when speaking and they are able to establish a minimum conversation.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how effective is the formulaic language in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, in a Catalan context. Some theories are going to be described in this study which provided evidence of the effectiveness of those sequences in an English classroom, however, in this paper, the purpose is to investigate the effects of the formulas with low proficiency students of a Catalan context.

The framework assumed in this paper defines what formulaic language is and provides evidence of the purpose of introducing those expressions in the second language acquisition. Moreover, it presents the different views of the researchers who claim a variety of strategies to introduce the formulaic expressions to the learners.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Formulaic Language

The effect of formulaic language has been extensively studied in recent years. Research has shown that there are different definitions for formulaic language, on account of that, it has been defined by several authors.

On the one hand, Myles, Hooper and Mitchell, (1998) defined it as multimorphemic units that are recollected as a whole. Similarly, Wray (2002, 2008) defines formulaic language as:

> A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appear to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (Wray 2002, 2008, cited in Myles, 2012, p.73)

Based on the literature review, "definitions of formulaic language units refer to multiword or multiform strings produced and recalled as a chunk, like a single lexical item, rather than being generated from individual items and rules." (Wood, 2002, p.3) This definition matches with the previous ideas which mentioned prefabrication (previously constructed sequence that are ready to be used) as an important aspect from the formulaic language.

Furthermore, Myles et al. (1998) and Coulmas (1979), cited in Wood (2002), suggest some criteria to use when identifying formulaic sequences. The chunks must present at least two morphemes and they must be phonologically coherent, meaning that they need to be fluent when articulated. In addition, the ideas of both authors match because they specify that formulas are more advanced in grammar, compared to the language that students might produce.

After reviewing several definitions for formulaic language, it is essential to observe the functions that formulaic language has. Research has shown different views of these functions depending on the situation in which they are used. Firstly, according to Wray (2000) cited in Steyn & Jaroongkhongdach (2016), there are two functions that can be presented when using formulaic expressions.

On the one hand, formulas may help the speaker during their speech production, and on the other hand, it may facilitate hearer's comprehension. For instance, the expression "ok, next one…" means that something new is coming, so this helps the speaker to organize their ideas and it can also provide clues to the listeners because they will know that a new topic is coming next.

Moreover, based on Bahns, Burmeister, and Vogel (1986) cited in Steyn & Jaroongkhongdach, (2016) formulaic language has some functions specially addressed to the classroom situation. Firstly, *directives* are the sequences linked to the classroom commands, such as "help me" or "sit down", also the *game* is the classification for the chunks that introduce a new activity, like "need to" or "the first". Moreover, *phatic* utterances are meant to take part in social interactions, for instance: "are you finished?" or "over here". They also classify the chunks related to the teachers' emotions or feedback ("good job", "very good") and the ones connected to the questioning as "what is" or "what about". Finally, *polyfunctional* are the sequences that have more than one semantic or pragmatic function ("let's see").

Seeing that research has stated different functions that formulaic language may have, the present study will intend to focus on the functions related to the classroom because they are more suitable for the research.

2.2 The role of Formulaic Language in Second Language Acquisition

Noticing that oral communication in English is necessary to become linguistically competent, there has to be a focus on teaching speaking to improve the productions of the learners. As Haozhang, (1997), cited in Al Hosni (2014) states, the activities done in the classroom to teach the language should aim at giving the maximum opportunity to the learners to practise the use of the language individually.

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According to Nation and Newton, (2008), there are some key elements that L2 learners should be taught during their early stages to be able to communicate in an English-speaking context. They suggest some formulaic expressions that had been designed as a basic tool to start communicating. One of them is the expressions for talking about oneself, such as "My name is _____. I live in _____." Another priority when teaching the language is the use of classroom utterances, for instance, "How do I say this?" or "May I go to the toilet?". Despite the benefits of using classroom sequences to talk about oneself, Myles (2014) states that the routines that the children have been using only refer to personal information. Consequently, the learners have more difficulties when trying to speak using the third person, because they did not have practice on that topic.

Ellis (2008), in line with Nation and Newton (2008), states that doing activities that enhance the communication of the students is a priority because it will enable them to use the language in real purposes. This is because when learning a language, there is a natural focus on the meaning rather than on the form. Moreover, the author emphasises some benefits of doing communicative tasks. Firstly, communicative activities help to develop true fluency in the second language, and they are motivating for the students because they are creating meaning. Furthermore, as Long (1996) and Prabhu (1987), cited in Ellis (2008) affirm, only when the learner wants to decode and encode a message is when they acquire the knowledge.

Similarly, Nation and Newton (2008) suggest that the focus when teaching a language must be on the meaning rather than on the grammar rules. They also state that the sentences need to be simple, useful for communicating and go in line with the purpose of the learner. That means that the language presented should be used in real communicative situations.

On the contrary, Ellis (2008) claims that the students need to learn the rules because it helps them to create and construct their sentences to express their ideas. For instance, "They need to internalize rules for subject-verb agreement and modifying terms of address to suit the person to whom they are speaking" (Ellis, 2008, p.1). The author believes that the rules enable the students to create

their sentences and to use language creatively. Consequently, he states that a competence language curriculum needs to teach formulaic language and rule-based knowledge in the early years.

Regarding comprehensible input, Nation and Newton (2008) also highlight that, when teaching formulaic sequences, one sentence must be chosen instead of presenting two chunks with the same meaning. For instance, decide if it will be used "My name is ____" or "I am _____" but not both, because it could create confusion on the learner.

2.2.1 Teaching Formulaic Sequences in the English Language Classroom

Earlier studies questioned the teaching methods that could be used in the instruction of formulaic language in second language acquisition.

Firstly, according to Le-Thi, D., Rodgers, M. P., & Pellicer-Sánchez, A. (2017), there are two types of learning. The authors differ between direct and indirect learning.

Direct learning leads to explicit teaching that occurs when learners pay more attention to the lexical items, for instance when translating a word, using dictionaries or word cards. It is said that learning is direct because the learner knows exactly what he or she is learning, learning the lexical is the main focus of the activity (Le-thi, D., et. al 2017).

This point is well supported by Ellis (2008) who suggests that instructed learning provides a higher level of grammatical competence. However, it does not ensure that the learners acquire what they have been taught. Consequently, there are some benefits to direct learning, but it has to be taught following the learners' natural process of acquisition, to ensure that what is being learnt is acquired.

However, Le-thi et al. (2017), asserts that indirect learning leads to incidental learning of the vocabulary, that means that the lexical is learnt as a result of doing meaning-focused activities, such as reading, listening and speaking. Incidental learning can also happen when the same word appears many times during reading or listening. The words that appear from three to six times in short

contexts are more likely to lead to significant learning for the students rather than the ones that appear only once or twice.

Similarly, Ellis (2008) states that instruction needs to focus on implicit knowledge (held unconsciously) because it causes the ability to communicate fluently and confidently in the second language. According to this, the implicit knowledge must be the ultimate goal of an instructional programme. Some researches differ in their points of view, but there is a consensus which claims that participating in communicative activities develops the students' implicit knowledge.

After comparing the effectiveness of the two different approaches, Le-thi et al. (2017) conclude that in real classrooms, teaching involves a combination of the direct and the indirect activities. As a result, it emerges the opportunity to experience both, the incidental and the explicit learning.

Several authors (Heriansyah, 2012: Ellis, 2008: Wood, 2002) agree about the importance that the amount of input has when teaching a new language. Firstly, Heriansyah (2012), cited in Muslem et al. (2017) observed that the English-speaking ability of some teachers was very low and he claims that it was due to the limited exposure they had to the language. This fact takes us to the research done by Ellis (2008) in which supports the importance of the amount of input the students have when referring to a second language learning. Therefore, Ellis (2008) claims that the teacher must maximise the use of the language inside the classroom. But also mentioned that the teacher should provide spaces and resources for the students to experience the language outside the classes, to supply the learners with more hours of exposure to the language.

Similarly, Wood (2002) claims the importance that the input and the interaction have when attending the formulaic language in the classroom. The author believes that there must be native-like input because in order to memorize the sequences, they must be presented in real-life use and practised in spontaneous communication. Furthermore, the author suggested two tasks, shadowing and dictogloss which could help the awareness of the role of formulaic sequences.

Shadowing involves spoken language and the imitation of how a fluent or native speaker performs. The activity consists of reading a transcript while it is being played in a disk. This process is repeated until the students know how to pronounce being aware of the suprasegmental aspects, such as the intonation. This task gives them the opportunity to know how to use the formulas in real life.

Dictogloss is an activity where the learners listen to a text twice, that it could be read by the teacher or played on a disk. While they are listening, they have to take notes of what they can retain, and after that, they have to reconstruct the text working in teams. Finally, they are shown the text so they can compare it with their own productions. Wood (2002) believes that the activity could be a great tool to present formulaic sequences to the learners. Moreover, they can also put the focus on the constituent parts of the formulas, and it may help them retain it.

According to the interaction, Wood (2002) states that it matters when teaching formulaic sequences in the classroom. He believes that the interaction is the key when acquiring FS in spoken language and that the sequences enable the students to achieve communicative goals. For this reason, interacting with each other may be beneficial when finding an accurate sequence to fulfil a particular need.

Moreover, Bygate (1988), cited in Wood (2002), concluded that the interactions done in small groups and pairs may be beneficial for using formulas in spontaneous speech. Furthermore, the repetition of the formulas guarantees its acquisition, for this reason Wood (2002) suggests an activity in which students can acquire the sequences by repeating them and interacting with each other. The activity is called *jigsaw*, in which the learners, in small groups, become experts of an information and later, they explain it to the other groups, encouraging the interaction between them and using the suitable formulas that they need. Furthermore, Wood (2002) also suggests having interactions with a native speaker because it allows the students to observe how the formulas are used in the discourse.

2.3 The effectiveness of Formulaic language in Second Language Acquisition

There has been considerable interest in the benefits of formulaic language, so several authors (Myles et al. 1998: Wronf-Fillmore, 1976: Nation and Newton, 2008, Myles, 2014, Sirkel, 2017: Mugford, 2017) had argued about the topic, finding a different reason to justify the importance of those expressions when learning a language.

On the one hand, Myles et al. (1998) highlight three proposed functions that the formulaic language has in language acquisition. The main objective of the use of formulaic language is communication, so the learner's purpose is to communicate by applying this expression to their speech. This fact allows the student to have a minimal conversation due to the low competence that they have, mostly at the beginning stages.

Secondly, Myles et al (1998) also suggest that formulaic language is used as a production strategy that enables the speaker to improve their fluency in their oral communication and increases the process of meaning.

Finally, the last function that Myles et al. (1998) claims is the developing of grammatical competence as a result of analysing the utterances. When "unpacking" a formula, the learner separates its parts, and uses them to create different chunks with the same base from. For instance, if the learner is analysing "My name is _____" they will discover that they can also say "Your name is_____" when referring to another person's name.

This argument is confirmed by Wrong-Fillmore, (1976) cited in Myles et al. (1998) who states that the imitated utterances become part of the development of the learner's linguistic system as a result of the previous analysis that they do to it. Both authors agree on the steps that are done to a sequence when analysing it.

Several authors (Nation and Newton, 2008: Sirkel, 2017) suggest that another important benefit that formulaic language provides to low proficiency L2 learners is raising their self-esteem. As mentioned above, Nation and Newton (2008) state that there are sentences that are useful for the learners to talk about themselves,

and those sentences allow them to get to know the other classmates. Moreover, Nation and Newton (2008) suggest that the pupils could see that they are beginning to be able to do a presentation about them in a foreign language. Having said that, they concluded that using formulaic language in the early years seems to raise the students' self-esteem because it allows them to produce some sentences that are useful to communicate with others, in a short period. This point is well supported by Sirkel (2017) who states that the learners have a sense of accomplishment when using formulaic sequences because they realize that they can establish a minimum conversation, so that increases their motivation towards the learning. Moreover, Sirkel (2017) believes that "such expressions help to increase fluency and understanding, which in turn boosts the learners' self-confidence" (p.39).

Formulaic sequences are seen also useful when trying to make a request. Mugford (2017) states that using formulaic expressions enables the learners to make requests and saves them time when having to construct them every time they need it. Not only the sequences are useful to start to communicate with others but also to have tools when trying to make a request. As the expressions are prefabricated, the learner will only have to remember it and produce it effectively. By doing so, the students will be formal and polite when asking for something, even though they may not completely understand the meaning of all the words, such as "Could you pass me…" or "May I go to the toilet, please?".

Research done by Myles (2014) provides evidence about the role that formulaic language plays in early stages of second language acquisition. The study focused on how children asked questions in the third person. Myles (2014) discovered that at the beginning, when learners wanted to ask another person's name, they used the chunk they had studied in advanced, such as "what's your name?" while they pointed at the image of the person who they were referring to, instead of asking "what's his/her name?". Then, the author observed that the next step was to add "the boy" to the sequence, consequently, they asked "What's your name? The boy" rather than pointing at the image. Myles (2014) highlights that this was the moment in which the learner understood that "your" meant "you" and that it was not suitable for the person who they wanted to ask about (the boy). It is at

this point when the students are starting to break down the chunk. Finally, the author states that the last step is to say, "what is his name?" though this process is not common during the beginning stages and that it rarely appeared during Myles' (2014) research.

This point is also sustained by the work of Wood (2002) where the author recognizes formulaic language as a strategy that children use for communicating. However, Wood (2002) also suggests that the process needed to analyse the formula and recombine it to create different utterances takes place later in time because it comes after a neurological development of the students.

Bearing in mind the previous researches about formulaic language, this study aims to explore the effectiveness of formulaic sequences in an EFL classroom. According to this, the research question that guided this paper is the following:

- How effective is the formulaic language in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in a Catalan context?

3 Methodology

3.1 The study

The data reported on this paper aims to explore the role of formulaic language in second language acquisition of two groups of primary school children who were in the first academic year (between 6 and 7 years old).

The data collection method that was used for gathering information was the pre and post-test about five formulas to explore the role that those chunks of language had on low proficiency students. Moreover, a pedagogical intervention had been done in order to explore the role of formulaic language in Second Language Acquisition and how effective it was for students to end up communicating more fluently.

At the beginning of the study, the children did a pre-test where it could be seen their previous knowledge of the five formulas that I intended to introduce. Later, the formulas were presented to the learners and they had been practising them in their English classes (two hours per week) for two weeks. Furthermore, some of the chunks were also used in their classroom routines to maximize its utilization.

As mentioned above, to analyse the effects that formulaic language had on the communication of the primary students that participate in this project, the following question guided this research:

- How effective is formulaic language in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in a Catalan context?

3.2 Participants and School Context

The present study tested 24 primary school students (14 male and 10 female) from two different classes. They were in the first year of primary, so their ages ranged from 6 to 7 years old. In this sample group, there were students with

different learning rhythms and needs. One of the participants had a high level of autism, there was another one who had just arrived at school, he was a newcomer, but he knew some English. However, three of the learners who participate in the study were going to English schools in the afternoons. It is apparent that there is a great variety in the sample chosen for the research.

These learners come from a state school located in the district of a city, that has around thirty-five thousand inhabitants, in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Most of the population of the district are gipsy families and in recent years the neighbourhood has suffered the effect of migratory movements and economic and social changes.

The socio-economic characteristics of the area in which the school is located are rather low, due to the low economic levels of the families, the percentage of students that have special education needs and the qualifications of the families that does not benefit them when trying to find a job.

Those 24 participants belong to two different classes in which the tutors were starting to introduce CLIL activities. This initiative comes from the school since the beginning of the course, and the teachers had been doing CLIL activities once or twice a week. That means that they were starting to integrate the foreign language in some tasks which were not focused on working the language, such as doing the register in English every morning and some story telling. Both teachers used English naturally in their classes, even though they were not doing a language class. Besides, one of the tutors was also an English teacher and this may affect the analysis of the results of her class given that she tended to use the foreign language with the children in some activities.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Data collection method

The data collection method that was used for gathering information was the pre-test and post-test design. Shuttleworth (2009) defines the pre and post-test as: "the preferred method to compare participant groups and measure the degree of

change occurring as a result of treatments or interventions" (Shuttleworth, 2009. Retrieved Mar 16, 2020 from Explorable.com: Https://explorable.com/pretest-posttest-designs)

Moreover, Shuttleworth (2009) also states that this data collection method is suitable for educational research which aims to see the effect of a new technical method or an intervention done to a group of children. According to this, those tests were the instrument needed for gathering information due to the intervention planned to observe the effectiveness of the formulaic language in an EFL classroom.

Furthermore, before doing the intervention, Holmqvist & Lindgren (2008) claim that the test is used to assess the student's previous knowledge about the subject that it is being addressed. As a result, a pre-test was designed to observe if the learners had any notion about the sequences that we were going to be dealing with.

Before creating the pre-test, the utterances that were taught during the intervention had to be chosen. For choosing the best sequences for the students it was necessary to resort to theory as well as being aware of the students' context and needs. Finally, the sequences used were the following:

- "I'm fine thank you".

- "Can I go to the toilet, please?".

- "I'm six years old".

- "How do you say _____ in English?".

- "My favourite animal is the ____".

According to the literature review, I believed that using some classroom sentences was a great resource for the learners and could facilitate their communication in the class. Bearing in mind the main conclusions extracted from the literature review, FL sequences might enhance oral communication in low proficiency L2 learners.

As mentioned before, the classes that were involved in the study were starting to introduce some tasks in English. Seeing that, I thought that it would be interesting to introduce the chunk "I'm fine, thank you" because they were beginning to ask every morning the students' feelings and emotion by using the sequence "How are you today?".

Similarly, I decided to follow the same structure as the sequence above: "I'm _____" to incorporate the chunk "I'm ___ years old". I believed it would be interesting for the students to be able to say how old were they to start communicating and presenting themselves, as Nation and Newton (2008) suggest.

The sequence "Can I go to the toilet?" was based on Mugford's (2017) study where it is said that using request sequences is effective for the learners because they will be more polite, and it would save them time to construct the request every time they want to use it. For that reason, I believed that incorporating the sequence was necessary to provide the learners with a model for making future requests.

Before starting the lessons to introduce the formulas mentioned before, I planned to measure the students' knowledge at the beginning, with a pre-test, and after the teaching intervention, using a post-test. At the end of the instructional period, the results provided by both tests were evaluated.

After planning to do my practical part in four weeks, I had only three to complete it, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pre-test was made during the first week of the study. The students were told that they were going to do an activity in which they had to match five sentences that appeared in the paper, with five photos, considering the meaning of each one.

Illustration 1 *Pre-test*

Furthermore, the post test was impossible to conduct in the class, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, *Google Forms* was used to create a form in which the sentences were presented. The children had to choose which photo belonged to each sequence according to its meaning.

When designing the post-test, instead of incorporating the missing words in the sentences, such as "horse" in the sequence "my favourite animal is the ____", I decided to avoid them and to leave the space empty. By doing this, I wanted to observe if the learners understood the meaning of the sequences after presenting them in the teaching intervention and using them for two weeks.

3.3.2 Intervention

A pedagogical intervention was designed in order to introduce the sequences to the learners, and it was done the week after they did the pre-test. To present the chunks, I prepared a document where I wrote those five sequences (see appendix 1). Seeing that learners had some difficulties with the language, due to their age and their context, I put an image below the words to make it more understandable for them. By doing so, the sentences were presented visually which may have facilitated memorisation in L2 learners.

When introducing the sequences, several steps were followed. Firstly, I presented the chunk in the interactive board, so everybody could see the word and the images together. Next, I read the formula, pointing at the images and doing gestures to make the meaning more comprehensible for the students. After that, a toy monkey was used as a speaking object, and I threw it to the teacher, who also said the sequence, adapting it to her own experience if needed. For instance, if we were using the chunk "I'm ___ years old", I said my age, and when I threw the monkey to the teacher, she said her own. After those steps, I passed the monkey around the class, so everybody could say the sequence. Using the teacher's help was useful when providing another example of the pronunciation and the meaning of the sequence.

After passing the speaking object to the learners, I decided to translate the sequence in Catalan or Spanish, to make sure that everybody understood the meaning. The students were used to follow this methodology and they usually translated the vocabulary worked in the English classes. In order to maintain the same teaching methodology, the sequences were translated into Catalan and Spanish, seeing that some of the learners had some difficulties of understanding.

Once the learners said the meaning correctly and understood the purpose of the chunk, I continued presenting the following sequence. I repeated this process several times until I had already introduced the five sequences.

Later, I made five groups and gave one cardboard for each. Every group had a printed sequence and they had to copy it on the cardboard. Moreover, they could add some drawings to the sequences in order to make them more visible and understandable for them.

Illustration 2 *Students' cardboards*

Illustration 3 *Students' cardboards*

4 Results

To analyze the results of the test, it will be distinguished between the two classes that I used for the study. One of the groups, named "group A" corresponds to the class of the first-grade learners which has an English teacher as a tutor. Nevertheless, "group B", are the other first graders whose tutor uses English naturally during the class, although not being an English teacher.

Regarding the pre-test, according to the following 5 tables, the group A presented better results in knowing the meaning of the sequences before introducing them.
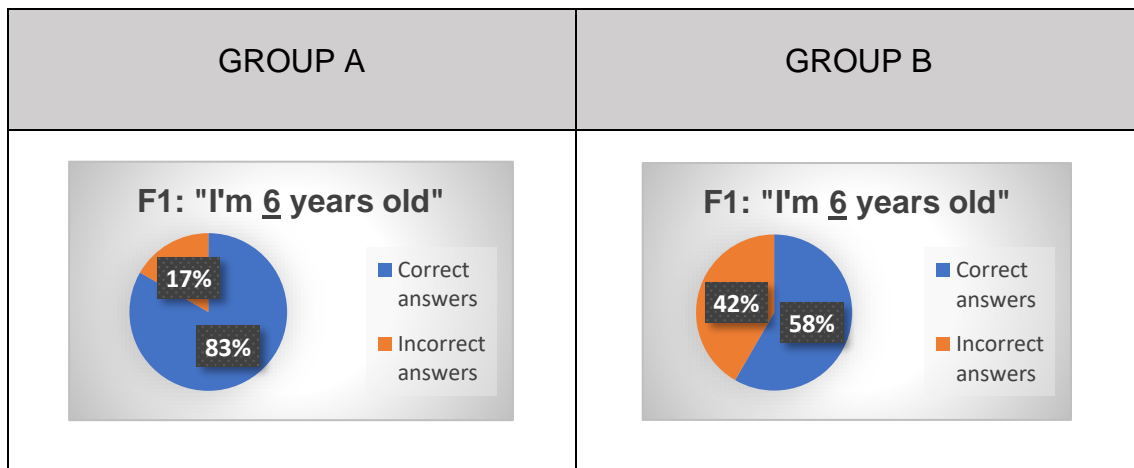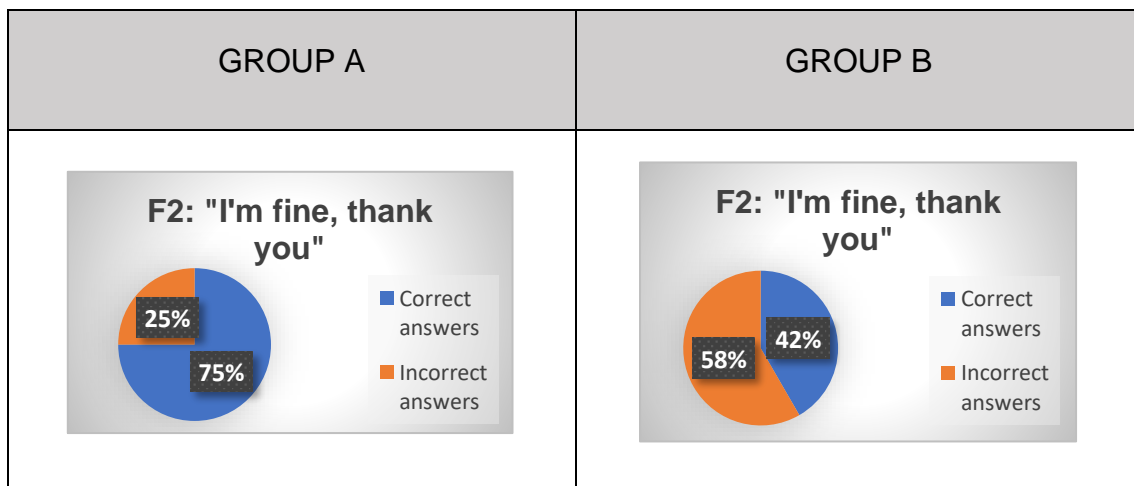
GROUP A	GROUP B
F1: "I'm 6 years old" 17% 83% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers	**F1: "I'm 6 years old"** 42% 58% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers

Table 1 *Formulaic sequence 1- pre-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F2: "I'm fine, thank you" 25% 75% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers	**F2: "I'm fine, thank you"** 42% 58% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers

Table 2 *Formulaic sequence 2- pre-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F3: "How do you say <u>casa</u> in English?" 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers	**F3: "How do you say <u>casa</u> in English?"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers

Table 3 *Formulaic sequence 3- pre-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?" 33% 67% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers	**F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?"** 33% 67% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers

Table 4 *Formulaic sequence 4- pre-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F5: "My favourite animal is the <u>horse</u>" 25% 75% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers	**F5: "My favourite animal is the <u>horse</u>"** 25% 75% ■ Correct answers ■ Incorrect answers

Table 5 *Formulaic sequence 5- pre-test*

As the data collected shows, there are some sequences that seemed easier for the students than the others. In table 1, we can observe how in group A, more than three-quarters of the students knew the meaning of the sequence whereas in group B only the 58% of the students matched correctly the sentence with the picture.

According to table 2, is it visible how 75% of students in group A indicated the answer correctly while in the other group only 42% of the learners did it right.

In table 3 it is seen how both groups related the picture with the image correctly without any mistake. However, in table 4, the students had some difficulties again with the expression. Group A had a 67% of correct answers while group B did the opposite because 67% of the learners matched incorrectly the sequence with the image.

Finally, in table 5 it can be observed how both groups have 75% of correct answers and 25% of wrong answers, that means that the number of right responses was higher.

When analyzing the total of answers during the pre-test, it is possible to observe different aspects.
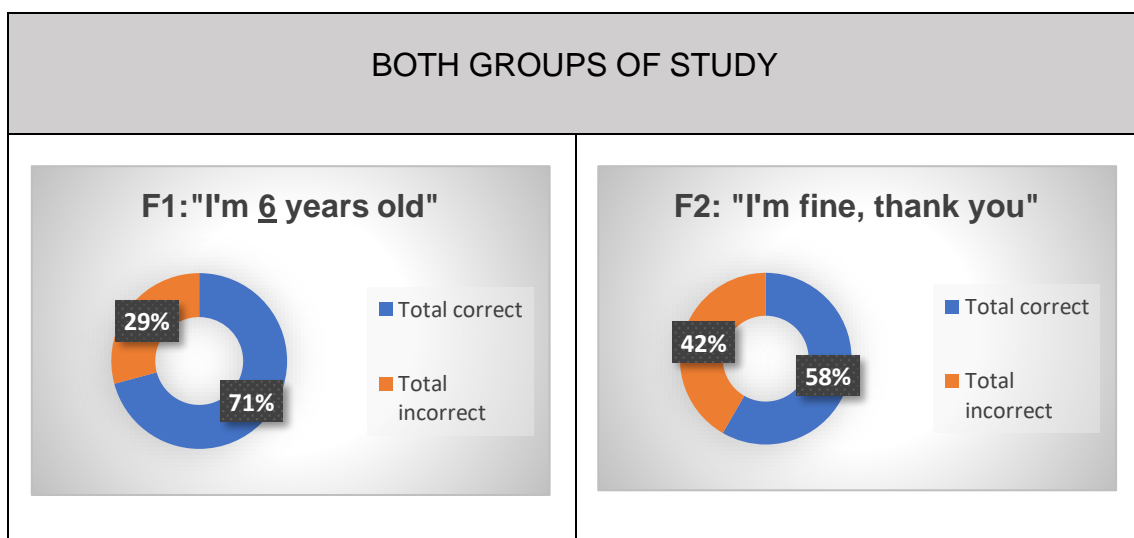

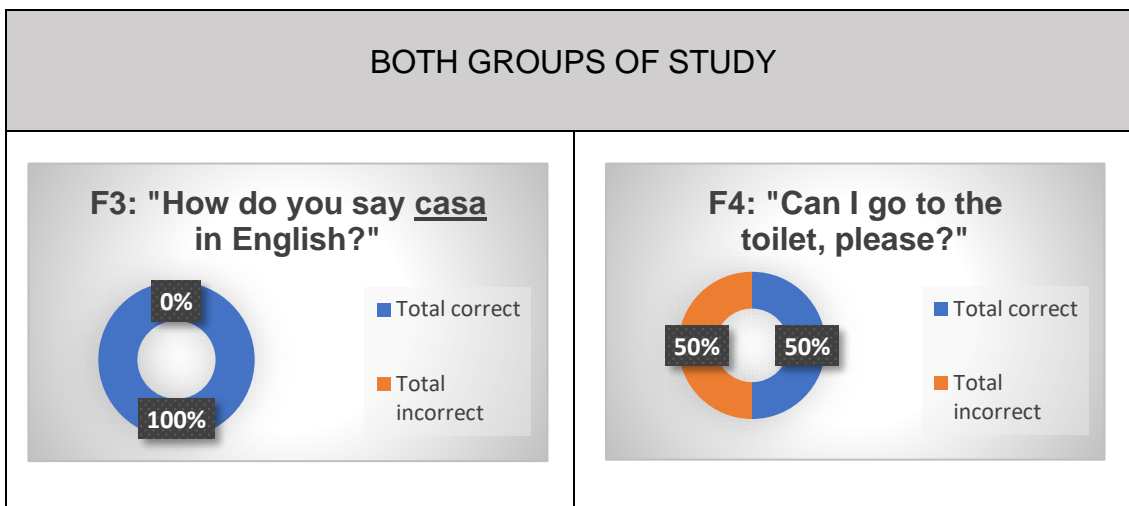**Table 6** *Total formulas 1 and 2 – pre-test*

BOTH GROUPS OF STUDY	
F3: "How do you say _casa_ in English?" 0% 100% ■ Total correct ■ Total incorrect	**F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?"** 50% 50% ■ Total correct ■ Total incorrect

Table 7 _Total formulas 3 and 4- pre-test_

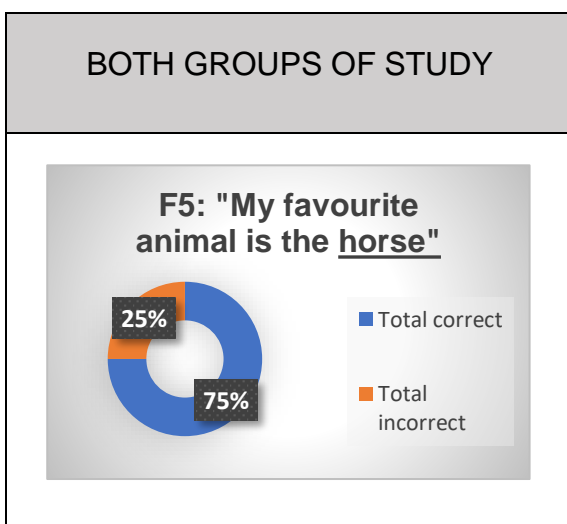| BOTH GROUPS OF STUDY |
| --- |
| **F5: "My favourite animal is the _horse_"**
 25%
 75%
 ■ Total correct
 ■ Total incorrect |

Table 8 _Total formula 5- pre-test_

The data collected in the pre-tests indicates that the sequence that was easier and more comprehensible for the students was "How do you say casa in English?". On the other hand, the one that had more wrong answers was the fourth: "Can I go to the toilet, please?" because half of the students match the images correctly whereas the other half had some difficulties.

Furthermore, the sequence "I'm fine, thank you" seems to be difficult for the learners because 42% of the participants answered incorrectly. However, as results show, we can indicate that the expressions one and five were also familiar for the students because 71% of the students in the first formula, and 75% of the participants in the fifth, answered accurately.

Regarding the post-test, there had been several limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample of the students had been reduced, because only sixteen of the learners answered the online post-test. From group A, six of the learners answered, and from group B ten of the learners answered the test.

The analysis of the data suggests that there has been an improvement after introducing the formulas to the students.
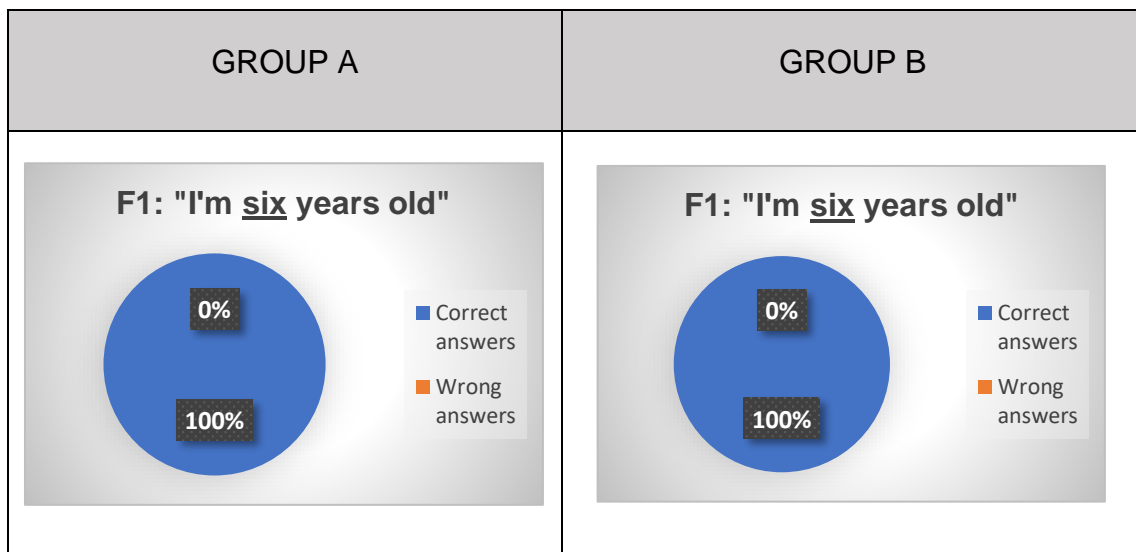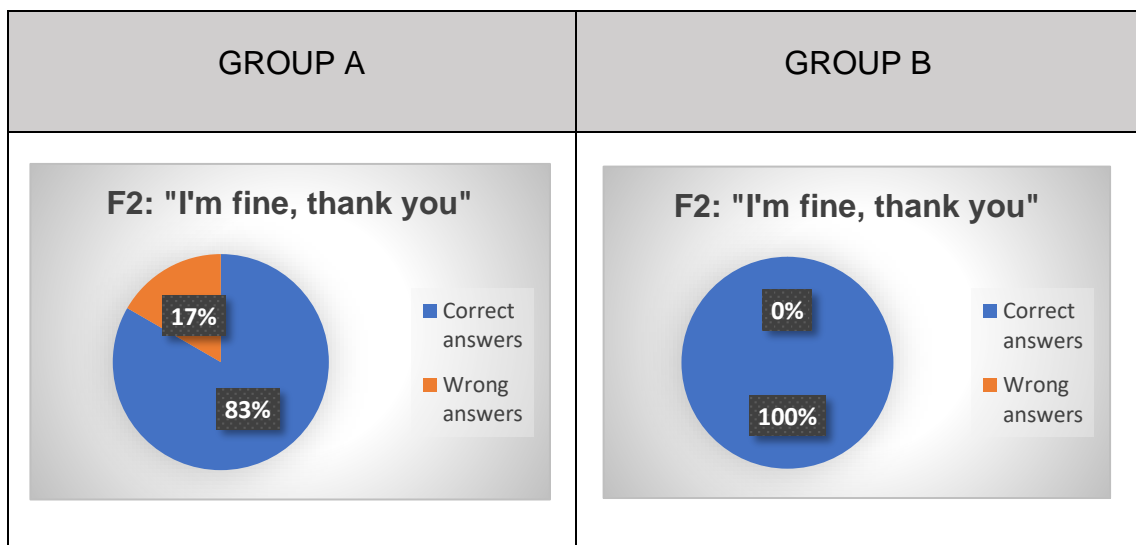
GROUP A	GROUP B
F1: "I'm <u>six</u> years old" 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers	**F1: "I'm <u>six</u> years old"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers

***Table 9** Formulaic sequence 1- post-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F2: "I'm fine, thank you" 17% 83% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers	**F2: "I'm fine, thank you"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers

***Table 10** Formulaic sequence 2- post-test*

GROUP A	GROUP B
F3: "How do you say ____ in English?" 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers	**F3: "How do you say ____ in English?"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers

Table 11 Formulaic sequence 3- post-test

GROUP A	GROUP B
F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?" 17% 83% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers	**F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers

Table 12 Formulaic sequence 4- post-test

GROUP A	GROUP B
F5: "My favourite animal is the _____" 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers	**F5: "My favourite animal is the ____"** 0% 100% ■ Correct answers ■ Wrong answers

Table 13 Formulaic sequence 5- post-test

The evidence reveals a difference between the pre-test and the post-test. The graphs show that there has been an increase in the percentage of correct answers in the post-test, compared to the initial test. According to the figures in the tables above, all the sequences had a 100% of correct answers except from the table 10 and the table 12, where it can be seen that there is a 17% of wrong answers on both formulaic sequences.

Moreover, it is visible that both wrong answers came from the group A whereas the group B did not have any incorrect answers.

Compared with the previous test, the data in the post-test shows that the students may have memorised the meaning of the sequences because they correctly matched the expressions with the images.

When analysing the total answers of both groups it is visible that there has been an increase in the number of correct responses compared with the previous test.
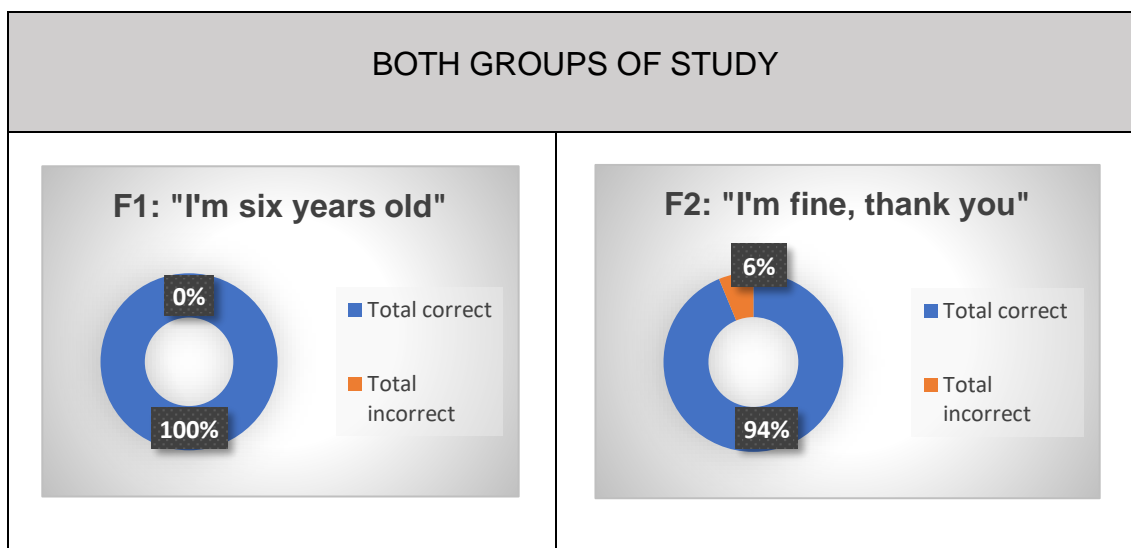

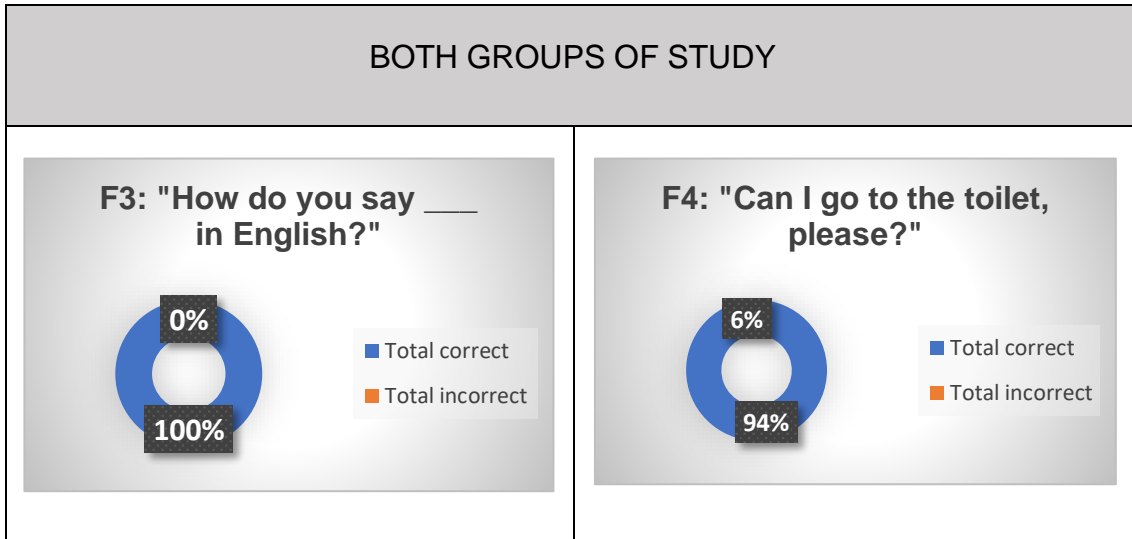**Table 14** *Total post-test - formulas 1 and 2*

BOTH GROUPS OF STUDY	
F3: "How do you say ____ in English?" 0% 100% ■ Total correct ■ Total incorrect	**F4: "Can I go to the toilet, please?"** 6% 94% ■ Total correct ■ Total incorrect

Table 15 Total post-test - formulas 3 and 4

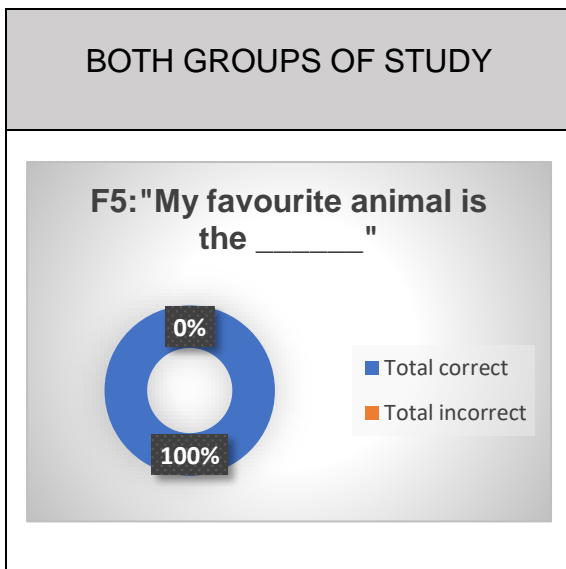| BOTH GROUPS OF STUDY |
|---|
| **F5:"My favourite animal is the _____"**

0%
100%
■ Total correct
■ Total incorrect |

Table 16 Total post-test - formula 5

After examining the tables of the results, it is visible that the answers from the post-test were more accurate than the ones obtained in the pre-test. The data shows that the second and fourth formulas were the one that the students had some difficulties, but only 6% of the answers were incorrect.

In conclusion, it can be seen that there has been an increase in the number of correct answers, and therefore, more students might have understood the meaning of the formulas presented for the study.

5 Discussion

In relation to the research question, the data collected shows how students memorized the sequences and might have understood their meaning. According to the definition proposed by Wray et al. (2002, 2008), cited in Myles (2012), these linguistic formulas are stored in the students' memory and later retrieved when necessary. It has been reported in some studies (see Myles, 2002) that L2 learners might make a metalinguistic analysis of each item in the formulaic chunk, which fosters their metalinguistic awareness, that is to say, the way in which they interpret and analyse linguistic input. As a result, they can create similar utterances by playing with these new acquired structures/words. For instance, *my favourite _____ is _____* (animal, colour, flower/ dog, red, rose).

The evidence provided by the tests suggest that they may have memorized the formulas, like the author indicates. Besides, pupils had been more than one month without going to the school, which means their L2 exposure had dramatically decreased but they were still able to retrieve the formulas and their meaning.

The progress of both groups throughout the study seems to indicate that, after introducing some formulas to these learners and use them in real communicative situations, they were able to remember the meaning of those sequences. This may imply that when language is used in a real purpose, it may be easier for L2 learners to memorize it (Sirkel 2017). This memorization of the formulas may enable them to incorporate those expressions in their repertoires and use them when speaking in the future.

At the beginning of the study, the evidence from both groups suggested that they had a general idea of the formulas presented, but many of the learners found it difficult to identify which image corresponded to each sequence. This fact can be seen in tables 6, 7 and 8, where the results showed that the only sequence that all the students did correctly was the third one: "How do you say casa in English?". However, while the learners were doing the pre-test, I realised that they were answering correctly to this sequence because they understood the word in

Catalan (*casa)*, and they matched it with the picture of the house. But in reality, they were not understanding the meaning of the formula, they simply related the image with the word in Catalan. After being aware of this mistake, I decided to change it in the post-test, and that is the reason why the sequence presented in the post-test was: "How do you say _____ in English?" and the corresponding image was a boy with a bubble as if he was asking a question.

Illustration 4 *Image form the third formula in the post-test*

Once the change was made in the post-test, it can be seen how the children had correctly answered to the sequence, and they identified the images related to the formula. Seeing this, it can be concluded that they may have memorised the sequence, because after more than a month without practising it in the school, they had still remembered its meaning.

Regarding the first formula "I'm six years old", in the post-test it had the 29% of the answers wrong, and the 71% remaining were correct. However, in the post test, the sixteen learners answered correctly. The data shows that there has been a success in learning this formula. It can be deduced that, as mentioned in the theory, Nation and Newton (2008), this sentence belongs to a real context for the students and it is very closed for them. Therefore, it can be stated that the formula is more meaningful for the learners because they could use it to present themselves in front of other people.

On the other hand, the second formula, "I'm fine, thank you" had a 42% of wrong answers in the previous test whereas in the post-test it had only the 6%. As it is demonstrated by the data gathered, there has been an improvement in the understanding of the sequence. This fact could be caused because, as

mentioned before, they were starting to practise every morning this sequence explaining how they felt on that day. It can be assumed that practising the sequence every morning and seeing that they were understood and able to speak in the foreign language, made it easier to remember its meaning.

According to the fourth sequence, "Can I go to the toilet, please?", it is visible that there has been an upgrading over the pre-test, where there was a 50% of correct answers. In comparison, 94% of the responses were accurate in the post-test. The evidence reveals that after introducing the formulas and practise them for two weeks, the learners were more likely to identify the meaning even though they did not practise it for several weeks. Furthermore, the results obtained may be due to the amount of times the students used the formula, since both, the English teacher and I, asked them to use the sequence in case they wanted to go to the bathroom.

Considering the research done by Mugford (2017), it can be concluded that the formulas used as requests, allow the learner to demand something politely. Moreover, the more they use the request, the better they will understand its meaning, and the more useful will be for creating future requests.

Finally, compared with the table 8, the data in table 16 shows that the number of correct answers increased. In the pre-test (table 8) the 75% of the answers were correct while on the contrary, in the post-test (table 16) there was a 100% of right responses. Besides, the formula, "My favourite animal is the _____" was changed in the post-test, similar to what happened with the third sequence.

In the pre-test, the sequence presented was "My favourite animal is the horse" and learners matched the expression with the image of the horse. The 75% of the learners did it correctly although it was the first time they had seen the formula. It could be concluded that, as the word *horse* was familiar for them, they matched it correctly because they understood the name of the animal and they identified it in the picture. According to this, I decided to change the sequence in the post-test and remove the name of the animal, to verify if they understood the meaning of the formula. I finally presented the sequence "My favourite animal is the _____" and they had to match the expression with a picture where appeared lots of different animals.

Illustration 5 *Image corresponding to the fifth sequence*

In conclusion, it has been shown that there was an improvement after introducing the formulas to the children. Once the sequences were practised and used in real communicative situations, the students may have understood the meaning and remembered the formulas even though they were not able to go to the school for more than one month.

On the other hand, Myles (2014) claims that time is needed when learning new formulas, and learners need to use them several times to be able to identify them and to use them accurately. Moreover, after some time using the formulas, the author states that the students start to analyse the sequences and to create new utterances based on the previous expression.

The period of time used for the intervention carried out in the school was very short. Consequently, the analysis of the sequences could not be observed. However, it can be established that using the formulas is effective for the learners because they were starting to use them accurately in the classroom. Therefore, this might imply that they were beginning to express themselves using the target language although their level of proficiency was rather low. Hence, formulaic language might be a useful approach to teach beginners, which goes in line with Myles et al. (1998), Nation and Newton (2008) and Myles (2014).

6 Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the role of FL in the EFL classroom. By means of a pre/post-test experimental design, a task was created to elicit data from 2 groups of first grade of a primary school in Catalonia (6 and 7 years old). Participants were not much exposed to the language and as a result, their proficiency in English was very low.

Results suggest that after performing a pedagogical intervention to introduce five formulaic sequences to the learners and working on those expressions for two weeks, learners seemed to remember those and were able to understand their meaning.

On the one hand, considering studies conducted by Myles (2014) and Wood (2002) formulas are effective when starting to communicate with others and when providing models for the learners to analyse and afterwards create their expressions. According to Myles (2014) and Wood (2002), it takes a while to be able to observe this effectiveness because learners need time to process the sequences and to develop the ability to analyse them.

As shown by the information given in the data gathered, minimal effectiveness is visible in those learners who participated in the study, because they appear to memorize the formulas and used them when needed during the classes. It is evident that it could not be observed how the learners analysed the formulas and used them as models to create new utterances, due to the limited time that I had to carry out the research.

On the other hand, it must be taken into account the benefit of formulaic language presented by Nation and Newton (2008) where they claimed that using FL raise the learner's self-esteem because they can start a minimum conversation although their knowledge of the language is low.

This fact could be observed in the students involved in this research because they were motivated about using the formulas and that could be seen during the classes since they were very enthusiastic to use the request to go to the toilet.

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Moreover, there were moments in which the learners said the formulas aloud and tried to say it faster every time. The point of the motivation provided by the FL is well supported by Sirkel (2017), who believes that students' motivation increases once they realise, they can establish a minimum communication with real purposes, and they are more encouraged to learn the language.

Finally, according to the analysis of the results obtained in the present study and the information provided by the theory framework stated during this research, it could be concluded that formulaic sequences have a significant role in language learning. There are some benefits presented when using those sequences with young learners that can help them to increase their interest and motivation towards learning the language. Moreover, they begin to improve their fluency when speaking and start to experience their first communicative situations in which they can use the language for real purposes.

Despite not being able to observe the usefulness of FL to create new utterances, it could be seen that presenting them to low-level students was effective. The formulas allowed them to have models of correct language sentences which could serve as a guide for future occasions.

Furthermore, it is essential that the students are interested and comfortable when learning a language, and it has been seen that using formulaic sequences enhance their motivation and their predisposition for learning.

In conclusion, in response to the aforementioned research question, I was able to test some of the effectiveness of using FL in an English classroom. It looks like using prefabricated sequences in the classroom may benefit learners in different ways and provide them with tools for effective and fluent oral communication. Therefore, after using formulaic sequences, learners may end up more prepared to communicate in real-life situations (Wood, 2002).

6.1 Limitations

There had been several difficulties that interfered when carrying out the research and limited the study to a certain extent. First of all, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a post-test was not possible to carry out face-to-face with participants.

Furthermore, the pedagogical intervention could not last any longer because schools had to close and there was no time to continue practising the sequences taught.

Moreover, this medical issue also affected the data collected because the post-test had a smaller sample of participants than the pre-test. According to the health emergency, this last test had to be done through the internet and not all the families were able to answer it. That means that the final results were not applicable to all the learners who participate from the beginning of the study.

Finally, further research could be done in which the recording of classes will be used as an extra data collection method because it would benefit and improve the accuracy of the study. By doing so, more information might be gathered, and the number of times the learners used the formulas in a class could be quantified. This method would upgrade the research because the number of times the students use the formulas would highlight which are more useful according to their needs. Moreover, it could also be seen if there is an improvement in the fluency of the students when pronouncing the utterances.

7 References

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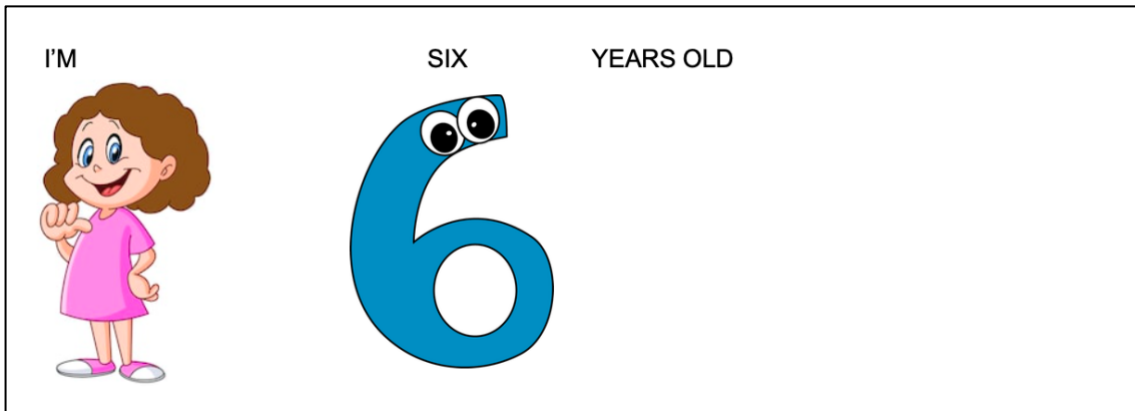
8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1

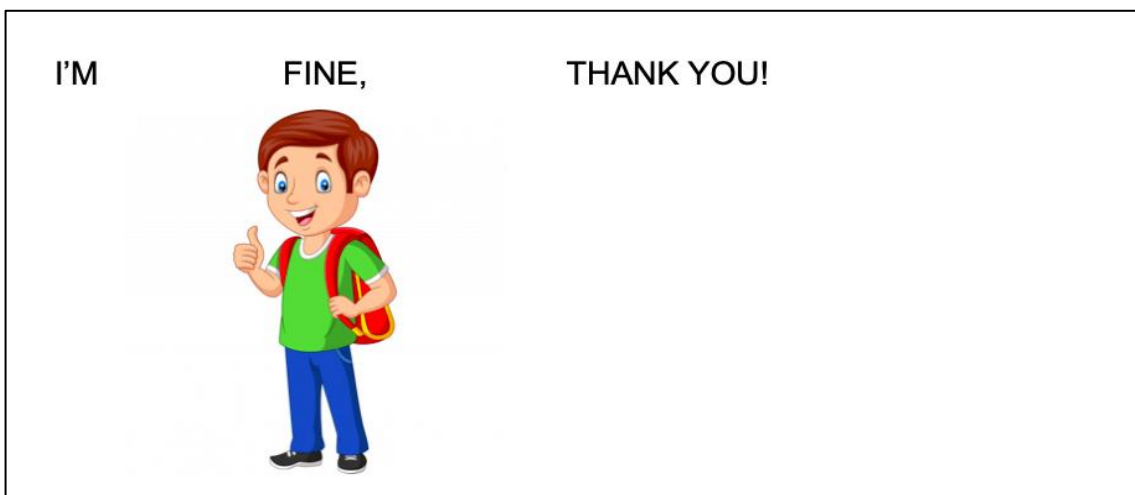*Illustration 6* Intervention- Formulaic sequence 1

Illustration 7 Intervention- Formulaic sequence 2
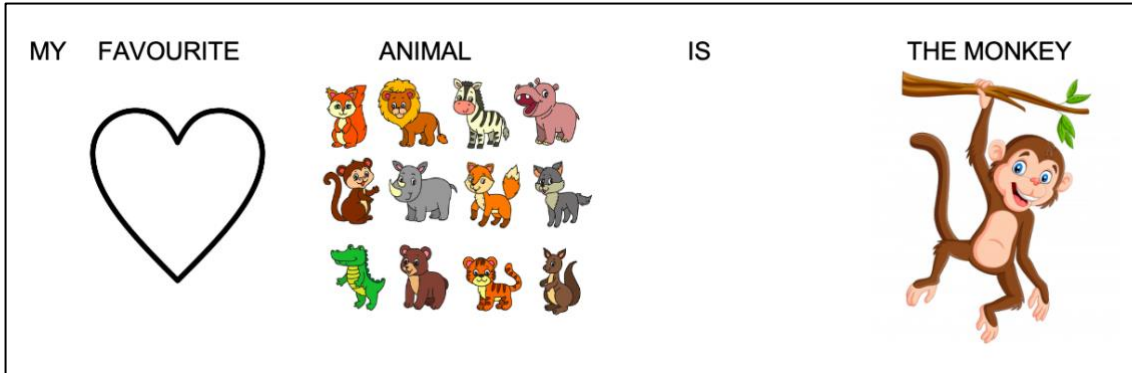

Illustration 8 Intervention- Formulaic sequence 3

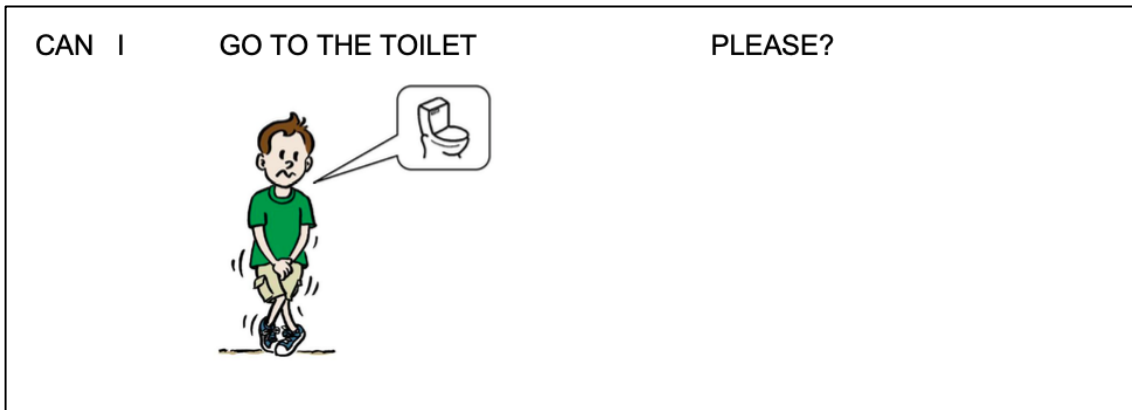**Illustration 9** *Intervention- Formulaic sequence 4*

Illustration 10 *Intervention- Formulaic sequence 5*