

# Individual differences and their effects on formulaic sequence acquisition

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## Introduction

Anecdotal evidence abounds that language learners show considerable variation in their acquisition of formulaic sequences. This variation does not appear to be directly related to their overall rate of language learning success (i.e. 'good' learners may not be better than 'slower' learners at mastering a range of colloquial phrases); and the variation also applies to more natural language learning situations embedded in the host environment, with the learners being exposed to natural L2 input. What causes this variation? Why do we find that many international students, who spend several years studying at a British university, still maintain their artificial, 'textbook-like' proficiency, whereas some others readily master a wide range of formulaic phrases and colloquialisms which in turn lend their language use a native-like character?

Our initial assumption was that the acquisition of a formulaic, phraseological competence is somewhat different from the mastery of other components of communicative language proficiency in that formulaic language is so closely linked to the everyday reality of the target language culture that it cannot be learnt effectively unless the learner integrates, at least partly, into the particular culture. For example, the context-appropriate application of colloquial phrases cannot be learned from textbooks, but only through participation in real-life communicative events. Thus, we assumed that the acquisition of a formulaic repertoire is a socially-loaded process that goes beyond mastering elements of the target language code as it also requires 'tapping into' the sociocultural reality of the L2 community and incorporating elements of it into the learners' own language behavioural repertoire. This hypothesis was indirectly confirmed by the quantitative analyses of the data gathered in the acquisition component of our project, reported by Schmitt, Dornyei, Adolphs and Durow (this volume): The lack of any statistically significant correlations between the participating

students' formulaic language gain scores and the individual difference measures pointed to the fact that the inter-learner variation was not simply a function of the existing differences between the learners' basic attributes, but was the outcome of a more complex process such as the sociocultural integration of the learners. The current study intends to explore this 'more complex process' by analysing qualitative data collected from a subsample of the participants in the Schmitt *et al.* study.

As far as we know, there have been no focused investigations conducted analysing the relationship between sociocultural integration and SLA in the past; therefore the design of our study was exploratory in nature. Based on the theoretical considerations outlined above, our own past experience, and extensive discussions with fellow teachers and researchers, we decided to look for the decisive factors explaining student success or failure in relation to the degree of the students' *acculturation*, that is, the extent to which learners succeeded in settling in and engaging with the host community, thereby taking advantage of the social contact opportunities available. Thus, the qualitative strand of our project was aimed at examining how the participants coped with this sociocultural aspect of their learning process.

## Background

Schumann (1986) defines *acculturation* as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group" (p. 379) and sees it as a prerequisite to mastering the target language. His theory was originally developed for multiethnic settings from a minority group perspective and this situation has obvious similarities to the mastering of the dominant language of the host environment by international students. The bulk of Schumann's theory concerns factors that may create a social or psychological distance between the L2 learners and the target language speakers, which is seen as detrimental to the attainment of the target language. Three areas highlighted in the theory seem to be particularly pertinent to our study: (a) culture shock and cultural adaptation; (b) language attitudes and motivation; and (c) social networks and enclosures.

### Culture shock and cultural adaptation

Schumann (1986) defines '*culture shock*' as the anxiety and disorientation experienced upon entering a new culture due to the recognition that established

mechanisms to cope with routine activities do not work in the new environment. Thus, the concept denotes a complex notion covering a broad range of negative psychological and social reactions to immersion in another culture (Furnham, 1993). Culture shock is assumed to happen to everybody new to a culture — it is a normal and expected reaction as part of the adaptation to the existing cultural differences. The concept was first introduced in a study by Oberg (1960), which identified six main sources of culture shock: (a) strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations; (b) a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession, and possessions; (c) being rejected by / and/or rejecting members of a new culture; (d) confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity; (e) surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and (f) feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

The international students in our sample came from cultural backgrounds that were rather dissimilar to the host environment. Our pilot investigations suggested that not only did they find the sociocultural norms different and often strange but even basic issues such as the local food caused them difficulties and stress. We therefore assumed that many of them would experience severe forms of culture shock and the process of cultural adaptation would not be smooth for most.

### Language attitudes and motivation

A key aspect in any learning situation is the learner's motivation. Because of the complex, socially-loaded nature of language, the motivation to learn a second language is a multi-faceted construct, involving a range of components such as attitudes towards the L2 speakers and their culture; various pragmatic benefits of L2 proficiency; issues related to the learner's personality/identity; and a host of factors rooted in the actual context of the learning (cf. Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001). Therefore, the learners' appraisal of the host environment and the L2 community is a key determinant of their willingness and eagerness to actively engage with the locals. Furthermore, as Aston (1988) emphasises, the development of an interactional ability requires the acquisition of the interactional rituals of the L2 culture and having favourable attitudes towards their use — this again points to the significance of a positive evaluation of the target culture.

Because our study involved a longitudinal investigation covering a period of several months, of particular importance for us was how initial attitudes and motivation changed over time. The temporal dimension of motivation and the

question of motivational evolution has received some attention in L2 studies during the past few years (e.g. Dornyei, 2000, 2001; Ushioda, 2001) and conceptualising motivation as a dynamic process rather than a relatively stable learner attribute offered us the opportunity to explore the fluctuation of the learners' motivation and the relationship between motivational development and changes in the learners' sociocultural perceptions and social situation. Our research design has, therefore, involved periodically revisiting the participants' attitudinal disposition in order to identify possible trends that may support or hinder their learning process. Taking such a process-oriented approach seemed all the more necessary in the light of the failure of the motivation test administered to the whole student sample to produce results that explained a significant amount of variance in the formulaic language gains (Schmitt *et al.* this volume), pointing to a more complex motivation-learning achievement relationship.

#### Social networks and enclosures

One of Schumann's (1986) most influential insights into the process of acculturation involved the significant role he attributed to the concept of *enclosure*. By this he meant the extent to which the learner's group shared the same social facilities (e.g. churches, schools, recreational facilities, professions) as the target language group. Obviously, if learners find themselves in an 'international ghetto' situation, this will reduce their opportunities for contact with the host community and hinder any subsequent sociocultural integration. Thus, the issue of enclosure raises two broader questions, the role of *social networks* and *interethnic contact*. Both are well-researched issues in the social sciences with solid bodies of literature and therefore the current discussion can only outline the scope of these issues and their relevance to our current study, without offering a systematic overview.

In a study that was similar to ours both in its aims and conditions, Geoghegan (1983) analysed the difficulties experienced by non-native students at Cambridge University. She concluded that the most important factor that contributed to the students' sense of alienation was the poor contact they had with the host population. The participants of her study explained the insufficient quantity of contact largely as a result of restrictions within the British culture where privacy and individualism are highly valued. While putting the blame, and therefore the responsibility, on the other party is clearly a simplistic and one-sided perception, it illustrates well that the success of interethnic communication is dependent on the extent of cross-cultural understanding. Indeed,

despite the realisation of the importance of contact within the learning process, many international students fail to achieve it because they treat learning the L2 and learning the L2 culture as two separate things and try to focus only on the former. Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe, Hewstone's (1996) findings indicate that this phenomenon is not restricted to specific ethnic groups. The researchers investigated British exchange students and found that not a single one of them reported having had too much contact with host country members, whereas 55 per cent reported having had too little contact with them.

The amount of interethnic contact one experiences is also a function of the nature of the learners' social network, which consists of all the people they have links with such as family, friends, acquaintances and even the strangers they meet (McMahon, 1994). The quality of such social/friendship networks has a strong impact on the ultimate success of the language acquisition process. In a study of Chinese teaching assistants in America, Jenkins (2001) found, for example, that her participants, who lived together in apartments that they themselves referred to as the 'Chinese ghetto' and operated under a system of interdependence and group obligations, attributed their cultural isolation partly to their situational circumstances.

The effects of interethnic contact have also been the subject of a vigorous line of research in social psychology investigating the "Contact Hypothesis". In a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, Pettigrew (1998) summarises that, according to the theory, contact leads to positive interethnic outcomes only if the following five conditions are met: equal group status of the two groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, authority support and friendship potential. From our perspective, particularly the last condition is important because this is exactly the kind of quality that is so often missing from the relationship between international students and the locals. Furnham and Bochner (1989) provide a survey of findings concerning *the friendship networks* of international students and conclude that although friendship relationships with host nationals are seen as important and necessary, these relationships are seldom forged. They go on to argue that "foreign students have limited contact with host nationals [which] may explain why many overseas students return home disgruntled with the society in which they have studied" (p.129). The well-being of international students from a social network perspective would require, as the scholars maintain, for international students to belong to both a host-national network through which they could learn the social skills of the host culture and a co-national network so that they could maintain their culture of origin. However, the available evidence suggests that most foreign students "do not belong

to a viable host-national network" (p.129). In a recent overview, Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) confirm the validity of the earlier findings. Although many students would like, and feel that it would be beneficial, to form friendship relationships with members of the host community, in practice this very rarely happens. Investigating an Oxford student residence, for example, Bochner, Hutnik and Furnham (1985) reported that as many as 70 per cent of their sample of foreign students did not have any English friends at all after at least one year in the country.

### Research question

The brief overview above suggests that international students arriving at British universities may not necessarily find what so many of them expect, namely that they will be able to immerse in the host culture and develop their language proficiency through ongoing participatory experience of L2 communication. Past research suggests that their acculturation process is likely to be an uphill struggle, hindered by serious culture shock, motivational fluctuation and inadequate membership opportunities in host-national networks. We have also argued that the acquisition of a formulaic/phraseological competence is to a large extent the function of the learners' sociocultural adaptation and integration, and in the light of the acculturation difficulties outlined above we can see why formulaic language learning is so often unsuccessful. The good news, however, is that some learners do manage to make considerable progress in this area, and this observation prompts our main research question: What learner characteristics and learning conditions/processes facilitate the successful mastery of formulaic sequences, thereby empowering learners to 'beat the odds'? In order to pinpoint the patterns that cause the differences in this area, our research design contrasts some of the most successful formulaic language learners in our sample with some of the least successful ones.

## Methodology

### Participants

Participants included seven international postgraduate students at the University of Nottingham, enrolled in a pre-session intensive language course offered by the Centre for English Language Education (CELE). All of them were

**Table 1.** Descriptive data about the seven participants

	Age	Nationality	Study area	Formulaic gain	L2 proficiency	Course length
Mike	29	Japanese	IT	20	TOEFL (comp): 190	3
Daniel	26	Chinese	IT	16	IELTS: 5.5	3
Faith	26	Chinese	Law	15	TOEFL: 637	3
Beth	23	Chinese	Education	10	IELTS: 5	3
Jill	23	Chinese	Law	1	IELTS: 6.5	2
June	34	Chinese	Business	-1	IELTS: 6	2
Ann	32	Chinese	Law	-5	IELTS: 5.5	3

of Asian origin (Chinese and Japanese) and none of them had visited the UK before. They were selected from a pool of 24 students who had participated in the longitudinal interview study strand of our larger-scale project (cf. Schmitt *et al.* [Chapter 4], this volume). All the 24 students took part in regular interviews for a period of approximately six months and they all took a number of different paper-and-pencil tests. The reason for selecting the current seven learners for our study was that they each obtained extreme gain scores on the two types of formulaic sequence tests we applied in the study (cf. Schmitt *et al.*, this volume): while three of them showed virtually no improvement between the pre- and post-tests, the other four showed considerable gains in their formulaic sequence repertoire during the examined period. Table 1 presents some basic descriptive data about the participants; as can be seen, the 'good' formulaic learners all obtained a total gain score of 10 or above, whereas the 'slow' ones only 1 or below. Given that the mean gain score was 5.66 for the whole sample (N=70) and the standard deviation was 5.16, these learners were at least one standard deviation above or below the sample mean.

### Data collection

Besides taking the paper-and-pencil tests in the same way as the rest of the sample (cf. Schmitt *et al.*, this volume), the participants also took part in a series of regular long interviews. At the time of the interviews, all the students were studying English in an intensive language course of either two or three months' duration; following this preparatory course, they intended to proceed to postgraduate study. Students on the three-month pre-session course were interviewed at the beginning, middle and end of the course, while the two-month students were only interviewed at the beginning and the end. The interviews

were conducted by the authors and a research assistant in a way that a student was always interviewed by the same caseworker. The interviews were recorded and the tapes subsequently transcribed. At the end of the language course, the personal tutors who had been assigned to each student by CELE were also interviewed. Again, the interviews were taped and transcribed.

### The interviews

As summarised earlier, the aim of our study was to supplement and clarify the quantitative findings (cf. Schmitt *et al*, this volume) with in-depth qualitative data obtained from a series of semi-structured interviews with both the participants and their personal tutors. We were hoping to explain the variation observed in the formulaic gain scores by identifying possible reasons rooted in the participants' motivation, attitudes and beliefs, as well as their personal experiences related to interethnic contact and cultural adaptation.

In order to make the interview data comparable across the participants, we developed interview guides for each session, which were first piloted with five students at Nottingham University. These interview guides included questions concerning factual information about the interviewees' background and a set of topics to be explored with the interviewees during the course of the interviews. These were selected as a result of consulting the relevant literature and conducting in-depth informal discussions with a variety of people who had relevant expertise (e.g. course tutors) or personal experience (international students). The final list involved issues such as the students' reaction to the host country; their attitudes and beliefs about language learning; their language learning motivation and any possible changes in it; their perceived progress and any factors they thought might have facilitated or hindered it; and finally their social well-being, including social networking and contact opportunities with native speakers of the target language. The interviewers were given freedom in how they sequenced the questions and finalised their wording, and how much time they devoted to each individual topic as long as the interview contained some coverage of all the areas.

The series of interviews created prolonged engagement with the interviewees and, as a result, good rapport was built between each interviewer and interviewee. The interviewees found it increasingly comfortable to express their opinions in a conversational manner and the fact that they were interviewed more than once allowed the interviewers to pursue and deeply understand any emergent topics, responses and motives. It is important that the interviewees

were seen as 'participants' not 'subjects' and they actively shaped the course of the interview. The interviewers showed interest, gave support and sometimes even took part in the participant's social activities. Their focus was on exploring the participants' own perspectives and interpretations.

### Data analysis

Data analysis took place in an ongoing manner throughout the longitudinal data collection phase. For the purpose of this study (as this was just one subset of the larger-scale project) we employed content analysis of the transcribed interviews, trying to identify any themes that would explain the individual participants' observed success or failure in acquiring formulaic language.

### Results

#### Quantitative results

Table 2 presents the aptitude and motivational test scores obtained by the participants, standardised for the whole sample. That is, the table shows how much each individual score differs from the sample mean, and this difference is presented in standard deviations. Thus, for example, Mike's aptitude score is .80 standard deviations higher than the sample mean. (All participants' names are pseudonyms.)

As can be seen in the table, there is no straightforward pattern of results that would explain the differences between the two groups of learners. For example, although Mike, the most effective formulaic learner, had the highest level of language aptitude, Beth had the lowest and still qualified for the 'good' group. And although Ann, the worst formulaic learner, reported the highest level of language use anxiety, the second highest level was displayed by Mike, the top learner. This inconclusive pattern, in fact, corresponds with the results calculated for the whole sample (Schmitt *et al*, this volume), where we did not find any significant relationships between individual difference variables and the degree of acquisition of formulaic sequences.

#### Qualitative results

Why did the good learners excel and the slow learners fail? In the following

Table 2. Various standardised test scores obtained by the participants<sup>a</sup>

		Sample mean	Mike	Daniel	Faith	Beth	Jill	June	Ann
Aptitude		.67	.80	.49	.18	-1.07	-.76	-.13	-.76
Attitudes toward L2 learning	Initial	4.43	.90	-1.08	-.75	-.09	-.75	-.09	-.42
	Change	.14	.29	1.77	.29	.29	.66	-.46	-.46
	Final	4.57	1.21	.47	-.63	.11	-.26	-.63	-1.00
Integrativeness	Initial	4.27	1.59	-1.40	-.41	-.91	-.16	.34	-.16
	Change	-.11	-.72	.31	-.49	1.62	.22	.92	.92
	Final	4.16	.69	-1.03	-.89	.69	.01	1.15	.69
Instrumentality	Initial	4.20	-.22	.15	.15	-.59	.13	.52	.88
	Change	.15	-.50	-1.47	-.82	.15	-.82	-.17	-.50
	Final	4.35	-.78	-1.55	-.78	-.40	.36	.36	.36
Language use anxiety	Initial	3.35	.63	-.02	-.34	-.02	-.02	-.67	1.27
	Change	-.29	.21	-.38	-.68	-.68	-.09	.21	.21
	Final	3.06	.92	-.38	-1.03	-.71	-.06	-.38	1.57
Commitment to learn English	Initial	4.90	1.17	.10	-1.50	.64	.10	.10	-.97
	Change	-.21	-.63	-.63	.62	-.21	.20	-1.04	.62
	Final	4.69	.30	-.66	-.66	.30	.30	-1.15	-.18
Intended effort	Initial	5.40	.86	.86	.86	-2.03	-.58	.86	-.58
	Change	-.14	-1.91	-.87	-1.91	1.23	.18	.18	.18
	Final	5.26	-1.75	-.36	-1.75	-.36	-.36	1.03	-.36

<sup>a</sup>All participant scores have been standardised (i.e. the sample means have been converted to 0 and the standard deviations to 1). Please note that this also applies to the *change scores*: they do not represent the actual changes but rather how these changes were related to the changes that occurred to the other participants in the whole sample.

section we will present a qualitative data by looking at what we have found out about the participants from the interviews. First we examine the participants one by one, in a descending order of their formulaic gain scores (i.e. we start with the best formulaic language learner), and in the subsequent Discussion section we analyse any emerging broader themes.

### Mike

In Japan, Mike did not use to like learning English and did not see the point of doing so because he did not need the language for his daily life. All this changed

when he made friends with a foreign student whose English was excellent, and through him he got to know several other international students as well. As he explains,

In university I changed my mind because I met an overseas student. He is Argentinian but can speak English very, very well. We got on a very very nice relationship, so I tried to speak English. He lived in international dormitory, and I had some chance to talk to other overseas students. It was a very nice experience for me and there I wanted to learn English.

There were three further contributing factors to his motivation: First of all, the role modelling of his father, who had a high level of proficiency in English since he edited an English-speaking paper and whom Mike admired. Second, the fact that he had to work for two years to be able to afford his trip to England, which considerably increased the value of this opportunity to learn and also made him keen to make the most of it. Third, his general positive attitude towards British people, whom he thought shared a lot in common with the Japanese in being polite, gentle and shy.

Mike therefore started off with a high level of commitment and he appeared to enjoy the English course: As Table 2 shows, his initial attitude toward L2 learning was higher than average and it further increased during the three month period. In his private life he also made an effort to use as much English as possible, although he did not seem to manage to establish any real contact with native speakers. To compensate for this, he tried to speak to his friends and even to his wife in English, but as he admits this was not always possible. In an interview at the end of Mike's studies in CELE, his tutor told us how pleased he was with Mike's progress and how much he admired the positive part Mike took in his learning process. He described Mike as an organised, bright, humorous, well-balanced, happy, lovely and sensitive person. The tutor also noticed that Mike mixed well with other nationalities in the group and was also realistic about the pace of his learning, which he believed had paid off.

Thus, Mike appears to be a straightforward case of a particularly highly motivated and talented learner (Table 2 shows that he had the highest aptitude score in our sample) who wanted to make the most of his studies. However, even in his case the picture is not entirely clear-cut because he also displayed a greater than average level of anxiety about using English and by the end of the three-month period his commitment to learn English decreased somewhat along with the amount of effort he wanted to exert on his language studies.

### Daniel

Looking at Daniel's quantitative profile in Table 2, the only special thing we can notice is that he came to like the language learning process during his stay in Nottingham: Starting off as worse than the average, by the end of the three months he was way above his group in terms of his positive disposition. His qualitative data reveals a factor that must have been highly instrumental in his success: his *desire to use English in real-life situations*, that is, "just to talk with a native speaker". Right from the start he decided that sharing his accommodation with native speakers would be useful, and indeed managed to move into a rented house with some British youth. In our experience with international students, this had almost been unprecedented as most students would usually stay in the safety of the university student halls where they are housed with other foreign students. The same willingness to apply English for real-life communication was also displayed in his eagerness to use the language to meet people of other nationalities and even to find a foreign girlfriend:

With English we can talk to Koreans, Japanese, we can talk and get to know each other, make a girlfriend from another country, it's very useful.

Although he admits that the communication with his British house-mates was not always easy and unfortunately after a while they had to leave and Daniel moved back to campus, he kept watching TV and listening to the radio purposefully to remain in touch with spoken English. In a follow-up interview, his tutor described Daniel as chatty and talkative and he also noticed Daniel's interest to use the language appropriately in social situations. The tutor thought that Daniel found it relatively easy to adapt to life in the UK but noted that Daniel had one main language problem, his poor pronunciation. A good illustration of Daniel's intercultural social skills was given by himself in an interview describing a situation when he started to talk to a British lady in the street and ended up being invited to her place to have a cup of coffee with her. This was particularly noteworthy given that this was not something usually done in China:

And also I met a lady, she welcome with me to her room and have a cup of coffee with her. Is very good I think but in China is very strange but in UK I think very common.

### Faith

Faith is similar to Daniel in that the quantitative details do not reveal anything remarkable about her with regard to her L2 learning success. The only area

where she was better rather than worse than the average was *language use anxiety* — she did not seem to worry about communicating in English. This, as we find out from her personal account, was due to the fact that her mother was a teacher of English, who encouraged her to learn the language from an early age. Furthermore, before coming to England she had been working for joint venture companies where a good level of English was a requirement.

In Nottingham, she did not find the English course sufficiently challenging. As her personal tutor described,

She's probably the best person in that group in all her skills and she is very focused, very self-motivated, wants to get on faster. You know, I think she has found it a bit slow.

Faith's personal accounts reveal that she 'underrepresented' herself in the motivation questionnaire: She came to Nottingham with a very high level of motivation and expectations, and she spent a lot of her free time studying (at least four hours a day!). She set out to acquire a native-like level of proficiency in English, and it is this ambition and the accompanying determination to achieve it that, we believe, made her stand out of the others.

She was well aware of the importance of contact with native speakers of English ("... it can improve English and it can also make you understand the culture ...") but, interestingly, even her advanced proficiency and her motivation were insufficient to get her to really integrate into the local community. This is partly because she spent most of her time on her "project and on playing on the computer", and partly because she had certain basic problems with cross-cultural communication, most notably with the choice of non-academic topics that were appropriate for British people.

I have created some chance to talk with native speakers but the topic is hard to choose ... what kind of topic is proper to discuss. Sometimes when I try to find some new topics, maybe the person I have talked with feels embarrassed or not at ease. For Chinese people, we all like to talk about family life but I found that some British people didn't like this topic since it's a little bit private to talk about ... Sometimes I want to ask some questions to local people but I am always afraid that maybe they think I'm rude. I don't want to make people upset.

### Beth

We have included Beth in this study partly because she qualified as a successful learner of formulaic sequences (cf. Table 1) and partly because her story serves as the perfect illustration for the significance of an ongoing social engagement

with the target language community: All the indications suggest that without the successful sociocultural integration that she displayed she would have probably failed her course, let alone become one of the success stories. So far all the three good students we have described had a higher-than-average language aptitude, whereas Beth was just the opposite: her aptitude score was more than one standard deviation below the sample mean. In addition to this handicap, her initial motivation was also below average in every respect except 'commitment to learn English', and the amount of intended effort she was going to put in her learning was over 2 (!) standard deviations below average. And, given that her proficiency level was also worse than most of her peers', it does not come as a great surprise that initially Beth was struggling: she was depressed, nervous and intensely homesick. In fact, both her personal tutor and her research caseworker expressed serious worries at that time that Beth would break down and go home. Two quotes, one from her and one from her tutor, illustrate this situation well:

These days I am not very well. I am so tired. I feel that I cannot arrange the time to deal with my daily life. I miss my mother very much, every night I bring my mother's photo into my dreams. I feel I am very alone.

[Personal tutor:] When she first arrived, she was very nervous, very insecure, completely out of her depth. She was a long way from home and probably for the first time she was very lost. She is very intense, you know the workaholic type who works a lot and doesn't make friends very easily, so she was isolated for a long time.

Yet by the end of the three-month period, her integrative/cultural disposition towards England improved by more than 1.5 standard deviations above the average, her anxiety decreased and her attitude toward learning became more positive, exceeding the sample mean! What happened?

If we look at her quantitative profile in Table 2, there is one aspect in which Beth stands out: her *desire to achieve a high level of English*. And as soon as her immediate culture shock was over, she started to adjust to life in Britain and to cope with her challenges:

I feel I have become, from time to time ... I have joined in the British culture and British life, and it's not very quick ... When I came here, I always worried about everything, food shopping and study, and I always felt I couldn't enjoy myself. Sometimes I didn't want to communicate with people ... but this week I feel I have some experience about how to arrange my life.

Beth's characteristic feature was that she proactively sought out opportunities to interact with native speakers. As her personal tutor described, she "latched onto anybody she could", but did this in an amiable way. Looking back, it is noteworthy that already in China she succeeded in developing a relationship with a

British teacher of English, whom she met at an exhibition and, as she described, "every week we write a letter on the internet". Here in England she joined a local church and became very involved in church life. This resulted in a lot of contact with native English speakers and by the end of the three-month period she had made, by her own account, several friends both in church and in her language Course. Let us conclude this summary with two telling quotes, one from her, the other from her personal tutor:

I think in these three months I have made progress about my study. I have acquired academic skills and have got some friends in the language course and in my church and this is a great foundation to support my future study. So I've enjoyed these three months.

[Personal tutor:] To begin with everybody was very worried about her because she was so depressed. She's very thin and she seemed like a little sort of waif, wasting away, and she was always on her own. She looked unwell physically. She looked unwell emotionally. She just looked unhappy all the time but that's changed now. She seems to be quite different, very smiley, happy, relaxed, most of the time. She still has moments when you see the brow furrow and the panic start but that goes very quickly once she remembers what to do.

### Jill

Let us start looking at the group of low formulaic achievers by introducing Jill, a 23-year old Chinese student. Her test profile in Table 2 shows that she was not dissimilar to the average sample, perhaps slightly on the negative side, particularly in her language aptitude and her attitude toward language learning. When we analysed her personal accounts, one pattern in her behaviour became striking: her inability to integrate into the local culture and community. For example, just like Daniel, she also left university accommodation where international groups were housed in ethnic clusters, but she moved into a rented house with Chinese friends rather than British or other international students. The following extract illustrates her crosscultural difficulties:

I try to understand the English culture through the media such as newspapers and TV but I think it is very difficult to be a part of English culture. You know, we are from different countries, we have different ... maybe there is a cultural gap between us, so very difficult, and nobody will look on us as a native. ... I think the biggest problem is that I cannot meet many native speakers ... So you know, there are Japanese just together, Chinese together, and people from Europe together ...

Her difficulty in finding opportunities to communicate with native speakers of English might have also been caused by her beliefs about language learning.

Like many Asian learners, she believed in the supreme importance of studying grammar and memorising vocabulary items, especially law-related ones. She would thus spend hours studying the language in her room rather than using it. As she explained, in China she used to watch English-speaking TV, but she stopped doing so in Britain because of her studies and because she could not see the point of many "silly programmes" on TV, especially the comic ones. This critical attitude was also reflected in her attitude about British people:

I heard from my friend they said although they act very polite indeed they are very indifferent and I think I have not many relationship with them.

Indeed, her tutor described her as an articulate person who was confident enough to make a complaint, something the Chinese students rarely did. He also noticed that she seemed to get dispirited easily and needed some sort of external stimulus to get motivated.

#### June

Two things that stand out in June's quantitative profile (Table 2) are her above-average level of *integrativeness* and *intended effort*. However, the latter is somewhat 'pulled down' by her lower-than-average commitment to learn English. This is also expressed in her personal account:

In the long run I really want to be like a native speaker but in the two months [the duration of her language course before joining a department] I hope I can improve my English to achieve the requirement of academic studies.

Before June came to England she thought she would "make a lot of new friends and speak English every day" but she has found England "much quieter than .. China" and she "cannot see so many people and cannot find many opportunities, activities [to communicate in English]". Just like Beth, she tried to join a church because "many native speakers when they talk about something they always use stories or something related to the Bible" and therefore she thought that learning about the Bible would be useful, but her first impression was that she could "understand very little". What a different attitude this is from Beth's, who didn't just want to learn about things but wanted to *bepart* of things. This lack of commitment to make the most of her stay was also obvious when she admitted, "I think I am not a very hard-working pupil. When I go to the shopping centre with my Chinese friends we generally speak Chinese along the road."

Thus, June could not really make contact with the local people and we believe that one main reason for this was her general inability to relate to the English

way of life. This is well reflected in the following extract talking about pubs and tree time:

I don't like the pub. I don't know what the British people do every day, every weekend, every holiday; I don't know where they go beside the pub. . . . I think in a pub it's very . . . I don't know how to say it . . . you know, people dress a little and drink a lot of beer, alcohol . . . they dance, they speak aloud, something like this, but I think that beside this nothing is very exciting, just very quiet.

We must note that this 'inability to relate' is not the same as a 'negative attitude'. As was already mentioned, June had an above-average level of integrativeness and this was also reflected in her personal accounts: she found Britain an advanced, modern country and the British gentle, polite, traditional and patient. Furthermore, as her tutor has remarked, "from the way she is dressed she really wants to be European more than Asian". When asked about the best way of learning English, she said, "I think the best is the English environment, but I cannot find that environment. I think the most I use English here is to ask for directions [laughs]". It is noteworthy that her tutor considered her rather quiet, lacking confidence and not revealing much about herself except that she missed her country and her family a lot.

#### Ann

Ann had been working for over ten years as a lawyer in China, a profession that did not require her to use English. Her quantitative profile (Table 2) reveals two things: her level of *language use anxiety* was over a standard deviation above the sample mean and her *attitudes toward L2 learning* were below the sample average. She also openly admitted the latter in one of the interviews, "I admit that I can't find a lot of fun in learning English, sorry, because I still cant find a good way of improving my level." She also did not have high expectations about her success: "I am not so confident about achieving a high level [of English] in the short time. Maybe in ten years I can [laughs]."

Ann's personal tutor described her at the time of her arrival as "not particularly confident but no less confident than anyone else". She claimed to know very little of Ann outside the course but what she said implies that Ann avoided socialising:

To be honest, I don't actually see her very much. I never see her having dinner with the other students. . . . I would imagine that she has very little contact with native speakers.

Going through all the interview data, it becomes clear that Ann's main problem was the tiredness and stress she experienced ever since her arrival in Britain. This, we believe, explains her high anxiety scores in Table 2. As she explained, this nervous state had in fact been a feature of hers even before coming to the UK:

I need a little rest. I'm a nervous person — my colleagues always say that you are too nervous on the job. I think it's because I have so much pressure in my life, for the future, for my work and for my dream. I try to learn how to relax. This is difficult.

This stress caused tiredness, which was further augmented by her language use and anxiety:

I also feel exhausted in class because I still have not got used to get a message, get knowledge in a different language. I translate it into my own language, and I reflect and I react, so I feel tired in class and after that I need a little rest. That's why I go back home in lunchtime, and then in the afternoon, most of the times, I don't think I learned much in the afternoons.

At the end of the three-month course she still experienced problems of tiredness which lead to difficulties in learning: "At the final study, I felt tired. I can't learn. I feel tired even in class. And my reactions slowed down. I just feel tired and physically I have some problems." Thus, the stress and exhaustion held Ann back considerably from learning and also from socialising. She admitted that she withdrew from any form of social contact when she was tired and depressed. In general she spent a lot of time on her own:

I just go to Beeston one time a week to shop, and most of the time I just stay in my room and study or sometimes I listen to the BBC radio broadcasting. Yes, not too much contact outside works.

## Discussion

Although the above descriptions could only provide a crude and superficial representation of the specific issues the seven learners had experienced, one thing becomes clear when we read through them: success in acquiring formulaic sequences is strongly related to the learners' active involvement in some English-speaking social community. The problem is, as we have generally found in our research project, that international students, and particularly those who come from a very different cultural background, find it extremely hard to join such 'host-national networks'. In fact, apart from superficial service encounters most of them hardly ever come into meaningful contact with English speakers out-

side their academic environment. Therefore, their success in acquiring formulaic sequences — and a phraseological competence in general — will depend on whether they can 'beat the odds', that is, whether they can break out of the 'international ghetto' they find themselves in. Two out of the four successful students we have described, Daniel and Beth, managed to do so and their efforts paid off. It is particularly interesting to see that Beth, who was originally 'destined' to be a failure, did manage to completely turn the tide through her most determined efforts at social integration.

The other two successful students and all the three unsuccessful ones failed to break the social barrier. What distinguished the former from the latter, it seems, is their level of language aptitude, which was in both cases above average, and more importantly their extraordinary motivation. Mike was so motivated that he tried to speak English even with his Japanese friends and wife, and Faith tried to improve her language proficiency — which was quite developed to start with — by putting in an amazing amount of work every day. Jill, June and Ann were not bad or unmotivated students — if they had been they would not have been in Nottingham. But for various reasons they did not 'run the extra mile' that was necessary for success: None of them had a particularly high level of aptitude to start with, and each of them had some further personal 'handicaps': Jill could not get over the cultural gap that she felt divided her from British people; June did not have enough perseverance and she also had serious problems relating to British people; and Ann suffered from ongoing stress-related tiredness.

It is dangerous to generalise from the findings of a qualitative study but the tendency that our data has revealed seems to be so strong and it coincides so well with the general impression that we have developed during the two years of our investigation that we feel it is justified to formulate the following conclusion: Success in the acquisition of formulaic sequences appears to be the function of the interplay of three main factors: language aptitude, motivation and sociocultural adaptation. Our study shows that if the latter is absent, only a combination of particularly high levels of the two former learner traits can compensate for this, whereas successful sociocultural adaptation can override below-average initial learner characteristics. Thus, sociocultural adaptation, or acculturation, turned out to be a central modifying factor in the learning of the international students under investigation, which explains why the whole-sample statistics (Schmitt *et al.*, this volume) that did not address the issue of sociocultural adaptation failed to produce significant results.

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