# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ACQUISITION OF FORMULAIC LANGUAGE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

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**ABSTRACT**. Lexical competence forms the basis of mastering a foreign language. A good command of vocabulary not only entails the knowledge of words but also the ability to use the words in appropriate formulaic sequences to make communication fluent. The aim of the article is to analyse the possibilities of raising B1 language learners' competence in the acquisition of functional vocabulary with a focus on formulaic language. The analysis is based on the observations of B1 English language learners both on the degree and in-service courses at the Estonian National Defence College (ENDC) during 2015–2016. The analysis reveals that students had difficulties in identifying formulaic language, which in turn hindered the appropriate use of lexical chunks in context. To maximise students' potential in the acquisition of formulaic language, it is important to facilitate the learners' understanding of how a language works and raise their awareness of the utility and productivity of learning words in chunks. Developing metalinguistic awareness also contributes to learner autonomy and sustains continuing linguistic development outside the classroom setting.

*Keywords: English language learning and teaching, vocabulary acquisition, formulaic language, metalinguistic skills, learner autonomy*
*Võtmesõnad: inglise keele õppimine ja õpetamine, sõnavara omandamine, keelelised vormelid, metalingvistilised oskused, õppuri autonoomia*

## Introduction

Language is a form of communication in which the message is primarily conveyed by lexical means and therefore a good command of vocabulary has received a great deal of attention in foreign language teaching and learning. Vocabulary mastery is an overarching competence that underlies the learner's success in the four basic language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A good performance in any of the skills would be unattainable

without a sufficient grasp of lexis. To become an active user of a foreign language, the productive skills (speaking and writing) are often given precedence over the receptive ones (listening and reading), and it is in the productive skills that language learners most often do not seem to have a big enough vocabulary to enable communication. Although vocabulary acquisition is a central issue at all levels of language mastery, it warrants extra attention at intermediate levels since learners at that stage seem to be struggling most with problems arising from the use of words in appropriate patterns. In addition, these learners appear to be lacking the strategies for efficient vocabulary acquisition that would increase their learner autonomy. The purpose of the paper is therefore to analyse the possibilities of raising intermediate language learners' competence in the acquisition of functional vocabulary with a focus on formulaic language. The article makes the claim that although focussing on the form-meaning relationship between single words has its benefits on foreign language learning, it is essential to pay attention to the acquisition and mastery of multiword items and formulaic language to become conversant in a foreign language. Firstly, the article gives an overview of the significance of formulaic language in vocabulary acquisition and discusses the importance of formulaic language for B1 learners as stated in the descriptors of the CEFR[1]. Secondly, the discussion is followed by an analysis of the problems B1 English learners from the Estonian Defence Forces have faced in their vocabulary learning process both independently and in class, and finally, some suggestions are given to increase learners' competence and autonomy in the acquisition of formulaic units.

The analysis is based on the observations of B1 English language learners both on the degree and in-service courses at the Estonian National Defence College (ENDC) during 2015–2016. The degree course students were first-year cadets, who took the 4-credit point compulsory English course as part of their curriculum. The participants in the in-service courses included the personnel of the Estonian Defence Forces in need of developing their proficiency in English with regard to their professional duties. The students observed were native speakers of Estonian of different ages and varied in their former language learning experience.

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[1]  Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – a guideline providing a common basis for the classification of language levels, course syllabi and curricula, examinations, study materials, etc. **CEFR** = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. 2001. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1. [**CEFR** 2001]

## 1. The importance of formulaic language in vocabulary learning

### 1.1. The development of vocabulary acquisition skills

The acquisition of lexis is a time-consuming process and the facilitation of the procedure with regard to the learner as a language user in real-life situations deserves therefore more attention. Vocabulary mastery cannot be gained simply by "picking up" the unknown words from different activities and tasks appropriate to a particular level[2], nor will it take care of itself in an environment where language is learned and taught through communication[3]. Relying heavily on implicit learning is not likely to result in significant progress. Therefore, a more proactive approach should be adopted in enhancing vocabulary acquisition through explicit teaching and exposure to substantial lexical input[4] comprising formulaic sequences as used by native speakers. Considering the contemporary language learner as a self-directed learner in an environment where life-long learning has become a fundamental component in both professional and personal development, it is important to provide learners with skills indispensable for independent vocabulary learning. Classroom input has its limits and is not sufficient for continuing linguistic development, which can only be made possible if language users assume more responsibility for their progress and apply strategies that facilitate independent learning. In the past decades, there has been a lively interest in the concept of learner autonomy[5], which in broad terms can be defined as a psychological capacity and readiness to be in charge of one's learning[6]. In the context of communicative competence, autonomy can be primarily viewed as an ability that helps language learners "to operate independently with the

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2    **Schmitt, N**. 2010. Researching Vocabulary. A Vocabulary Research Manual. Basingstoke: Palgrave. Macmillan, p. 8. [**Schmitt** 2010]

3    **McCarthy, M**. 2001. Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 64.

4    **Schmitt, N**. 2008. Instructed second language vocabulary learning. – Language Teaching Research, Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 333. <http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.utlib.ut.ee/doi/pdf/10.1177/1362168808089921> (08.03.2017); **Laufer, B**. 2005. Focus on form in second language vocabulary learning. – EUROSLA Yearbook 5, pp. 223–250, in **Schmitt** 2010, p. 8.

5    **Benson, P**. 2007. Autonomy in language teaching and learning. – Language Teaching, Vol. 40, No. 1, p. 21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003958> (27.02.2017). [**Benson** 2007]; **Bekleyen, N.; Selimoğlu, F**. 2016. Learner Behaviours and Perceptions of Autonomous Language Learning. – The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 1. <http://www.tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej79/a5.pdf> (27.02.2017).

6    **Benson** 2007, p. 23.

language" in real-life communicative situations[7]. In addition, autonomy in this sense involves a conscious application of learning strategies both in and out of the classroom[8] with the aim of helping the learner to figure out how the language works. Although the current tendency towards training students to become more autonomous and competent in the use of language learning strategies has been widely acknowledged[9], not enough attention has been drawn to the acquisition of formulaic language. Since lexical competence forms the foundation of the mastery of any language, the role of vocabulary acquisition skills in an efficient self-directed learning process is hard to over-estimate.

## 1.2. Defining formulaic language

The term formulaic language is generally understood to entail messages, ideas, or instructions (e.g. *For inspection port arms!*), conventionalised expressions and functions in social interaction (*Can I help you?*), collocations (*to rain heavily*), and other strings of words which can be either fixed units (*ups and downs*), or multiword verbal units requiring some modifications in order to fit them in context (*to go out with someone*)[10]. Formulaic language can also be defined as word chunks which can be divided into formulas and patterns consisting of fixed, routinized utterances (*The weather is nice, isn't it?*) and items with fillable slots (e.g. *I would like to…*) respectively[11]. However, there is no accepted methodology to assess and identify the quantity of formulaic expressions in any language because of the lack of clear-cut distinctions between the lexical and grammatical mechanisms at work in the formation of a formulaic item[12]. Accordingly, in the current paper formulaic language is defined as a generic concept based on the notion of the so-called common partners, i.e. lexical units which allow the user to convey

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[7]    **Littlewood, W**. 1997. Self-access: why do we want it and what can it do? – Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning. Ed. by P. Benson, P. Voller. London and New York: Longman, p. 81.

[8]    *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

[9]    **Zhao, N**. 2009. Metacognitive Strategy Training and Vocabulary Learning of Chinese College Students. – English Language Teaching, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 123.
<http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/4461/3802> (16.12.2016).

[10]   **Schmitt** 2010, p. 10, 131−132.

[11]   **Oxford, R. L**. 1990. Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know. Boston: Heinle&Heinle Publishers, pp. 72−73. [**Oxford** 1990]

[12]   **Schmitt** 2010, p. 40.

comprehensible, self-sufficient messages and which are longer than single words. As such, the formulaic units, as discussed in the paper, encompass multiword expressions, phrases and collocations formed through lexical and grammatical compatibility (e.g. *stay in for the evening, Nice to meet you!, make mistakes, etc.*).

## 1.3. Benefits of formulaic language

Formulaic expressions are essential for productive mastery and they can be retrieved automatically from memory[13], which makes them a prolific source of lexical input already at the early stages of the learning process. Such expressions help to increase fluency and understanding, which in turn boosts the learners' self-confidence[14]. For instance, ready-made utterances like *How are you? Where are you from?* help the learner to cope with a simple conversation without having yet gained the knowledge of the basic grammar rules concerning the word order in questions. Having certain formulaic sequences at their fingertips gives beginners as well as more advanced learners a sense of accomplishment and may strengthen language learning motivation. Also, the ability to recognize and use formulaic items appropriately increases the efficiency of independent learning, and developing an awareness of the functionality of lexical bundles proves to be a great asset in laying a solid foundation for language competence.

 Although contemporary language teaching lays great emphasis on the development of communicative skills[15] through a wide range of eclectic but carefully chosen activities covering all the four basic skills[16] and much attention has been paid to active learning methods to boost learners' performance in real life situations, vocabulary instruction and acquisition do not seem to have kept abreast of those latest trends. There is still an overwhelming tendency in vocabulary learning and teaching to concentrate on the

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[13]  **Pawley, A.; Syder, F. H**. 1983. Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. – Language and Communication. Ed. by J.C. Richards and R.W. Schmidt. London: Longman, pp. 191–225, in **Schmitt** 2010, p. 11.

[14]  **Oxford** 1990, p. 72.

[15]  **Larsen-Freeman, D**. 2001. Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 121.

[16]  **Cushing-Leubner, J.; Bigelow, M**. 2014. Principled eclecticism and the holistic approach to language teaching and learning. – Approaches and Principles in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Education. Ed. by S. Çelik. Ankara: Egiten, p. 249. <http://cehd.umn.edu/ci/people/profiles/documents/BigelowPrincipledEclecticism.pdf> (27.02.2017).

memorization of isolated words in lists, while formulaic language, which forms the foundation of efficient communication, is not brought into focus as often as it could be[17]. The popularity of the so-called single word approach can probably be explained by convenience[18] as individual words can easily be grouped into thematic lists and spread out on semantic mind maps, be acquired by flashcard method, and tested accordingly. This approach is based on the dual form-meaning relationship, which is the first association any language learner makes when coming into contact with a new word[19] and it is therefore considered an efficient way of decoding an unknown item and making the first acquaintance with foreign lexis. However, in the active use of vocabulary, single words seldom form a meaning that is self-sufficient and independent from the context. Single words are fragmentary elements and when taught as such, the students will still have difficulties in understanding texts and speech and may ultimately lose their interest in the acquisition of a new language[20]. Thus, the traditional single word approach may not be in accordance with the contemporary learner's needs and goals[21], in which more and more emphasis is being laid on efficient communication. To convey a message, the language user has to rely on a diverse repertoire of language from simpler expressions, verb patterns and collocations (*to miss a bus, to get on a bus[22]*) to more complicated speech formulas (*I'm not really bothered about…; It's got great memories for me[23]*). Such expressions and word combinations deserve more attention in communicative activities and tasks since they provide useful ready-made lexical units worth regular exposure, reiteration and memorisation.

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[17]  **Schmitt** 2010, pp. 8−9.

[18]  *Ibid*., p. 9.

[19]  *Ibid*., p. 38.

[20]  **Zheng**, **S**. 2012. Studies and Suggestions on English Vocabulary Teaching and Learning. − English Language Teaching, Vol. 5, No. 5, p. 131.
<http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/16664/11119> (16.12.2016).

[21]  *Ibid*.

[22]  **Crace, A.; Acklam, R**. 2013. New Total English Students' Book. Pre-intermediate. Harlow: Pearson, p. 107.

[23]  *Ibid*. p. 151.

## 1.4. The requirements for communicative and lexical competence at B1 level

The CEFR identifies three basic communicative language competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences[24]. Each category in its turn distinguishes a range of sub-competences which define the language user's profile. The competences are all interdependent and lay emphasis on the functionality and fluency of the language used. In the CEFR, lexical competence, which is classified as an aspect within the broader linguistic competence[25], is not only defined as the knowledge of words but as the command of both lexical and grammatical elements, which entails the use of formulaic sequences such as sentential formulae (*How do you do?*), idioms (*to kick the bucket*), fixed frames (*Please may I have…*), phrasal verbs (*to put up with*) and collocations (*to make a mistake*)[26]. Sociolinguistic competence, for example, lays emphasis on linguistic markers of social relations (greetings, address forms, etc.), politeness conventions and register[27], which can only be acquired through developing the ability to recognise and use certain formulas. Similarly, pragmatic competences refer to the discourse and functional aspects of a language[28] which are inextricably connected with the utilization of particular lexical sequences and discourse markers. According to the document, B1 level is classified as Threshold Level, which corresponds to the lower intermediate level of the independent language user as usually described in the classic trifold division of basic-intermediate-advanced[29]. B1 is also the required minimum level the cadets of the ENDC are expected to reach by the end of their two-semester compulsory English course and it has been the level most frequently taught on the intensive English courses designed for the personnel of the Estonian Defence Forces in the past years. All the study outcomes and assessment criteria in the course syllabi are based on the CEFR.

As for lexical accuracy and fluency, the CEFR states that a B1 speaker "uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used "routines" and patterns associated with more predictable situations" and "can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning

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[24]  **CEFR** 2001, p. 108.

[25]  *Ibid*., p. 109.

[26]  *Ibid*., pp. 110−111.

[27]  *Ibid*., pp. 118−120.

[28]  *Ibid*., pp. 123–128.

[29]  *Ibid*., p. 23.

and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production"[30]. To meet those requirements, the language learner has to pay more attention to the lexical bundles which are "intrinsically connected with functional, fluent, communicative language use"[31]. While it is quite common for beginners to concentrate on ready-made lexical bundles that are easy to use in everyday situations and the learners' readiness to practise and memorise such items through reiteration can also be noticed, there seems to be a change in the focus and presentation of formulaic sequences as well as in the learners' recognition and perception of multiword items once they advance in their language study. The learners are becoming more concerned with the memo-rization of single words than fixed expressions and such a shift from ready-made utterances to individual words can increasingly be detected at B1 level. One of the reasons for this change of focus may include the growing bulk of lexis and grammar the students are expected to master at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, and to tackle the problem they often find it easier to manage and learn lists of single words rather than deal with sets of lengthier expressions which may have gaps in them to be filled with appropriate gram-matical and lexical items befitting the context.

To meet the requirements set for the competences a language learner needs to demonstrate at B1 level, it is necessary to apply a more conscious approach to language. The word strings incorporated into the study materials become more complicated and it often requires special attention to recog-nise a meaningful multi-word unit in a sentence. Although textbooks (e.g. *New Total English Pre-intermediate*) provide and draw attention to lists of multiword units, it may not be helpful if extra focus is not laid on the use of those items in communicative tasks. To achieve the desired communicative competence, students first have to develop the skill of identifying formu-laic sequences in texts and speech since the inclination to learn words as individual items does not contribute to a better understanding or fluency. It is thus the ability to identify a meaningful word chunk that may provide a gateway to more successful vocabulary learning. However, it is also a skill that language learners do not seem to have developed enough. As a result, the acquisition of formulaic language essential for comprehensible communica-tion can be seriously impeded.

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[30]  **CEFR** 2001, p. 29.

[31]  **Schmitt** 2010, p. 12.

## 2. Analysis of the B1 learners' use of formulaic sequences

What makes the acquisition of native-like formulaic language complicated is its relatively fluid nature that cannot simply be grasped by learning by heart the single words an expression consists of and mastering the grammatical constructions involved. To understand how such language works, the learner has to make a special effort. While a good grasp of formulaic language reduces the cognitive effort of language use and comprehension[32], the improvement of fluency through the acquisition of readily available lexical strings poses problems to language learners. The language learners observed were adult learners with no considerable experience in learning English but they were, nevertheless, to some extent familiar with the specific phraseology in their general or more specific field of speciality due to the necessity of operating in an environment where fixed phrases which are unambiguous and unequivocal in meaning are often used. In general, such competence is usually acquired while performing everyday duties and the automatic, purposeful use of formulaic military English is the result of a regular exposure to situations where such language is utilized. The learning in such instances normally takes place by memorisation through empirical associations and the users of military phraseology hardly ever need to focus on or analyse the grammatical structures or lexical compatibility at work in such phrases. However, on an English course they are expected to deal with an increasing amount of lexical material, the memorisations of which requires more effort, and the learning of formulaic expressions no longer simply happens "on the go".

In the groups under observation, the problem of identifying longer meaningful units was primarily illustrated by the difficulties students had in using dependent prepositions and idiomatic and non-idiomatic phrasal verbs in communicative tasks. In lexical units with dependent preposition and phrasal verbs, semantic connection was seldom made between the headword and the preposition or adverb particle. The learners were likely to concentrate on the "weightier" items that they regarded as major semantic constituents in a string of words and leave out the additional elements that connect the segments into a meaningful whole. For instance, when asked to form a sentence with the phrasal verb *to look after somebody*, a learner came up with a sentence *I looked at the picture*. In another case when the instructor asked the students first to find a suitable preposition to make the sentences

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[32]  **Schmitt** 2010, p. 135.

containing a phrasal verb complete (e.g. *She got … her illness.* → *She got over her illness.*) and then to produce a sentence of their own containing the same prepositional string (i.e. *to get over something*), many learners made sentences using only the preposition they had been required to fill in in the first part of the task (e.g. *We went over the street.*). In both cases the focus was shifted to only one word, either a verb or preposition, and the holistic semantic aspect of the formulaic unit was neglected. Similarly, in speech and writing there were recurring instances of omitting dependent prepositions (e.g. *He graduated the college\** vs *He graduated from the college; He was promoted major\** vs *He was promoted to major*). Concentration on single items may refer to the learners' difficulty to notice the whole chunk even if pointed out by the instructor and indicates a prevailing tendency to split the chunks up into isolated parts that cease to function in the figurative meaning of the expression.

Another problem concerning the acquisition and utilization of formulaic language was detected in the use of functional utterances and phrases of routinized meanings under topics like asking and giving direction and eating out. To perform a communicative task imitating a real-life situation, students were expected to apply a range of functional sequences with fillable slots that were provided to them by the instructor either as expressions with gaps (e.g. *Follow the signs for …; Turn left into … Street*) or expressions with gaps accompanied by example sentences (*How about…? – How about finding somewhere to eat?*; *What are you going to have for… – What are you going to have for your dessert?*). There was a remarkable difference in the accomplishment of the task between the students who strongly relied on ready-made sets and examples distributed to them on handouts and the students who either ignored the compiled material or did not succeed in applying the sequences with fillable slots as required. As students were given the chance to freely reflect on their performance after the communicative tasks, some of them pointed out that they found the ready-made sequences convenient and it demanded less effort from them to fulfil the task (e.g. "*I didn't have to think much.*", "*I just had to use the expressions on the handout.*"). The students who did not manage so well also found it difficult to analyse the reasons for their more modest performance and contribution. However, since no systematized interviews or questionnaires were conducted after the task, the reasons for different performances cannot be clearly outlined and a more in-depth analysis is needed to identify the problems that arise in the use of formulaic language. The observations revealed that the biggest problem seemed to be the difficulty in identifying the meaningful string, which in

turn affected how the sequences were reproduced. The students' difficulties in creating the link between the lexical and grammatical features of a formulaic utterance and using it as a whole signals therefore the necessity to pay more attention to skills that help to develop a holistic view of language.

Successful acquisition of formulaic items may also depend on the input students receive on the course. If students' focus is solely on naming things and compiling lists of single words, the vocabulary they learn is not helpful for developing productive skills. This tendency was well reflected in students' performance in sentence formation both in speech and writing, which at times was not accurate. Their expression of ideas was not smooth enough and occasionally even incomprehensible. The mistakes probably resulted from the learners' attempt to convey messages "from scratch" and come up with a sequence of their own, which proved to be too complicated for them. Such fragmented production indicates that the learner had difficulties in seeing the "big picture" and concentrated on the segments in isolation. As a result, the utterances hardly ever consisted of conventionalised sequences and the production could be considered un-English even if it was understandable to the interlocutor. Therefore, it can be inferred that the production of an easy-to-understand utterance from isolated elements requires more effort from the learner and the result tends to be less satisfactory whereas the processing of ready-made phrases is faster[33] and the communication is smoother[34] as a result.

This inference reflects the assertion in the CEFR according to which lexical competence does not only refer to the mastery of vocabulary but also entails the competence in both lexis and grammar[35]. At intermediate levels, however, grammar and vocabulary are often seen to operate in different "boxes" with little or sometimes no connection at all between the two. To facilitate a better understanding of how larger lexical units work in a language, more attention should be paid to the common ground of lexis and grammar as a large amount of formulaic language is composed of fillable slots or open-slot phraseology, i.e. phrases and expressions that have "slots" in them to be filled

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[33]  **Schmitt** 2010, p. 136.

[34]  **Kuiper, K**. 1996. Smooth Talkers. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Kuiper, K. 2004. Formulaic performance in conventionalised varieties of speech. – Formulaic Sequences. Ed. by N. Schmitt. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 37–54; **Dechert, H**. 1983. How a story is done in a second language. – Strategies in Interlanguage Communication. Ed. by C. Faerch, G. Kasper. London: Longman, pp. 175–195, in **Schmitt** 2010, p. 136.

[35]  **CEFR** 2001, p. 110.

with appropriate elements in accordance with the contexts[36]. Such open-slot phrases are a good example of the points of convergence between grammar and vocabulary and to make such expressions work, students may need to apply metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies.

## 3. Suggestions for the improvement of the acquisition of formulaic sequences

To support students in learning formulaic language, it is worth considering the learners' cognitive strategies as applied to learning vocabulary. Language learners, for instance, have been classified as referential and expressive, or as item learners and system learners respectively[37]. According to this division, the former prefer to focus on individual words whereas the latter has an inclination to pick up whole sequences useful for social interaction. In the groups observed, the item learners seemed to be in the majority, a phenomenon which could be explained by the popularity of the single word approach that was dominant, and to some extent still might be, in foreign language teaching at schools. It also partly explains why the item learners were faced with problems in accomplishing the communicative tasks where they were expected to use formulaic language.

One of the problems why many learners did not succeed in appropriately using a sufficient amount of formulaic lexis to ensure smoother conversation was the difficulty in identifying formulaic units in texts and speech. To improve students' skills in recognizing such units, it could be helpful to direct more attention to the development of learners' metacognitive skills and to raise their metalinguistic awareness, which in turn also facilitates learner autonomy and boosts language performance[38]. In the past decades there has been a growing interest in metacognition, i.e. in the awareness of one's cognitive mechanisms in the processes of learning[39], and the importance of metacognitive strategies for efficient language learning cannot be

[36] **Schmitt** 2010, p. 40.

[37] **Cruttenden, A**. 1981. Item-learning and system-learning. – Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, Vol. 10, pp. 79–88, in **Schmitt** 2010, p. 137.

[38] **Anderson, N. J**. 2012. Metacognition: Awareness of Language Learning. – Psychology for Language Learning. Insights from Research, Theory and Practice. Ed. by S. Mercer, S. Ryan, M. Williams. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 169; **Cook, V**. 2001. Second Language Learning and Language Teaching. London: Hodder Arnold, p. 131.

[39] **Mercer, S.; Ryan, S.; Williams, M**. (eds.). 2012. Psychology for Language Learning. Insights from Research, Theory and Practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 251.

underestimated as dealing consciously with new input helps the learner to manage the seemingly unmanageable: incessant exposure to unfamiliar words, complicated grammar rules, pronunciation, etc.[40]. Metacognitive strategies in language learning also involve metalinguistic ability, which can be defined as an awareness that makes the language user think about linguistic form, function and meaning.[41] It also entails analysing how language is utilized by other users.

Metalinguistic awareness, which involves the ability to identify word chunks as important units in the construction of a message and to prioritise the chunks according to their needs, is probably the hardest to develop. Nevertheless, to improve metalinguistic skills, students first have to be trained to identify a meaningful string of words and be equipped with certain strategies to help them out while learning on their own. The set of strategies should include the skill to recognise the grammatical function of the words that a particular formulaic sequence consists of, for example, understanding the role of prepositions and adverb particles in phrasal verbs. Even though the grammatical analysis of multi-word phrases may be considered unappealing by some students and teachers alike, elementary knowledge of the parts of speech and sentence elements does have obvious benefits. It is not suggested, however, that one should conduct in-depth grammatical analysis; it is sufficient to establish a routine from the regular presentation of the lexical input with a focus on the grammatical features of formulaic sequences, which has a beneficial effect on the learner's ability to notice the role of each element in a meaningful whole. Such explicit integrated instruction is regarded to be most useful when applied to communicative tasks since it contributes to making mental connections and hence to the memorisation of the rules[42]. To apply this approach, there is no need to prepare extra materials, for the existing textbooks and audio-visual resources can efficiently be used. In a classroom situation, students may be asked to point out, underline or write out formulaic sequences they find useful or think they might need and present the findings to the rest of the group. The instructor's feedback helps to draw their attention to the errors in identifying the whole lexical unit or refer to the potential

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[40]  **Oxford** 1990, p. 136.

[41]  **Jessner, U**. 2008. A DTS Model of Multilingualism and the Role of Metalinguistic Awareness. – The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 92, No. 2, p. 277.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25173027> (11.01.2017).

[42]  **Ellis, R**. 2015. Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 249.

stumbling blocks in using the open-slots. Additional tasks, such as asking the learners to form their own sentences with a given expression, etc., can easily be devised on the go should there be a need for further practice. Such activities can be applied as efficient time fillers or done on a regular basis since systematic exposure is likely to have the best results for the identification and analysis of formulaic sequences and the development of metalinguistic ability.

To support the development of analytical skills in vocabulary acquisition, it may also be worthwhile to raise the learners' awareness of the grammatical differences and similarities at work in the formulaic sequences both in their mother tongue and the target language. Even in case of markedly different languages like Estonian and English, drawing parallels between the grammatical structures of corresponding formulaic units may give a better understanding of the mechanics of formulaic expressions. For instance, pointing out the role of prepositions in English vis-à-vis case endings in Estonian may elucidate the function and meaning of prepositions in a multiword item. Just as the cases are needed to show the relationship between the words in an expression, the prepositions perform a similar function in English. Since the learners in the groups observed had difficulties in identifying and understanding the role of prepositions in formulaic units, learning to see the parallels between the two languages may contribute to a better understanding of how English works. The comparison between languages cannot always be applied because of the inherent uniqueness of every language, but developing the ability to notice how different linguistic systems operate may yield good results in the acquisition of formulaic language in the long run inasmuch as learners acquire the skill to approach formulaic units analytically and start using them efficiently as a result. Thinking about the linguistic form, function and meaning facilitates the understanding of a formulaic expression as a whole.


## Conclusion

Lexical competence forms the basis of mastering a language and a good command of vocabulary not only entails the knowledge of words but also the ability to use the words in appropriate formulaic sequences to make communication fluent.  However, vocabulary teaching and learning strategies are often centred around single words and not enough attention seems to have been paid to the use and acquisition of lexis consisting of more complex,

multiword items in service of functional language. At B1 level learners are expected to have a relatively good grasp of the more frequent formulaic sequences that help them to communicate within the realm of everyday topics. The language user needs to know the functionality of formulaic phrases and multiword items that may not have a one-off translation in their native language and to identify and memorise such lexemes, the learner has to start applying different strategies. As the observations carried out on B1 English courses at the ENDC demonstrated, the difficulties in identifying and learning to use formulaic language may hinder the achievement of the study outcomes that focus on lexical competence and fluency. To maximise students' potential in this respect, it is worthwhile to facilitate the learners' understanding of how a language works and raise their awareness of the utility and productivity of learning words in chunks. Developing meta-linguistic awareness and a more holistic view of the language used by the native speakers in everyday situations contributes also to learner autonomy and sustains continuing linguistic development outside the classroom setting.

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