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# THE USE OF FORMULAIC LANGUAGE TO ENHANCE THE SPEAKING ABILITY OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT (LEP) LEARNERS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL

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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF EDUCATION (MIXED MODE) (TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE)

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# ABSTRACT

This study is aimed to analyse on how formulaic language can be used to enhance the speaking ability of limited English proficient (LEP) learners in a secondary school. Five, Form 4 LEP learners were involved in this study, which used a mixed method with an embedded design methodology. Their speech production (monologue and dialogue) were analysed in terms of accuracy by looking into the sentence selection to convey their intended ideas and the level of correctness in employing the learnt formulaic language in terms of lexis choices, word order and grammar, before and after a series of direct instruction sessions, which involved 'noticing' and 'awareness-raising' activities. The study also analysed how the use of formulaic language affects the context of repair fluency of the LEP learners in terms of repetition, reformulation and false starts. It can be concluded that the use of formulaic sequences had improved the quality and length of speech production for all the five LEP learners of this study, and to a certain extent had also served as a time-gaining strategy in their repair fluency. Due to learner differences, they improved at different levels, and the use of formulaic sequences was more extensive in the monologue speech production after the direct instruction sessions. However, their dialogic speech did not show encouraging improvement as their monologue speech production. This study provided some insights on how teachers may explore the use of formulaic language in teaching speaking skills especially to learners with limited English proficiency.

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# PENGGUNAAN BAHASA BERFORMULA DALAM KEMAMPUAN BERTUTUR DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR YANG BERKEMAHIRAN TERHAD DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS DI SEKOLAH MENENGAH

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan mengkaji penggunaan frasa-frasa yang dikenali sebagai bahasa berformula (formulaic language) untuk mempertingkat kemampuan pengucapan lisan bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan pelajar yang berkemahiran terhad dalam bahasa Inggeris di sebuah sekolah menengah. Kajian ini melibatkan lima pelajar, Tingkatan Empat. Produksi bahasa lisan mereka (monolog dan dialog) dianalisis dalam konteks ketepatan makna dengan melihat pilihan ayat mereka untuk menyampaikan maklumat dan tahap ketepatan frasa-frasa bahasa berformula dari segi urutan kata dan tatabahasa. Ini dilakukan sebelum, semasa dan selepas satu siri pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang mengutamakan aktiviti yang menarik tumpuan mereka terhadap frasa-frasa bahasa berformula. Kajian ini juga menganalisis kesan penggunaan frasa-frasa ini terhadap konteks repitasi, reformulasi dan gangguan permulaan ayat. Pada keseluruhannya, dapat dirumuskan bahawa frasa-frasa berformula telah meningkatkan kualiti dan kuantiti pengucapan kesemua pelajar dalam kajian ini walaupun pada tahap yang berbeza, serta berfungsi sebagai satu strategi menjimatkan masa untuk meyusun kata-kata yang hendak diucapkan. Dalam kajian ini, penggunaan frasa-frasa bahasa berformula lebih berkesan dalam pengucapan monolog berbanding dialog. Kajian ini dapat membantu guru-guru bahasa Inggeris meneroka penggunaan bahasa berformula terutamanya untuk kemahiran lisan pelajar-pelajar yang kurang mahir bahasa Inggeris.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


| | PAGES |
|---|---|
| **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** | iv |
| **ABSTRACT** | v |
| **ABSTRAK** | vi |
| **TABLE OF CONTENTS** | vii |
| **LIST OF TABLES** | viii |
| **LIST OF FIGURES** | XIII |
| **LIST OF APPENDICES** | XIV |
| **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** | XV |
| **CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY** | |
| 1.1 Introduction | 1 |
| 1.2 Theoretical Framework | 4 |
| 1.2.1 Lexical Approach | 5 |
| 1.2.2 Scaffolding Theory | 6 |
| 1.2.3 Noticing Hypothesis | 7 |
| 1.3 Conceptual Framework | 7 |
| 1.4 Needs for the Study | 10 |
| 1.5 Statement of the Problem | 13 |
| 1.6 Purpose of the Study | 15 |
| 1.7 Research Questions | 16 |
| 1.8 Significance of the Study | 17 |
| 1.9 Operational Definition | 19 |
| 1.9.1 Formulaic Language | 19 |
| 1.9.2 Limited English Proficient Learners (LEP) | 21 |
| 1.9.3 Speaking Ability | 22 |
| 1.9.4 Direct Instruction | 26 |
| 1.10 Summary | 28 |
| **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW** | |
| 2.1 Introduction | 29 |
| 2.2 Theoretical Background | 30 |
| 2.2.1 Lexical Approach | 30 |


05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

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2.2.2 Scaffolding Theory 33
2.2.3 Noticing Hypothesis 34
2.3 Formulaic Language in Terminology and Definition Diversity 36
2.4 How Do Formulaic Sequences Benefit Learners 41
2.4.1 Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Speaking 43
2.4.2 Use of Formulaic Language in Teaching Speaking 44
2.5 Summary 50

**CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

3.1 Introduction 51
3.2 Research Design 52
3.3 Sampling and Sampling Procedures 56
3.4 Research Instruments 57
3.4.1 Formulaic sequences For Teaching and Learning Sessions 57
3.4.2 Formulaic language Checklist 62
3.4.3 Observation Guide 62
3.4.3.1 Monologue Speech Observation Checklist 62
3.4.3.2 Observation Field Notes 63
3.4.4 Voice and Video Recordings 63
3.5 Pilot Study 63
3.6 Data Collection Procedure 67
3.6.1 Preliminary Session 68
3.6.2 Direct Instruction Sessions a, b, c, d, e 68
3.6.3 Evaluation Session 70
3.7 Data Analysis Procedures 70
3.8 Triangulation and Research Validity 73
3.9 Limitations 75
3.10 Summary 76

**CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS AND FINDING**

4.1 Introduction 77
4.2 Findings on Speaking Ability to answer Research Question 1 78
4.2.1 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech of Case 1, Research Question 1 81
4.2.2 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech of Case 2, Research Question 1 90

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

4.2.3 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech of Case 3, Research Question 1 97

4.2.4 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech of Case 4, Research Question 1 106

4.2.5 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech of Case 5, Research Question 1 113

4.2.6 Findings on Dialogic Speech 120

4.2.7 Findings and Discussion on Dialogic Utterances of Case 1, Research Question 1 120

4.2.8 Findings and Discussion on Dialogic Utterances of Case 2, Research Question 1 123

4.2.9 Findings and Discussion on Dialogic Utterances of Case 3, Research Question 1 127

4.2.10 Findings and Discussion on Dialogic Utterances of Case 4, Research Question 1 128

4.2.11 Findings and Discussion on Dialogic Utterances of Case 5, Research Question 1 129

4.3 Findings on repair fluency (Research Question 2) 130

4.3.1 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech Case 1, Research Question 2 131

4.3.2 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech Case 2, Research Question 2 134

4.3.3 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech Case 3, Research Question 2 136

4.3.4 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech Case 4, Research Question 2 137

4.3.5 Findings and Discussion on Monologue Speech Case 5, Research Question 2 139

4.4 Summary on findings and discussion 141

**CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.1 Introduction 147

5.2 Conclusions 148

5.3 Implications for Practice 150

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research 152

**REFERENCES** 154

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

APPENDIX A Formulaic expressions extracted from BNC 165
APPENDIX B Formulaic sequences in sentences as teaching 168
APPENDIX C Material for shadowing activity 170
APPENDIX D Formulaic language checklist 173
APPENDIX E Observation checklist for monologue speeches 176
APPENDIX F Observation protocol 177
APPENDIX G Activity sheets (blank filling) 178

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

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# LIST OF TABLES


| List of Tables | | Pages |
|---|---|---|
| 1.4 | Factors that cause limited English proficiency among Malaysia learners | 11 |
| 3.4.1 | Formulaic sequences with various functions | 61 |
| 3.5 | Twelve diagnostic criteria for assessing intuitive judgments about formulaicity | 65 |
| 3.6 | Sessions involved in the procedures, and the related data collection methods and instruments | 67 |
| 3.7 | Guidelines on addressing discrepancies on formulaic sequences | 71 |
| 3.8 | Research Triangulation Matrix | 73 |
| 4.2a | Frequency of targeted formulaic sequences attempted by each case | 80 |
| 4.2b | Frequency of non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted by each case | 80 |
| 4.2c | Frequency of targeted and non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted by each case | 81 |
| 4.2.1a | Case 1-Monologue speech before direct instructions | 82 |
| 4.2.1b | Case 1-Monologue speech after direct instructions | 82 |
| 4.2.1c | Case 1- Comparison of speech utterances with and without the use of formulaic sequences | 87 |
| 4.2.1d | Case 1- Number of targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 89 |
| 4.2.1e | Case 1- Number of non targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 89 |
| 4.2.2a | Case 2-Monologue speech before direct instructions | 90 |
| 4.2.2b | Case 2-Monologue speech after direct instructions | 91 |
| 4.2.2c | Case 2-Number of targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 96 |
| 4.2.2d | Case 2-Number of non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 97 |
| 4.2.3a | Case 3-Monologue speech before direct instructions | 97 |
| 4.2.3b | Case 3-Monologue speech after direct instructions | 98 |
| 4.2.3c | Case 3-Number of targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 105 |
| 4.2.3d | Case 3-Number of non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted | 105 |
| 4.2.4a | Case 4-Monologue speech before direct instruction | 106 |


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05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

4.2.4b Case 4-Monologue speech after direct instructions 106

4.2.4c Case 4-Number of targeted formulaic sequences attempted 112

4.2.4d Case 4 -Number of non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted 112

4.2.5a Case 5-Monologue speech before direct instructions 113

4.2.5b Case 5-Monologue speech after direct instructions 113

4.2.5c Case 5-Number of targeted formulaic sequences attempted 119

4.2.5d Case 5-Number of non-targeted formulaic sequences attempted 119

4.3 Types of repair in LEP learners' monologue speeches when formulaic sequences were used 131

05-4506832 pustaka.upsi.edu.my Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah PustakaTBainun ptbupsi

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# LIST OF FIGURES


| List of Figures | | Pages |
|---|---|---|
| 1.3 | Conceptual Framework | 8 |
| 3.2a | The embedded design in a mixed method research (Creswell & Clark, 2011) | 54 |
| 3.2b | Flowchart of the Basic Procedures in Implementing an Embedded Design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) | 55 |


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## LIST OF APPENDICES

A Formulaic Expressions Extracted From BNC
B Formulaic Sequences in Sentences As Teaching
C Material for Shadowing Activity
D Formulaic Language Checklist
E Observation Checklist for Monologue Speeches
F Observation Protocol
G Activity Sheets (Blank Filling)

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| LEP | Limited English Proficient/Proficiency |
| DI | Direct Instructions |

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# CHAPTER 1

# BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

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## 1.1 Introduction

The English language syllabus in Malaysia aims to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs for English in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs (Ministry of Education, 2003). The objectives of the curriculum are to enable learners to:

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i. form and maintain relationships through conversation and correspondence; take part in social interactions; and obtain goods and services;
ii. obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form;
iii. listen to, view, read and respond to different texts, and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form
iv. show an awareness and appreciation of moral values and love towards the nation.

This shows that the ability to speak in English is expected to be acquired or learned by learners to meet the demands of real life. However, it is said that, speech fluency is not easy to acquire, for most language learners (Khodadady E & Shamsaee S, 2012). Wood (2004) in his study on fluency has mentioned that fluency development for effective communication is so instrumental yet marginalized or given less attention in the teaching and learning process.

Speaking ability requires a speaker to select from a range of 30,000 and 60,000 words while putting them in grammatically correct structures (Owens, 2008). Speech is constructed in real time and this imposes greater cognitive load (Wood, 2004). He states that, there is a need to articulate the intended meaning as well as comprehending and responding to the interlocutors in real time. Howell and Au Yeung (2002), attribute the lexical and grammatical knowledge development and the slower processing during formulation and articulation of speech as factors that

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contribute to disfluencies in L2. On this basis, it is understood that speaking can be a burdening process especially to limited English proficiency (LEP) learners. Perhaps this also explains why teaching speaking skills to LEP learners is often considered a time consuming task by some teachers.

Activities commonly used in speaking lessons that could inspire or promote speaking skills are role-play, simulation, acting from script, games, discussions and prepared talks (Harmer, 2007). However, the LEP learners may not perform well in these speaking activities as they are challenging for their proficiency level. Besides, Ding and Liu (2009) has stated that activities such as role plays may not fully assist EFL students attain language accuracy, appropriacy and fluency unless four factors are given attention and seriously dealt with: relevance of topic, the feed-in of language, error correction and the role of teacher.

Edwards (2001) states that, learners must be placed at the heart of the learning process, in which the learners are able to learn what is relevant for them in ways that are appropriate, and meeting their needs. Perhaps, the use of formulaic language in a series of direct instruction may contribute to the task of steering the LEP learners towards the goal. This study was designed to explore and describe how formulaic language could facilitate the speaking ability of learners with limited English proficiency.

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## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993), scaffolding theory (Bruner, 1978) and noticing hypothesis (Schimdt, 1990). Generally, teaching speaking skills using communicative approach portrays the manifestation of a constructivist view in which learning is expected to occur when a student freely constructs one's own knowledge (Crawford, 2003). The teacher attempts to create an environment to speak such as simulation, role play, debate, storytelling and various other activities in which learners are to develop understanding and meaning of concepts through participation in the activities (Decoo, 2001). However, in the case of LEP learners, it is questionable if they can construct their own knowledge all by themselves, because as in comparison to the average and proficient learners, the former are lacking in terms of vocabulary and syntax rules; support to use English and various other factors (Musa, N. C., Lie, K. Y., & Azman, H., 2012).

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Thus, focusing on certain aspects propagated by these theories may allow teachers to have a different view in teaching speaking skills to LEP learners. The gist of each theory is outlined in the following sections and further discussed in Chapter 2.

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### 1.2.1 Lexical Approach

Lexical approach was introduced by Michael Lewis in 1993. In the lexical approach, lexis or words of various types play a central role in language teaching and learning. Lewis (1993) drew attention to teaching and learning formulaic expressions that are made up from the most common words and patterns in the learner's most natural environment.

Nattinger and De Carrio (1992), suggested that teaching should be based on the idea that language production is the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation. Thus, comprehension of such units is dependent on knowing the patterns to predict in different situations. Instruction, therefore, according to Nattinger and De Carrio (1992), should center on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur. Implementing a lexical approach in the classroom does not lead to radical methodological changes. The language activities in line with lexical approach must be directed towards providing support and raising learners' awareness on the lexis. This research used some activities in which the ready-made units, as mentioned above, were incorporated into the teaching and learning process of the LEP learners to investigate how much assistance could be obtained by them to improve their speaking ability.

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### 1.2.2 Scaffolding Theory

Scaffolding is a concept developed by Bruner (1978), in the context of first language acquisition and parental tutoring of very young children which describes the verbal support provided by adults to guide a learner and enable them to carry out a task which they would be unable to do without help. Scaffolding is defined as 'the steps taken to reduce the freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the learner concentrates on the more difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring' (Bruner, 1978). In this study, the formulaic sequences were expected to help the learners to acquire the more difficult skill which is 'speaking' through various activities that provide guide mainly to overcome their major problem in sentence construction.

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The concept of scaffolding is to provide help which is not permanent and can be structured, strengthened, taken down piece by piece or taken away completely, as the learner independently develops knowledge and skills and eventually become competent. The formulaic expressions exposed to the learners through direct instruction in this research were with the expectation to scaffold the acquisition of word units in the learning process. Having this gradually pulled back, the learners played the role of managing the learnt units of formulaic expressions for their own language production.

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### 1.2.3 Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt (1992) has stated that awareness of language input is necessary in second language acquisition (SLA). This claim runs counter to Krashen's dual system hypothesis (as cited in Schmidt, 1992), that SLA largely results from an unconscious "acquisition" system and that the contribution of the conscious "learning" system to SLA being limited and peripheral.

Schmitt's (2004) noticing hypothesis highlights the differential performance on implicit and explicit learning and memory experiments. Schmitt says that it is caused by differences in the consciously processing demands of training tasks and not by the activation of consciously and unconsciously accessed systems. The individual differences in memory and attention holding capacity both affect the extent of noticing, thereby directly influencing second language learning. Taking this into consideration, the activities in this study (shadowing, filling in blanks and dictogloss) were tailored to maximise learners' ability to notice the formulaic expressions expected to be learned.

## 1.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research is based on lexical approach with the use of formulaic language in a scaffolding process in direct instruction. LEP learners manipulate and use the learnt formulaic language as a framework of instances to

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convey their own ideas in speech production. The framework in Figure 1 shows how the process of learning to speak was expected to work.

In a classroom, the process begins with giving input according to the needs of students. In preparing the LEP learners, teachers need to prepare scaffolding as means of support to develop the ability to speak. The scaffolding must be built on some kind of material; in this research, formulaic language which is the core of lexical approach is used. In order to build the support or 'scaffold' the content of language, teacher used noticing activities in direct instructions to ease the LEP learners' learning and acquisition process. The success in producing speech, by using and manipulating the learnt instances of the formulaic language in their speech production was achieved at the end of a series of these teaching and learning sessions. This concept is visualized in Figure 1. 3

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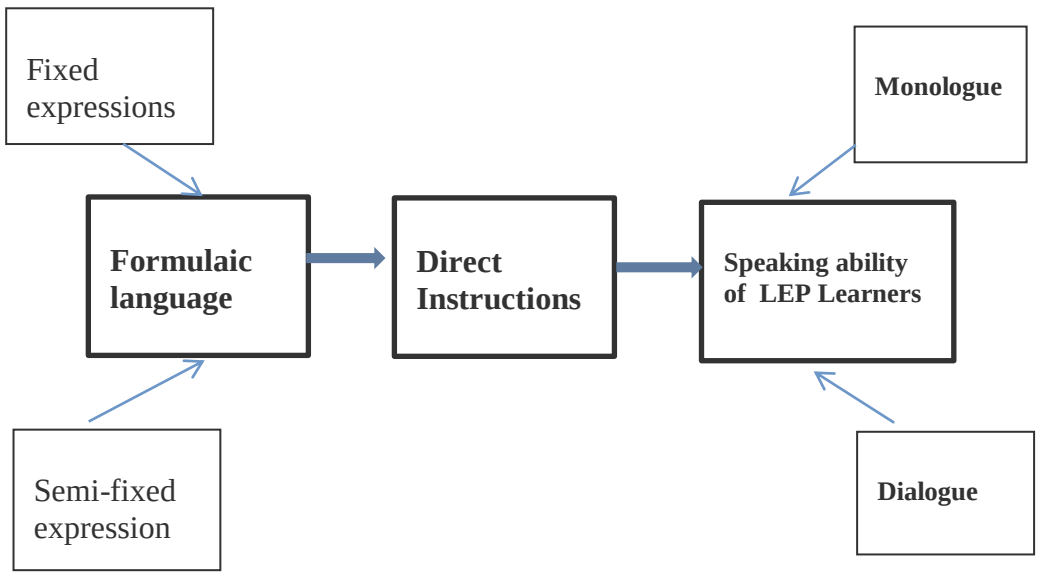


*Figure 1.3: Conceptual Framework*

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The second language acquisition (SLA) theory states that children focus in getting their message across first when learning a language and not on knowing the rules of the language. Nevertheless, this research did not neglect grammar accuracy altogether. However, many formulaic expressions are accepted as grammatically correct in English due to their vast use by speakers even though they show grammar irregularity. Below are some examples:

i. We say 'If I were you,' and not 'If I am you...' or 'if I was you...'

ii. Phrases such as 'look into it' does not mean looking inside something but to investigate or examine something.

iii. The question 'What is your father?' requires information on the occupation, although the use of 'what' may elicit different responses if interpreted literally.

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In this research, the teaching and learning process used formulaic expressions (lexical approach) in direct instruction sessions to scaffold the ability of speaking through activities that could help LEP learners notice, focus their attention and raise awareness to some formulaic expressions and later on use them to facilitate and improve their speaking ability.

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## 1.4 Needs for the Study

Richards (2008) states that a large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking which is needed for the functions of expressing ideas and opinions, wish or a desire and building social relationship in interactions . However, in Malaysia, classroom practices reveal limited listening and speaking exercises and featured more essay writing plus reading and comprehension exercises (Musa, N. C., Lie, K. Y., & Azman, H., 2012).

A further look into some studies also discloses a prevailing trend in Malaysian schools. The emphasis on examination is dominant and because of the high importance placed on examinations, it is reported that teachers tend to concentrate on the teaching of grammar and neglect the communicative aspects of language learning in their teaching, resulting in communicative incompetence - inability to use the English language productively (Koo, 2008; Ambigapathy, 2002). Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al. (2008) on the other hand, state that the environment do not encourage the use of English in many cases especially in rural areas and this has worsened the effort of acquiring the language. These reports show evidence that teaching of speaking skills often takes to the backstage. Learners with limited English proficiency are affected more for the reasons as what the following table shows.

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Table 1.4

*Factors that cause limited English proficiency among Malaysian learners*

| | |
|---|---|
| i. | English is viewed as a difficult subject to learn |
| ii. | Learners depend on the English teachers as authorities |
| iii. | English is used only to answer teacher's questions and spoken during English class |
| iv. | Learners tend to depend heavily on translation and dictionary use to find meanings |
| v. | There is a lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community |
| vi. | Learners are found to have limited vocabulary as English reading materials are not always available. |
| vii. | Learners display unwillingness and lack of motivation to learn English as they do not see the immediate need to use the language. |
| viii. | Learners have inadequate or insufficient exposure to the language as there is a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms. |
| ix. | English is not perceived as an important medium for communication as they use Malay language both for academic and personal interactions. |
| x. | Learners express unwillingness and high anxiety to use English to communicate despite acknowledging that English is important for their future. |
| xi. | There is a mismatch between policy and practice in the Malaysian ELT curriculum; the policy as envisaged in the school curriculum cannot be fully implemented in schools because of the over-riding concern for examination. |

*Note* Taken from Musa, N. C., Lie, K. Y., & Azman, H. (2012)
Sources: Ambigapathy (2002; 2006); Fauziah Hassan & Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002), Mohd Sofi Ali (2008), Naginder (2006), Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz (2007), Razianna Abdul Rahman (2005), Rosemala Ismail (2008), Zaira Abu Hassan (2008)

Besides, according to Hazita Azman (2009), there are still many learners who have contacts with English only during English classes, making the learning process as being highly conceptualized through school experience. All these suggest needs to a continued effort investigating the pedagogical practices of teaching English to help those with limited English proficiency to maximise learning within instruction time.

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This research that focused on the speaking ability of LEP learners relying mainly on formulaic language, could render help in reducing some of the problems faced by them. Using formulaic language in teaching speaking is analogical to verbal-scaffolding, word units to word phrases and sentences, which could, to a certain extent resolve problems pertaining to linguistic inability such as lack of vocabulary and sentence forming. Wood (2006) says language users rely on a very high extent on ready-made language "lexical chunks", which can be easily combined to form sentences. This sheds some hope in reducing the struggle of LEP learners to string words in meaningful way.

Besides, it is hoped that the acquisition of formulaic language can be retained, reconstructed and manipulated to convey intended meaning for future use by these learners, and in long run reduce the anxiety in using English to communicate because to retrieve something from the memory is easier than to build it from scratch (Schmidt, 2004; Wray, 2009).

In September 2013, Jobstreet.com found that 55% of employers who took part in a survey attributed unemployment to the poor command of English language. In a newspaper report, Samsudin Bardan (as cited in Fazleena Aziz, 2014) said that The Malaysian Employers Federation identified that 60% young recruits have low English proficiency.

LEP learners in schools may not vie for the upper strata of employment when they leave school. It could be the blue collar and pink collar jobs that usually

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