

Myles, F., Hooper, J. and Mitchell, R. (1998), Rote or Rule? Exploring the Role of Formulaic Language in Classroom Foreign Language Learning. *Language Learning*, 48: 323-364. doi:[10.1111/0023-8333.00045](https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00045)

How early learning of fixed expressions contributes to long term FL grammar development and creative language use

What this research was about and why it is important

Many language learners start by learning a selection of fixed expressions in the new language such as “How are you?”, or “My name is ...”. But do these expressions serve only to get the learner into communication in the short term, before embarking on a more systematic process of learning grammar? Or, do they make a distinctive contribution to language learning in the longer term, providing key entry points into the creative language system? This study was designed to address this key question. The researchers tracked 16 11-13-year-old beginner learners of French through 2 years of classroom instruction, and regularly recorded their spoken French. They analysed the learners’ use of selected verb phrases, which were taught as fixed expressions: *j’aime* (I like), *j’habite* (I live), and *j’adore* (I love). They showed that these fixed expressions were gradually unpacked and analysed over time, and contributed to the broader development of the pronoun system and creative use of pronoun+verb combinations.

What the researchers did

- This study formed part of a larger project which tracked 60 children learning French as beginners, over two years, in two English secondary schools.
- The study ran from Term 2 in Year 7 to Term 1 in Year 9. The research team regularly observed French lessons, and interviewed the teachers, so as to understand the nature of the learning experience provided.
- Once per term, i.e. on 6 occasions, the children completed a series of oral tasks in French with a member of the research team.
- The children’s spoken French was transcribed, and the speech of 16 children was analysed to study use and development of the selected verb forms *j’aime*, *j’adore*, *j’habite*, and of the pronoun system more generally.

What the researchers found

- The exchange of personal information was a frequent feature of the lessons, and accordingly most of the children quickly learned and used the target first-person verb forms (only one child never produced any of them).
- Initially, many children over-extended the use of these expressions, using them for third-person reference as well as for first-person. This suggests they did not analyse them as consisting of a first person pronoun (*j’*) + verb.
- By the end of the project, all children bar one had used the verb *aime* in varied contexts and independently of the first-person pronoun *j’*. However, only 9 and 7 children were using the verbs *habite* and *adore* with the same flexibility.
- The researchers concluded that by the end of the study, one-third of the children had fully broken down the target expressions into their grammatical components, and this was linked to the broader emergence of the French pronoun system. Another third were going through this process but had not completed it; the final third still used the target forms as unanalysed chunks.

Things to consider

- The study shows the value of memorized fixed expressions, in supporting early communication and speeding up early FL productions.
- The study also shows how fixed expressions become inadequate, as learners’ communicative needs develop. Under pressure from communicative need, grammatical analysis takes place and the components of the fixed expression(s) become available for creative construction.
- For example these early learners’ needs expanded e.g. to talk about third parties (‘he’ and ‘she’); the learners then moved to a second stage, experimenting with and modifying the early-learned first-person expressions. As third-person expressions were also learned, chunks were analysed more generally, and a recognizable pronoun system emerged.
- More generally the study illustrates the complex relationship between FL knowledge and communication; many later studies have confirmed how creative language knowledge emerges slowly from the processing and gradual analysis of frequently heard and used expressions.

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