

Jiayi Wang & Nicola Halenko (2022) Developing the use of formulaic language for study abroad: a targeted instructional intervention, *The Language Learning Journal*.

DOI: [10.1080/09571736.2022.2088446](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2088446)

The eprint link is:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/GGXCV5F53ETNPVA3Y86/full?target=10.1080/09571736.2022.2088446>

Developing the use of formulaic language for study abroad: A targeted instructional intervention

Jiayi Wang & Nicola Halenko

Abstract

This study investigates the immediate and sustained effects of a pre-departure study abroad training on the oral production of L2 Chinese formulaic language across a range of social and transactional interactions. Eighteen upper-intermediate learners of Chinese were assigned to either an instructed or non-instructed group to determine the efficacy of instruction designed to enhance their study abroad year in China and beyond. A three-stage pre-post-delayed longitudinal experimental design was adopted to examine instructional effects over an academic year, elicited by means of a computerised oral task (COT). The assessment was based on quantitative appropriateness ratings and a qualitative analysis of the output. Results show that the instructed group outperformed the control group immediately after the pre-study abroad (pre-SA) instruction, as well as after the year abroad. The significant difference between the two groups, however, decreased after the period abroad as the control group also showed significant improvement without the pre-SA instruction. Nevertheless, the sustained effect of the instruction enabled the experimental group to retain their competitive edge, even after a year in the target language country. The findings demonstrate the longitudinal benefits of pre-SA instruction.

Keywords: Pragmatics instruction, study abroad, formulaic expressions, longitudinal effects, L2 Chinese learners

Introduction

Language is known to operate in a highly conventional way (Meunier 2012; Wray 2002). The pervasiveness of formulaic language (FL), described as fixed or semi-fixed syntactic strings that are closely tied to recurrent situations and communicative events (Kecskes 2000), have well-known functional use to perform everyday tasks, “I was wondering if...” to make a request in English and “辛苦你了 [lit. hard work you *sentence-final particle*]” to express thanks or “哪里哪里 [lit. where where]” to respond to a compliment in certain Chinese contexts. In foreign language learning, in addition to the communicative and processing benefits offered by FL (e.g., Hinkel 2018; Wray 2002), interlocutors have an expectation of formulaic language use for effective and efficient interaction. Erman and Warren (2000, 31) highlight the importance of the target language community in their definition of FL:

‘combinations of at least two words favored by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization’. The authors go on to note that ‘raised awareness of the abundance and importance of [FL] should improve the student's learning strategies and command of a foreign language’ (2000, 52).

Sadly, research continues to show that FL is underused and remains a challenge even for those with advanced proficiency (Boers and Lindstromberg 2012; Glaser 2018; Kecskes 2000; Taguchi, Li and Xiao 2013). Inadequate sources of FL input may be one explanation pertinent to the present study. In instructed contexts, exposure to native-like FL input is typically limited to authentic documents, textbooks, and teacher-talk (Meunier 2012).

Kecskes (2016) comments on the abundance of formulaic expressions in Chinese but the paucity of L2 textbook material which deal with them in any depth. This is supported by anecdotal evidence from SA returners from China at our own institution who have previously drawn comparisons between their lack of confidence in using Chinese during SA with not possessing sufficient ‘survival phrases’, as they describe it, to get by in day-to-day interactions. In contrast, the availability and amount of native-like input in a SA environment is unlimited in principle, and yet, developmental studies reveal exposure and frequency do not necessarily lead to a better command of FL. L2 users are often reported to fall short of target-like levels in terms of FL comprehension, but more so with FL production, as shown in studies across languages, including L2 Chinese (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Su 2018; Taguchi, Li and Xiao 2013; Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017; Yang 2016).

FL is also considered a valuable area of research and study, particularly for SA sojourners, since its use acts as a ‘cohesive and unifying force of a language [and are] an important sign of group-inclusiveness and native-likeness’ (Kecskes 2016, 123). In this way, FL is crucial to the socialisation of novice language learners as they develop their language and sociocultural knowledge through participation with more knowledgeable and proficient members of the local community (Burdelski and Cook 2012). Language socialisation theory is helpful for the present study since the FL data can inform how the participants as novices are socialised to L2 Chinese politeness, hierarchy, social roles, statuses and relationships as they spend extended time in a new community of practice for their SA period (Burdelski and Cook 2012).

Whilst L2 Chinese studies have so far independently examined acquisition of FL during study abroad (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Su, 2018; Taguchi, Li and Xiao 2013) or the effects of

instruction of pragmatic routines (e.g., Li, 2012, 2013; Li and Taguchi 2014; Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017), to the best of our knowledge, no study has combined these variables. In this study, targeted instruction is applied to enhance formulaic output across a range of social contexts (e.g., invitations to dinner, gift-giving) and transactional contexts (e.g., ordering at a restaurant, taking the bus), which SA sojourners are likely to encounter.

The research questions relate to the extent of facilitative effects regarding instruction and SA in producing FL:

1. To what extent does pre-SA instruction and/or exposure to the L2 facilitate the development of formulaic competence?
2. How does the content and quality of formulaic output produced by the participant groups compare following the year abroad?

Background

Formulaic language

Historically, FL has seldom been a focus of mainstream studies investigating second language development, despite early and continued recognition of its importance as a central feature in effective and efficient communication (Pawley and Syder 1983; Schmitt 2004; Sinclair 1991; Wray 2008). Bardovi-Harlig (2009) records that it is only since the early 2000s that an interest in examining FL has seen a resurgence from Scarcella's (1979) earliest empirical work on L1 Spanish speakers which reported highly conventional target items in English were difficult for non-native speakers to acquire. The development of FL is a reminder of Lewis's (1993) Lexical Approach which contends that much communication is expedited through lexical phrases or chunks but remembered and deployed as single items. Wray's definition underlines the mental processing aspect of FL: 'a sequence, continuous or

discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears 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' (2002, 9), whilst Bardovi-Harlig (2009) highlights the social aspect: strings which native speakers use predictably in certain prescribed social situations. Since the present study examines FL within the context of SA, Kecskes' description of FL as 'highly conventionalised, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardised communicative situations' (2016, 108) is adopted.

Language learning from a formulae-based approach can be an effective L2 learning strategy. Retrieving and producing highly-routinised language saves both time (Pawley and Syder 1983) and effort (Wray 2000) since formulaic sequences are stored and retrieved as whole chunks. For L2 learners in particular, FL can save mental capacity (Wang 2011), reduces the amount of planning and processing time (Hinkel 2018), promotes fluency (e.g., Barron 2003) and positively impacts others' perception of pragmatic competence (Kecskes 2016).

Interlocutors also easily recognise FL and, in fact, have an expectation that it is used in order to expedite effective communication. This is achieved due to the predictability of formulaic language, resulting in a reduction in production and processing effort for all parties.

Developing formulaic competence for L2 users, however, is not without its challenges.

Firstly, regarding comprehension of formulaic expressions, a common issue is the tendency for language learners to process FL at the literal level rather than the expected conventional level (Kecskes 2000). For instance, the Chinese greeting, 'Have you eaten?' ('how are you?') may trigger the target language user to interpret this as an invitation to eat (literal meaning), rather than processing the sequence as a highly routinised greeting (conventional meaning) in accordance with the speaker's expectations. Secondly, from a production perspective, formulaic sequences require a high degree of accuracy to be effective, but this is not always achieved in terms of form (e.g., *I am wonder if...*) or meaning (*Happy morning*), as these L2

English examples illustrate. Finally, finding equivalent expressions between languages may simply not be possible due to their socio-cultural origins and close ties to the local context (Kecskes 2016; Wang 2018; Wang and Guo 2017). For example, 辛苦你了 [lit. hard work you *sentence-final particle*] does not have a direct English equivalent. It is used when someone has completed a task or favour for you to express appreciation for the hard work he/she did. Another factor which may also cause L2 users to actively avoid FL use is when the L2 sociocultural beliefs and norms expressed through the string is at odds with the user's L1 practices (see, e.g., Shively 2011 with L2 Spanish; Wang and Halenko 2019b with L2 Chinese). Researchers across languages agree that lack of familiarity with formulaicity, low sociopragmatic knowledge, level of proficiency, and learner agency as possible explanations for FL knowledge gaps (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig 2009; Qi and Ding 2011; Halenko 2018, 2021; Halenko and Jones 2017; Hinkel 2018; Wang and Halenko 2019a). As this study brings together both the study abroad context and classroom instruction in relation to FL, these two sources of input are discussed in the following sections.

Formulaic language and study abroad

Much conventional formulaic language can be found in realising functions such as requests, apologies, bargaining, taking leave (Schmitt and Carter 2004). To date, much of the attention on FL in L2 Chinese derives from speech act research, as the studies reviewed in this section illustrate. Being a member of a target language community can offer easy access to rich and varied formulae through participation in daily communicative events. That said, positive links between L2 exposure and speech act research are inconclusive, as the following studies of L2 Chinese also report.

Jin (2012) reports on a case study of four American students and their development of compliment responses in Mandarin Chinese whilst participating in an 8-week intensive

summer program in Shanghai. Extensive qualitative data from a participant questionnaire, interviews, reflective blogs, and the researcher's observation of social interaction showed individual trajectories of development in knowledge and skills which was shaped by high participant motivation to 'learn the Chinese way' (2012, 230) but constrained by limited social interaction and exposure to a range of compliment response samples.

Li's (2014) longer 15-week study focused on the development of eight request scenarios captured via an online oral test at the start and end of a SA in Beijing. The data from the 31 intermediate and advanced American learners of Chinese were measured against native Chinese speakers for increases in appropriateness, planning time and speech rate, in addition to determining whether proficiency was an influential variable. Overall, a higher level of proficiency was not found to lead to greater pragmatic gains during SA. Whilst the intermediate and advanced groups both made comparable gains in appropriateness rating (evidenced by changes in the production of alerters, request head acts and internal/external modification), neither group reduced planning time and only the advanced group gained in speech rate.

Focussing directly on formulaic expressions this time, Taguchi, Li and Xiao's (2013) investigation of 31 American, intermediate Chinese learners' ability to produce FL across a range of 24 communicative situations over a 10-week SA in mainland China has direct links to the present study. The learners' performance was assessed using an online speaking task and evaluated based on appropriateness and planning time, in addition to a survey assessing learners' perceived frequency of encounter with the target FL. The results revealed the learners achieved significant gains on appropriateness scores and planning time between the beginning and end of the SA period. Reported frequency of encountering the formulaic expressions did not correlate with the production gains, however, apart from those learners who scored lower on the pretest. A qualitative examination of the formulae showed a

complex picture of both convergent moves towards target-like expressions (e.g., increased use of core formulaic lexis and native-like syntactic structure of formulae which managed to adequately convey pragmatic intention) but was also characterised by both temporary and sustained divergence (e.g., overuse of particular formulae and pragmalinguistic inability to adjust formulae according to different situations). The authors noted that the production of exact formulae was ‘fairly limited’ even towards the end of the SA period, likely due to a combination of underdeveloped lexico-syntactic knowledge and pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic knowledge.

What links the above studies is the authors’ observations of the highly individual outcomes and developmental processes by which learners come to produce FL in a SA immersion context. Another common theme is the inconsistency of the quality and quantity of input mediated by the time-limited stay, so calls for longer observational periods, as found in the present study, also appear. Pedagogical action to boost formulaic competency, as discussed in the next section, is seen as a partial remedy to offer SA learners a more advantageous starting point so they can hit the (SA) ground running in terms of FL production.

Formulaic language and instruction

Instructional interventions consistently report being able to advance learners’ use of formulaic expressions common to many speech acts (see Taguchi 2015 for a review).

Overall, results suggest learners are able to produce and comprehend FL beyond the levels achieved from exposure alone. Moreover, targeted explicit instruction, where teacher-led metapragmatic input of the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features of the target language are introduced, has been shown to be the most beneficial approach (Plonsky and Zhuang 2019; Taguchi 2015). As examples of FL instruction within a series of studies examining spoken requests in L2 English, Halenko (2009, 2018), Halenko and Jones (2011,

2017), Halenko et al. (2019) consistently reported that experimental groups who received targeted formulaic instruction in requests and apologies were the highest performing groups compared to implicitly instructed groups, or those receiving no instruction.

The handful of intervention studies pertaining to L2 Chinese report similar positive outcomes. As is the recent trend in instructional studies, these investigations move beyond the question of whether instruction is effective to focusing on how pragmatics is best implemented. This section introduces a series of related L2 Chinese studies examining American learners' development of requests in Chinese, which help shed light on how variables such as practice and computer-based input can affect pragmatic performance.

Beginning with two speech act studies, Li (2012) aimed to understand the effects of differential amounts of input-based (receptive) practice on the development of request head acts. The results were not clear-cut between the intense or regular training conditions, or when comparing to a control group, but there was some limited evidence that a larger amount of practice time could lead to gains in pragmatic knowledge (accuracy) and processing ability (speed).

Later, Li and Taguchi (2014) also compared the effects of input and output modalities, on the development of accuracy and speed of recognition and production of requests. The instruction was a 40-minute computer-based metapragmatic session of four target forms of direct/indirect request-making. The input group took part in four input-based practice sessions with 20-25 minutes each over four consecutive days, whereas the output group engaged in four output-based sessions with 20-35 minutes each. The results showed that the development of pragmatic knowledge can benefit from practice across modalities and is more amenable to instruction than processing ability which requires modality-specific practice.

Taking technology-assisted learning one step further and focusing on the learning of Chinese formulaic expressions, Taguchi, Li and Tang (2017) devised a novel computer-based instructional platform, created to simulate a game-like experience, to measure the comprehension and production of twenty-eight Chinese expressions. Thirty learners progressed through a series of scenario-based, video tasks at their own pace, intending that completion of the game would signal the enhancement of formulaic knowledge. Pretest, posttest and delayed test comparisons corroborated previous research on the possibilities of advancing formulaic comprehension more easily than production. Participant interviews and author observations offered the linguistic and cognitive demands of production activities, the absence of targeted noticing activities, and the operational features of the game as possible explanations for this disparity.

In summary, production of FL has been shown to be more problematic than comprehension, associated with higher cognitive and linguistic demands placed on language learners and the need for linguistic and sociocultural precision when executing formulaic expressions (Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017). Additional empirical attention in the area of formulaic production is therefore needed. Although these studies enhance our understanding of instructional and SA variables when examining formulaic competence, they are limited in their cross-sectional design. This study's longitudinal focus and approach of tracking the transfer of learning to real-world communicative situations in order to gauge the after-effects of instruction and SA are rarely addressed (Taguchi 2015) and yet to appear in L2 Chinese research.

Methodology

Participants

Eighteen undergraduate students (9 males and 9 females), with an age range of 21-32, volunteered to participate in the study. The majority of students were British (two students were Asian heritage language learners) and three students were European. At the time of the study, all were formally studying Chinese as a second language as part of a range of undergraduate degree programmes within the UK institution where the study was located (TESOL with Chinese, Business Management in China, Chinese with another modern foreign language). On average, the students had completed 2 years of L2 Chinese study and had achieved an upper- intermediate level (CEFR B2). No student reported any prior study abroad experience in China longer than two weeks, and not within the twelve months leading up to the study. The timing of the study was scheduled at the end of the students' second year of their degree programme, and prior to embarking on a SA academic year at various partner universities in mainland China. The participants were assigned to either an experimental group ($n=9$) receiving explicit formulaic input, or an uninstructed control group ($n=9$) providing baseline data. The selection process was based solely on attainment to establish an even distribution of achievement levels and group homogeneity from a performance perspective.

Target formulaic expressions

Because pragmatics is not entirely formulaic (Bardovi-Harlig 2012), our study aimed to identify scenarios which were likely to produce the most consistent use of formulaic language, as well as contexts which SA sojourners would most likely encounter during their stay. The initial set of 37 formulaic expressions were developed with the help of existing literature (e.g., Taguchi, Li and Xiao 2013; Winke and Teng 2010), and consultations with previous study abroad students, and native and non-native speakers of Chinese. An example scenario is illustrated below.

Ask for the time

Scenario: Ask a passer-by for the time.

Does this situation happen regularly in your life? A. Yes B. No

What would you say in this situation? _____

问时间

场景：向路人询问时间。

在你的现实生活中，上述或相似场景是否时常发生？ A. 是 B. 否

在这个场景中，你会怎么对路人怎么说： _____

We trialled the English-based questionnaire containing all the 37 candidate situations with 8 final year undergraduate students majoring in Chinese who had just returned from their year abroad in China (NNSs). A Chinese version of the questionnaire was completed by 8 native speakers of Chinese (6 postgraduate students and 2 undergraduate students) (NSs). The situations encompassed a range of speech acts, such as requests, apologies and leave-taking. Similar to Taguchi, Li and Xiao (2013), only those situations which were rated as happening regularly in China by at least 50% of the NS respondents and/or at least 50% of the NNS respondents were retained. Broadly following Bardovi-Harlig (2009), scenarios that generated single expressions used by at least 50% of NSs, at least 50% of NNSs, and at least 50% of all the pilot participants featured in the final set. Out of 37 original candidate scenarios, this process yielded 26 situations, and their associated target formulae, which were considered meaningful and relevant for learners embarking on a SA stay (see Appendix 1).

Instruction and testing material

The explicit treatment introduced the experimental group to the target expressions which were linked to information about the sociocultural context within which they were found. In

this way both the linguistic and cultural aspects of the formulae were presented. The researchers delivered the input and contributed their native and non-native experiences of the communicative situations from L1 and L2 perspectives which were used as stimuli for discussion points.

The sessions were organised as preparation for SA and consisted of six hours of class contact over a two-week period. The instruction for each three-hour session was guided by well-attested principles known to be effective for pragmatics instruction: (1) the input followed an awareness-raising approach acknowledging that learners may exercise agency and reject the L2 pragmalinguistic and/or sociopragmatic norms presented (Rose and Kasper 2001); (2) a basic instructional framework adapted from existing interventional studies balanced input with structured practice activities and feedback (Taguchi 2015); (3) explicit input (which included metapragmatic information) over implicit input was selected, and for a minimum of five hours, since these variables have been shown to facilitate the most effective results in intervention studies (Jeon and Kaya 2006; Plonsky and Zhuang 2019; Taguchi 2015); (4) a control group enabled the measurement of true instructional effects (Taguchi 2006); (5) a delayed test, in this case on return from the year abroad, offered a way to measure any sustained instructional effects (Taguchi 2015).

The input sessions were organised according to 7 communicative themes which captured the 26 different transactional and social expressions: 1) compliment response, 2) request, 3) enquiry, 4) leave-taking, 5) telephone conversation, 6) bargain and 7) apology.

The first input session covered themes 1-3, the second input session covered themes 4-7. At the beginning of each session, we provided a metapragmatic overview. Next, we went through the themes and the associated scenarios. In addition, the students were also instructed

to practice in pairs and groups. The instructed group were exposed to the linguistic and cultural aspects of each theme, provided with communicative activities and opportunities for discussion. For example, the students were given an overview of the distinction between insider and outsider relations (内外有别) and the discourse patterns “Because...so... (因为……所以)” in Chinese and its impact on the formulaic expressions. Comparisons between L1 and L2 linguistic and cultural knowledge were encouraged throughout which was effectively facilitated by the two researchers as British English and mandarin Chinese native speakers.

Preceding the first input session, all participants completed a computerised oral test containing the 26 different scenarios. Participants were required to listen to the contextual information provided in English (also provided on screen), to imagine performing these tasks during SA and to provide an appropriate oral response in Chinese when they heard the prompt, ‘You say?’ (see example below).

Scenario 2: Asking for Professor Li over the phone.

You are calling the School Office. You would like to speak to Professor Li. You hear someone pick up the phone and say ‘wéi’. You say?

Learners worked through the scenarios at their own pace and took on average 17 minutes to complete the test. The test was administered three times with both the experimental and control groups: (1) before the instruction, (2) immediately following the six hours of instruction, (3) one year later, on return from SA. The control group was invited back each time to complete the test alongside the experimental group. The same scenarios were included at each test stage but were ordered differently to mitigate against test effects.

Data analysis

Our research assistant transcribed all the oral output, including all the utterances, pauses and hesitations as well as planning time and speech rate. She then mixed together all the responses to the 26 scenarios and created an anonymous scoring sheet for each scenario for each rater. Two Chinese language tutors, both of whom had over 10 years' experience of teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language, rated the appropriateness of each response on a six-point Likert scale according to their own perceptions of levels of directness, politeness and formality included in the responses (0 = no response provided, 1= I would not feel satisfied at all, 2= I would not feel very satisfied, 3= I would feel satisfied, 4= I would feel very satisfied, 5 = I would feel completely satisfied) (see Halenko 2021 for full descriptions). A rating of '3' was considered the cut-off point for a response to be considered appropriate. The raters had a thorough initial standardisation and briefing session. The interrater reliability rate was .87 for pretest, .89 for posttest and .91 for delayed posttest before discrepancies were resolved.

Results

Quantitative findings

Our first research question examined the extent to which pre-SA instruction and L2 exposure facilitated the development of formulaic competence. Figure 1 summarises the developmental trend of both participant groups throughout the whole project which lasted over one year. The blue colour refers to the experimental group and the orange colour to the control group. The key finding is that both groups improved the appropriateness of their formulaic output across time, but this success was attributable to different sources of input. The experimental group gained most from the pre-SA instruction whilst for the control group, the period abroad had the greatest positive effect.

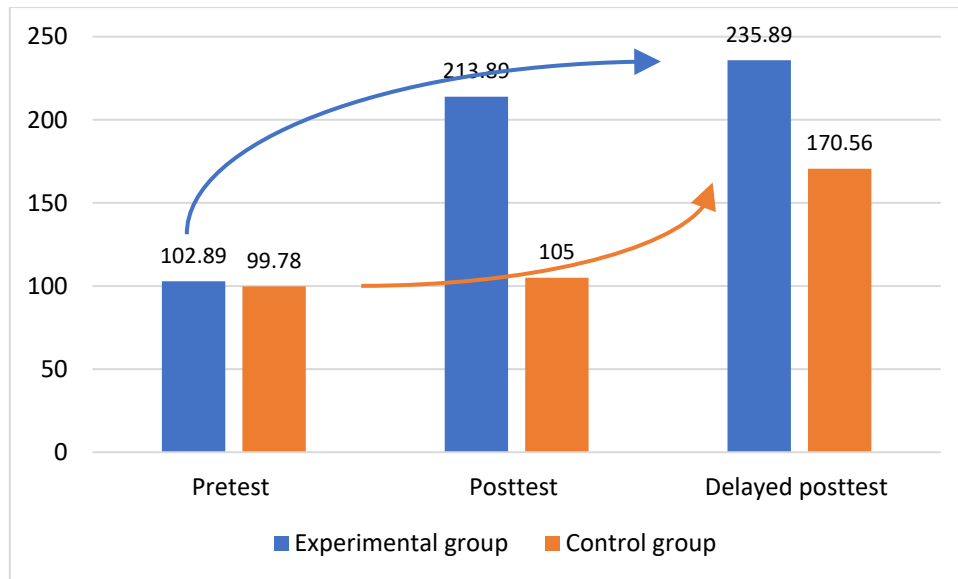


Figure 1 Mean appropriateness scores across three stages

Table 1 presents this developmental trajectory in more detail: the mean scores (M), the standard deviations (SD) and the increase in mean scores of both groups across three test stages: before the pre-SA instruction, immediately after the pre-SA instruction, and after the year abroad.

Table 1 Pretest, posttest and delayed posttest scores

Groups	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Delayed posttest M (SD)	Increase in M
Experimental group	102.89 (26.38)	213.89 (36.99)	235.89 (16.90)	Pre to post: +111 ($p = .000$) Post to delayed post: +22 ($p = .038$) Pre to delayed post: +133 ($p = .000$)
Control group	99.78 (29.07)	105.00 (27.56)	170.56 (34.05)	Pre to post: +5.22 ($p = .424$) Post to delayed post: +65.56 ($p = .000$) Pre to delayed post: +70.78 ($p = .000$)

Note: maximum score = 260 (26 scenarios x max 5 points x 2 raters)

At the pretest stage, the experimental group and control group were comparably low in terms of the appropriateness of their formulaic output. An independent samples *t*-test confirmed there was no significant difference between the two groups, $t(16) = .238, p = .815, d = 0.11$ (95% CI, -24.63 to 30.85).

At the posttest stage, which occurred directly after the two-week instructional period, the experimental group improved significantly, $t(8) = 14.320, p = .000, d = 4.77$ (95% CI, 93.13, 128.88), whereas the control group did not, $t(8) = .843, p = .424, d = 0.28$ (95% CI, -9.06 to 19.51). The efficacy of pre-SA instruction can be seen when comparing the gains between the two groups, which were found to be significant, $t(16) = 10.660, p = .000, d = 5.03$ (95% CI, 84.74, 126.81). The experimental group outperformed the control by producing formulaic sequences considered to be more appropriate for each of the social or transactional contexts presented.

Then both groups went to China for a year abroad. The delayed posttest was conducted after their return to England. At this stage, both groups achieved higher scores than before, revealing that their formulaic output had benefited from their period abroad regardless of any pre-SA intervention. However, the gap between the two groups narrowed and was no longer statistically significant, $t(16) = 5.156, p = .071, d = 2.43$ (95% CI, 38.47 to 92.19), implying that the control group's formulaic output had caught up to the experimental group to some extent. Although the control group still lagged behind the experimental group after their year abroad, they had made significant improvement during their time overseas, $t(8) = 5.976, p = .000, d = 1.99$ (95% CI, 40.26 to 90.85), implying that L2 exposure and/or classroom instruction during SA were somewhat effective, but overall pragmatic growth was still limited in comparison to the experimental group.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the raters considered the experimental group's formulaic output to be superior at all stages, particularly immediately following instruction where the ratings were almost double those of the control group. The benefits of the pre-SA instruction were sustained, and then further enhanced, after the year abroad. A qualitative look at the data in the next section offers some explanations for these outcomes.

Qualitative findings

Our second research question compared the content and quality of formulaic output produced by the experimental and control groups following the year abroad. The findings suggest that the instructed group outperformed the control group in three main areas based on frequency and percentage differences: (1) formulaic production which is well-formed and grammatical but deviates from native use, (2) output which contains a wider range and greater diversity of content, and (3) output evidencing L1 transfer. Each of these areas is discussed in this section.

Formulaic production which is well-formed and grammatical but deviates from native use

Sometimes, the formulaic production of both participant groups was well-formed and grammatical but not native-like in terms of context of use. This was particularly prominent in the delayed posttest after SA. The learners produced formulaic expressions which were grammatically and structurally flawless, but nevertheless deviated from native use in context. It appears the sociopragmatic aspects of the output were more difficult for learners to notice and reproduce in comparison to the pragmalinguistic aspects of the output.

The number of non-L2-like expressions rapidly jumped from 5 in the posttest to 35 in the delayed posttest for the control group, while it marginally increased from 4 to 7 for the experimental group, as shown in Figure 2.

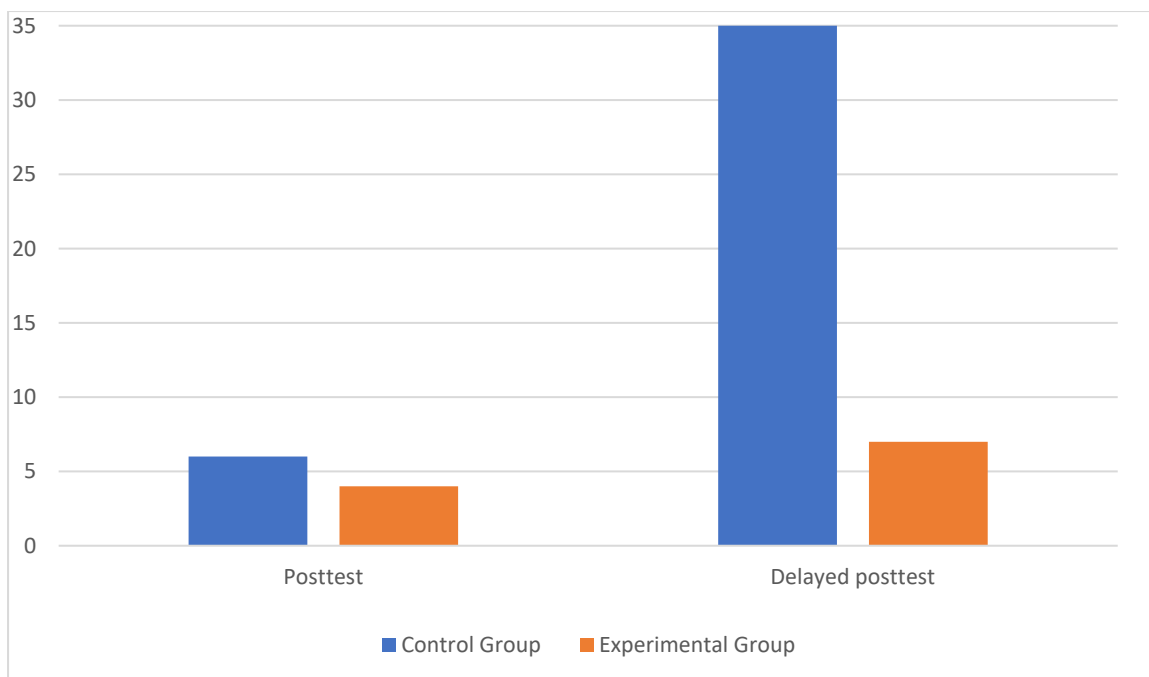


Figure 2 The number of formulaic expressions which were well-formed and grammatically correct but deviated from native use in context

In the delayed posttest after the year abroad, the experimental group did much better than the control group at minimising contextually-deviant FL. There were only 7 instances of non-native-like but well-formed and grammatically correct production among the experimental group as shown by Example (1), whereas there were 35 such instances among the control group, as illustrated by Example (2), (3) and (4) below. It may be argued that the instructional intervention enabled the former group to address this aspect much earlier and more effectively than the latter.

- (1) Scenario 26 *Pass a crowd*
 麻烦一下。
 Trouble one QUANTIFIER.

The formulaic expression in Example (1) is correct but often used in other contexts, for example, as an alerter when you want to politely ask a stranger a question. However, in this scenario to make way in a crowd, the appropriate response should be ‘麻烦让一下’ with one

more character ‘让’ (yield/give way). It is possible that the learner got confused between the two expressions, which are quite similar. Learners found it hard to master the accuracy of chunks on their own. This issue of confusing syntactically similar chunks was more widespread among the control group, such as in (2).

(2) Scenario 2 *Phone call*

喂，你好，我在找李教授，他在吗？

wéi, hello, I am looking for Professor Li, he is QUESTION WORD?

Akin to (1), there is only a one-character difference between the appropriate response ‘我找李教授’ for this scenario of wanting to speak to Professor Li over the phone and the underlined section of the response in (2), which is the present progressive. It can be seen as a transfer from the native English expression ‘I’m looking for Professor Li’ (L1 transfer will be discussed in more detail later). However, it is the character ‘在’ that changes the meaning completely. The underlined utterance in (2) would be perfectly fine in a context where the speaker is asked what they are doing. This seemingly minor yet fundamental inaccuracy of chunks was more common in the control group’s output than that of the experimental group after the period abroad. Thus, the accuracy of chunks appeared harder for the participants to notice and acquire without explicit guidance.

In addition to language accuracy, the contextual specificity seemed to pose another notable challenge for learners, as illustrated by (3) and (4).

(3) Scenario 6 *Empty seat*

不好意思，有空吗？呃，可以坐在这里吗？

Excuse me, have availability QUESTION WORD? Uh, I can sit here QUESTION WORD?

The underlined section ‘有空吗’ in (3) is the formulaic expression for asking for availability in terms of time rather than space in this context.

(4) Scenario 9 *Leave a friend's home*

哦，我先睡觉了，拜拜。

Oh, I first sleep PARTICLE, bye-bye.

Similarly, the formulaic expression in (4), especially the underlined section, is grammatically and structurally sound, but not appropriate in this context. It is commonly used to bid farewell to roommates with whom you share an apartment when you are, for example, in the living room and not far away from your bedroom. However, in Scenario 9, there is a gap between leaving a friend's home and going to bed which renders this expression a little odd in this context. Generally speaking, after the SA, the control group produced five times more formulaic expressions which were grammatically and structurally correct but applied in the wrong context.

In short, the outperformance of the experimental group after the SA was primarily reflected by the lower occurrence of contextually-deviant FL. The accuracy of linguistic chunks and the specificity of context of use constitute two distinct yet interrelated challenges for L2 learners in acquiring formulaic expressions. Pre-SA instruction, including opportunities for language practice, appeared effective in addressing these challenges by providing early opportunities for internalising the target expressions.

Wider range of FL and greater diversity of content

The second aspect of the experimental group's outperformance lies in the wider range and greater diversity of their formulaic output compared to the control group. The pre-SA instruction primed the students with more options and a greater range of target formulae to convey their pragmatic intent. For example, in response to the first scenario ‘responding to a compliment’, the experimental group's appropriate responses included all the three formulae

taught at the pre-SA sessions, whereas the control group's appropriate responses only contained the second option 哪里哪里 (lit. where where).

(5) Scenario 1 *Responding to a compliment*

- 哪儿的话，还不够好。
not at all. still not good enough.
- 哪里哪里
where where
- (还) 差得远呢
(still) a long way to go

In the scenario presented in (5), Chinese speakers typically have a ritualistic response. Certain formulae such as ‘哪里哪里’ cannot be easily translated into English, whereas no response or only an ad hoc formulation is common in English. This can be particularly challenging for L2 learners. Although many control group participants successfully acquired the chunk ‘哪里哪里’ during their SA, the instructed group demonstrated a more diverse set of appropriate pragmatic formulae. This difference in the range and the diversity of the FL output was also observed in Scenarios 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 15 and 26.

In addition, the experimental group's outperformance was also reflected in more linguistically sophisticated expressions such as incorporating the use of address terms. The experimental group were able to add a much wider range of appropriate and native-like terms of address to their formulaic output after their SA, such as ‘服务员 (waiter/waitress)’ in Scenario 3, ‘师傅 (lit. master. It is a respectful way to address someone who carries out a skilled occupation such as taxi and bus drivers)’ in Scenario 4, ‘帅哥 (lit. handsome boy. It is an informal way to address a male stranger)’ and ‘美女 (lit. pretty girl. It is an informal way to address a female stranger)’ in Scenario 16 as in Example (6), and ‘老板 (boss)’ in Scenario 18 as in Example (7) below.

(6) Scenario 16 *Asking for directions*

帅哥，美女，请问，北大在哪里？

handsome boy, pretty girl, please ask, Peking University at where?

(7) Scenario 18 *Bargain*

老板我是学生，便宜点儿嘛

boss I am student, cheap a bit AUXILIARY

These terms of address were neither taught in the pre-SA instruction, nor appeared in the participants' posttest results immediately after the instruction. After the SA, the experimental group produced 41 appropriate terms of address in their responses, whereas the control group only produced 5. In addition, as illustrated by the underlined section in (7) and (8), the experimental group was more likely to produce longer, more diverse and sophisticated utterances than the control group.

(8) Scenario 23 *Wrong phone call*

不好意思，你打错了，我是外国人，我听不懂。

Sorry, you dialled wrong, I am foreigner, I hear not understand.

Arguably, the instruction stage prior to SA provided a solid foundation on which participants were able to build and develop their formulaic competence as learning continued during SA. The processing load of mastering both awareness and production of chunks, as the control group experienced, was reduced thanks to the pre-SA training, which put the experimental group in an advantageous position.

L1 transfer

The third main aspect of the experimental group's outperformance lies in the smaller number of L1 transfers than those of the control group in the delayed posttest. There were 13 instances of L1 transfers among the control group as illustrated by (9) and only 5 among the experimental group as shown by (10).

(9) Scenario 4 *Taking a taxi*

请问可以带我去北京大学吗？

Please ask can take me to Peking University QUESTION WORD?

(10) Scenario 17 *Money withdrawal*

我要拿出来三百块钱。

I want take out three hundred QUANTIFIER money.

The underlined section ‘带我去’ in (9) is a direct transfer from L1 English ‘take me to’, but it is not used in the Chinese context of asking a taxi driver to take you to your destination as ‘去(to)...’ is the go-to option for native Chinese speakers. Similarly, in (10), ‘拿出来 (take out)’ is a direct translation of the English expression, whereas the Chinese formulaic expression is ‘取 (withdraw three hundred)’. Overall, the control group’s negative L1 transfers after the SA were three times that of the experimental group. It may thus be argued that the instruction helped reduce the amount of negative L1 transfers for those participants, whilst the control group lagged behind, seemingly led by their interlanguage grammar for the duration of SA.

Discussion

This study examined the development of formulaic competence with two groups of L2 Chinese learners by measuring the effects of pre-SA instruction and L2 exposure on formulaic output within different transactional and social contexts. To address research question one, the quantitative findings revealed the experimental group outperformed the control group at every stage; immediately after the pre-SA instruction and after they came back home from SA. The findings highlight the strong instructional effect of the pre-SA training was sustained (and even enhanced) after the year abroad. This echoes previous findings on the value of pre-SA pragmatics instruction in relation to specific speech acts (e.g. Cohen and Shively 2007; Halenko and Jones 2017; Hernandez and Boero 2018; Wang and Halenko 2019b) but shows for the first time that this training can also be successfully applied to producing a wide range of formulaic language. Previous studies focusing on formulaic production in at-home learning contexts have reported no-to-weak instructional effects in comparison to comprehension of FL (Li 2012; Li and Taguchi 2014; Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017), but the combination of targeted training, followed by a SA period, as seen in this

study, proved sufficient for the instructed group to make considerable gains in the quantity and quality of formulaic output, and sustain a competitive edge over the control group throughout.

What the data also reveal is that the control group did also profit (to a lesser extent) from L2 exposure in terms of formulaic production, revealing some SA effect on formulaicity, at least in this study. This finding lends weight to suggestions that practice (e.g., DeKeyser 2007) through active participation in the local community helps boost formulaic competence since formulaic expressions are community-wide in use and tied to everyday speech events (Kesckes 2000). The data seem to indicate one main factor contributing to the control's failure to reach the productive potential observed in the experimental group, however, the difficulty of simultaneously managing processing demands associated with being exposed to many of the formulaic sequences for the first time, with the expectation of accurate and situationally-appropriate future production. The experimental group, on the other hand, had the advantage of the early training period in which they learned how to encode their pragmatic intentions within a variety of everyday encounters (Taguchi 2011). In this way, processing costs were reduced as a result of the intervention so the learners could go on to utilise the local context to practice and refine their output further since the basic form-function mappings were already salient (Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017) and short-term memory was freed to focus on these aspects (Pienemann 1998).

Although at the appropriateness level, the SA period proved advantageous for developing formulaic competence for both groups based on the quantitative findings, it was a story of mixed successes at the lexico-syntactic level, as the qualitative findings revealed.

In answering research question two on the distinctiveness of the quality and quantity of output between the instructed and control groups following the SA period, the data first

revealed evidence of felicitous or grammatically well-formed expressions but which were often contextually inappropriate; a finding highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig and Su 2018; Kecskes 2000). Understanding the appropriate sociocultural context, and preferred native-speaker expression, has been found to be one of the major challenges with FL and is noted as one of reasons learners actively avoid FL use, even if they are familiar with certain expressions (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 2009, 2012; Barron 2003). The cultural specificity of Chinese expressions in particular and the frequent lack of English equivalents (Kecskes 2016) may also partly account for the sociopragmatic difficulties experienced by much of the control group in this study. As Bardovi-Harlig and Su (2018) note, if the alternative felicitous form serves a successful communicative function, learners may (intentionally or not) stop there at the expense of acquiring the preferred target-like equivalent. This is also a plausible explanation for the high frequency of these alternative expressions found in the control data set.

Another linguistic flaw found particularly with the control's output was the difficulty mastering the accuracy of chunks, without the benefit of specific guidance. These interlanguage forms, when learners have difficulty accessing all the required components, are considered to be driven by the interlanguage grammar (Bardovi-Harlig 2009) which is still under construction. Similar to Taguchi et al. (2017), the interlanguage forms in this study consisted of the addition or omission of Chinese characters which often resulted in a non-formulaic or non-target-like expression. This occurrence was most prevalent in longer chunks and may be explained in light of Meisel et al's (1981) Complexification Hypothesis which posits that syntactically complex structures, which by default are more cognitively demanding, are usually acquired later than simpler structures requiring less processing capacity. Shorter (and therefore syntactically less complicated) target expressions acquired during SA – even if they were typologically distant between the L1 and L2 (e.g. to negotiate

a lower price, ‘便宜点吧 [lit. cheaper a bit]’ vs ‘I’m sorry you’ll have to do better than that’ or had no L1 English equivalent (e.g. 哪里哪里) – increased the likelihood of accurate production. This could provide further support for the importance of processing capacity in L2 development (Pienemann 1998) since, in this study too, it is evident that formulaic expressions did not all develop at the same time (Bardovi-Harlig and Su 2018).

Whilst the control group’s formulaic development was constrained by a variety of factors discussed so far, the experimental group data were able to expand on formulaic expressions which were introduced in the intervention of their own volition. This included producing more specialised or nuanced expressions by using a range of Chinese address terms in specific situations, for instance. Since these components were not explicitly taught, we interpret this as a move towards the point where ‘things start falling into place’, in Kecskes’ (2000) terms. Rather than high proficiency determining the use of progressively nuanced expressions, as seen in existing SA research (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 2009; Bardovi-Harlig and Su 2018; Taguchi 2011), our study suggests pre-SA instructional intervention, combined with the affordances of SA, offer similar benefits even to those of lower proficiency, enabling them to reach similar goals in terms of formulaic competence.

The final observation to highlight is the differential trends in L1 transfer between the groups. Since we have established that the experimental group moved beyond Kecskes’ (2000) early developmental stages in the production of FL, it is perhaps not surprising that there were three times fewer occurrences of L1 transfer in comparison to the control group. The data in this study offers continued evidence that L2 learners commonly fall back on the safety of their L1 systems as a communicative crutch, taking a chance that their pragmatic intentions will be appropriately conveyed using this technique. Since this is a well-established learner

strategy widely evidenced in both spoken and written L2 pragmatics studies (Wang and Halenko 2022), this would be a useful feature of any instructional input.

Conclusion

As Meunier wrote, 'though L2 teaching no longer ignores the formulaic nature of language, the exact paths to follow to better teach it are still insufficiently lit' (2012, 123). This study presented one pedagogical effort towards enhancing learners' awareness and production of formulaicity in preparation for study abroad. The small sample size, specific participant profile and L1/L2 languages do limit the generalisability of the findings, and individual learner differences and social habits are likely to have impacted the results of this longitudinal study. The lack of consistency in approaches to experimental studies, and the many possible variables to negotiate in their design, is also unhelpful when it comes to replication research and building solid evidence for claims of instructional effects. This is particularly true of pre-SA research since this area needs much more empirical attention.

Nevertheless, the finding that both participant groups profited from being part of a deeply contextualised environment during SA (Taguchi, Li and Tang 2017), albeit in different ways and to different degrees, is a positive sign. However, this study indicates that with dedicated formulaic training prior to SA, language learners' experiences can be maximised which can positively assist with socialisation into the local context. The success of the experimental group in this study indicates that pre-SA instruction decreases the impact of culture shock when it comes to formulaic language development and can ease learners' transition into L2 culture (Barron 2003). Interacting with the participants at each of the test phases also gave the authors a sense that the intervention was able to enrich their SA experience because of their heightened awareness regarding pragmatic issues. From a production perspective, this awareness translated into target-like output which was characterised as superior when rated

by native speaker on the basis of appropriateness and more nuanced and sophisticated from a linguistic perspective. We hope this pedagogical effort inspires more research in pre-departure pragmatics training. Learning a language is not just learning different words for the same things, but different ways of talking about and doing things. Targeted instructional intervention is beneficial for the development of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural understanding which is more and more important in an increasingly globalised world.

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APPENDIX 1

Twenty-six scenarios and the target formulae

Item	Scenario	Formulaic expressions
1.	<i>Responding to a compliment</i> Your Chinese friend says, “You speak really good Chinese!”.	哪儿的话, 还不够好 not at all, still not good enough (还) 差得远呢 (still) a long way to go sentence-final particle (PA) 哪里哪里 where where
2.	<i>Phone call</i> You are calling the School Office. You would like to speak to Professor Li. You hear someone pick up the phone and say “wéi”.	请问 李 老师 在吗? Please ask Li Teacher is there question word (QW)?
3.	<i>In a restaurant</i> You are having dinner in a restaurant. You ask the waitress to take the left-overs with you.	打包 Wrap up
4.	<i>Taking a taxi</i> You want to go to Peking University and ask the taxi driver to take you there.	(去/到) 北(京) 大(学) (to go/to) Peking University
5.	<i>At the supermarket</i> At the supermarket checkout, you want to know whether the store accepts credit cards or not.	{能/可以} 刷 {信用卡/卡} 吗? {Can/may} swipe {credit card/card} QW? {能/可以} 用 信用卡 吗? {Can/may} use credit card QW?
6.	<i>Empty seat</i> It is very crowded in McDonald’s. You see several people sitting around a table but there is an empty seat and you want to sit there.	{这儿/这里/这/这个位置} 有人 (坐) 吗? {here/here/this/this seat} has person {sit} QW?
7.	<i>Bus service</i>	(请问) {去/到} 北(京) 大(学) 吗?

Item	Scenario	Formulaic expressions
	A bus is coming to a bus stop where you are waiting. You want to go to Peking University but you are not sure whether the bus stops there so you ask the driver.	(please ask) {to go/to} Peking University QW?
8.	<i>Leave early</i> You are having dinner with several of your friends. Something urgent has come up and you tell your friend that you have to leave now.	(我) {有急事/儿} {先/得先} 走了 (I) {have an urgent matter} {first/have to first} leave PA
9.	<i>Leave friend's home</i> You have spent the evening at your friend's home. It is now late and you are saying goodbye.	{时间} {不早了} {我} {先/该} 走了 {time} {is late PA} {I} {first/should} leave PA {天黑了} {我} {先/该} 走了 {it' s dark} {I} {first/should} leave PA
10.	<i>Ending a phone call</i> You and your friend are talking on the phone. It seems that you both have said all you want to say.	{那} 就 这样 (吧) {then} just this way (PA)
11.	<i>Calling Professor Li</i> You have never met Professor Li before. You are now calling him for something. You hear someone pick up the phone and say “wéi”.	请问 (您) 是 李 老师 吗? Please ask (you) are Li Teacher QW?
12.	<i>Order in a restaurant</i> In a restaurant, you would like to order a “yú xiāng ròu sī”.	{来} {一} {份} 鱼香肉丝 {come} {one} {measure word (MW)} yuxiang shredded pork)
13.	<i>Favourite dish</i> In a restaurant, you and your friend are ordering food. You want to know what your friend likes to order.	(你) 想 吃 (点儿) 什么? (You) want to eat (a little) what?
14.	<i>Toilet</i> In a restaurant, you want to go to the toilet but you don't know where it is. You ask a waitress.	请问 卫生间/洗手间/厕所在 哪儿? Please ask toilet in where QW?
15.	<i>Cashier</i> You are at the department store looking for the cashier desk to pay.	请问 收银台 在 哪儿? Please ask cashier in where QW?

Item	Scenario	Formulaic expressions
	You ask the shop assistant where it is.	请问 在 哪儿 付款? Please ask where QW to pay?
16.	<i>Asking for directions</i> You want to go to Peking University but don't know how to get there. You want to ask for directions from a passer-by.	请问 (去)北(京)大(学) 怎么走? Please ask {to} Peking University how to go?
17.	<i>Money withdrawal</i> In the bank, you ask the bank teller to withdraw RMB 300 from your bank account.	取 300 {块 钱} Withdraw 300 {MW money}
18.	<i>Bargain</i> In a market, you want to buy a T-shirt but you think it's a bit expensive. You want the vendor to lower the price.	便宜 (一)点儿 (吧/嘛) Cheaper (a) bit (PA)
19.	<i>Trying on a hat</i> In a department store, you want to buy a hat. You ask the shop assistant if you can try it on first.	{能/可以} 试试/试一试/试一下 (那个帽子) 吗? {can} try/try one try/try a bit (that hat) QW?
20.	<i>Sending a parcel</i> You are at a local post office and want to send a parcel. You ask the assistant how to do this.	(我想/要) 寄 包裹 (I want to) post parcel
21.	<i>Department store</i> In a department store, a shop assistant asks whether you would like to buy anything. You tell the shop assistant that you do not intend to buy anything.	(我) (只是) 随便 看看 (I) (just) randomly look
22.	<i>Getting off the bus</i> You are on a bus. You want to go to Peking University but you don't know where to get off so you ask the bus driver.	(请问)(去/到)北(京)大(学) 哪(一)站 下(车)? (Please ask) (to/go to) Peking University which (one) stop get off (bus)?
23.	<i>Wrong phone call</i> When you answer your phone, you found the person on the other end dialled your number by mistake.	(您/你) 打 错 了 (Vous/Tu) dialled wrong PA

Item	Scenario	Formulaic expressions
24.	<p><i>Ask for the price</i></p> <p>At a fruit stall you want to buy some apples but don't know the price. You ask the vendor for the price.</p>	<p>苹果 多少 钱 {一斤}?</p> <p>apple how much money {one MW}?</p>
25.	<p><i>Late for a meeting</i></p> <p>You are a few minutes late for a meeting with your friend. You see your friend waiting for you.</p>	<p>不好意思/抱歉, (我) 来 晚了</p> <p>Sorry, (I) arrive late</p>
26.	<p><i>Pass a crowd</i></p> <p>You are walking in a busy street. A person is standing in your way, but you want to pass by.</p>	<p>{麻烦 / 请} {让一下/让一让}</p> <p>{Trouble/please} yield {a bit/yield}</p>