

# Formulaic language: The case of *How about you?*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the formulaic English expression *How about you?* (and its variants *And you?* and *What about you?*) in the context of Japanese learners of English as a foreign language. These expressions are very familiar to Japanese EFL students and are used very frequently by Japanese learners of English. The study examined the expression as found in classroom data, corpora, recordings of native English speaker interactions and Japanese EFL textbooks. This data indicated that the learners tend to overuse the expression in their speaking, compared to native English speakers, and also use it solely as a stand-alone expression at the end of a turn to nominate the next speaker and to index a question that was asked previously. In contrast, in native English speaker interactions, the expression is often accompanied by an address term and also may be followed by a question (either a reprise of an earlier question, or a newly introduced question) and seems to be used when there are more than two participants in the interaction to allocate turns when uncertainty may occur and thus its use contributes to progressivity. It is suggested that apart from relative overuse by the learners, the deployment of this expression in minimized form in dyadic interactions impedes progressivity as it prevents a recipient of the question from building on the content of the previous turn with assessments, commentary or the like, and instead directs the next nominated speaker to give their own response to a question and in effect disattend to the contents of the prior turn. The overuse is therefore not

only a question of frequency, but also of unintended pragmatic effects.

One of the central observations of generative linguistics is that language users continuously produce entirely novel sentences during language production. That is, speakers (and writers) use the finite resources of grammar and vocabulary to generate an infinite variety of sentences. This may have a large measure of truth at the level of the sentence, but it is also true that speakers rely to a great extent on pre-existing 'chunks' of language to create meaning. These chunks occur in a variety of different forms, from two-word collocations (*you know, I mean, sort of*) to multi-word strings (*and all that kind of stuff, keep a straight face*) to full sentences such as proverbs and proverb-like utterances. (*Don't judge a book by its cover, If you can't beat them, join them.*) For foreign language learners the ability to recognize, understand and produce such formulaic language is a key skill in the development of more advanced levels of proficiency. As stated by McCarthy (2010, p. 5):

Chunks enable greatly reduced retrieval and processing time... and are thus more communicatively efficient both for producer and receiver. The economy of effort for all relevant parties offers a further useful support to the notion of 'flow' and an interactive basis for its existence.

Not all formulaic language is equal. Perhaps the most accessible type of formulaic expression is the simple two item collocation, for example, *ladies and gentlemen, salt and pepper, black and white*. In these cases, the collocations are fixed and readily analyzable from their constituents. In English, monochrome images are referred to as 'black and white' and in Japanese they are referred to as *ShiroKuro*, literally, *white and black*. Although the order of the color terms is reversed in the two languages, the meaning is clear.

Idioms present more of a challenge for learners as the meaning may not be apparent from the content, and often relies on cultural values that may not be accessible to out-group members. That being said, the meanings of common idioms and idiomatic chunks are readily accessible to native / proficient speakers of a language and native speakers can usually provide a clear explanation of any such expression if asked. *Don't judge a book by its cover* is an unproblematic expression meaning don't make judgments of people, things or situations based on superficial criteria. (For more on formulaic language and language learning see, Wood, 2010)

While formulaic items like *black and white* or *don't judge a book by its cover* may be different in the level of accessibility to language learners, they both have essentially propositional meaning. That is, they make statements about the world or make judgments about the nature of things in the world that are uncomplex. There exists another area of language that is often expressed by means of formulae, but is much less accessible to scrutiny, not only by language learners, but also by native speakers of the target language, who use such formulae unconsciously but may be hard-pushed to account for the meaning or function. This is pragmatic language, which is to say, language that does not deal with propositions about the world or abstract entities, statements that have truth value and the like, but refers to and manages the ongoing interaction, at that time, in that place and between those participants.

Much pragmatic language is expressed by formulaic expressions. Chunks such as *at the end of the day*, *mind you*, and *the thing is* fulfil primarily pragmatic functions. In these examples the functions are summarizing a topic, offering a counter statement while acknowledging the validity of the original statement and focusing on the main point, respectively. These pragmatic formulae are extremely common in spoken language (see O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter, 2007), but by their very nature are not, or seldom, to be found in the written

form of the language, and it is the written form of the language that serves as the model for much language instruction. (See for example, Hasselgreen 2004, p. 238; Carter 2004, p. 26). Thus, when dealing with formulaic language in the second / foreign language classroom we can determine a hierarchy of accessibility, with two-word collocations at one pole, being essentially propositional and open to intuitive reasoning by both native-speakers and language learners alike, through to more idiomatic expressions which are still rooted in propositions about the world but are often opaque to language learners, but not to their teachers. At the other pole, there is formulaic language that serves a pragmatic function but lies largely below the metacognitive awareness of native speakers and language learners alike. The difficulties associated with identifying the functions of pragmatic expressions is summed up by Schiffrin (1988, p. 64), who, in referring specifically to discourse markers, identifies the fact that they are multi-functional, meaning that the function of any marker can only be addressed when it is seen in its naturally occurring and specific context. Schiffrin also notes that they are non-obligatory, and that any marked utterance could also have been made without that marker, which poses that question of whether absence of a marker also has functions. Although Schiffrin is referring to the class of words often termed discourse markers, her observations are also applicable to other formulae that are utilized by speakers for pragmatic purposes.

The difficulty in understanding and using pragmatic language is also referred to by Hasselgreen (2005, p. 238) and the complexity of much pragmatic language is revealed by, for example, the very extensive literature dealing with the pragmatic functions of *Well* outlined by Heritage (2015). The stigmatization of pragmatic language is referred to by Schiffrin, (1988), Watts (1989) and Campbell-Larsen (2017). It would seem from these observations that pragmatic language is difficult to teach and learn because of the written

focus of much language teaching, the multi-functionality of many pragmatic expressions, the relative inaccessibility of these functions to intuitions of teachers and L1 speakers and the tendency of their use, (or at least, their perceived overuse) to be stigmatized. Nonetheless, formulaic pragmatic expressions must be part of the repertoire of language learners if they are to progress beyond rudimentary information exchanges when interacting in the language.

### How about you?

This formulaic expression (and its variants *And you?* and *What about you?*) is often used by Japanese speakers of English and appears to be working towards managing turn taking, specifically, nominating the next speaker. It usually appears at the end of a turn and explicitly marks and projects speaker transition, as in the following excerpt taken from a video recording of classroom interactions between Japanese L1 university students:

#### Excerpt 1. School sports

- 01. Ken: Yes, difficult and I was member of relay
- 02. Taro: Oh that's cool, very fast
- 03. Ken: Thank you. I (.) I was very fast,
- 04.       but now I'm don't I'm not
- 05.       Yeah how about you?
- 06. Taro: Ah (0.3) ah, we::ll. I (.) high school
- 07.       high school I belonged to tennis club.

In this excerpt, the two participants have been talking about sports in general. By stepwise transition (See Sacks, 1972 and Jefferson, 1984), the topic has

narrowed to sports played in high school and Ken has been talking about being a member of the track and field club. After receipting Taro's positive assessment of this in line 03, Ken adds the gloss that he used to be very fast, but now he is not. After this he deploys the formula *How about you?* in line 05. Its appearance here may serve a variety of different purposes. On one level, the chunk seems to be used to overtly signal speaker transition. It also tacitly indicates the proposed content of the subsequent speaker's turn, that is, to supply the answer to the question posed by Taro that initiated the current sequence. (*What sports do / did you play?* not shown here.) These two functions, overtly signaling speaker transition and projecting the expected content of the subsequent speaker's utterance are oriented to by Taro who takes his turn in a more or less timely fashion and aligns with the question that was implied but not stated by Ken, i.e. high school sports activities. It is perhaps interesting to note here that *How about you?* occurs immediately after Ken has stated that he used to be fast but is now not so fast. It would not be a gross violation of topic management if Taro has treated this statement as relevant, i.e. if he had treated Ken's *How about you?* as an invitation to discourse on whether he was still as fast or athletic now as he had been in high school. Given the option of treating *How about you?* as relevant to a proximal utterance (*How about you? Are you as fast now as you were in high school?*) or a distal utterance (*How about you? What sports did you play in high school?*) the person nominated as the next speaker orients to the formulaic utterance as a return to the question that initiated the current sequence on high school sports. Speaker transition is proposed, and the content of the next utterance is projected as being relevant to a specifically posed question that occurred at the onset of the current sequence.

The same functions can be observed in the following excerpt.

## Excerpt 2. Part time job

01. Yuri: Whato (1.1) did you: (1.0)  
 02. do (2.1) weekend this (0.9)  
 03. last weekend? weekend  
 04. (4.8)  
 05. Miyu >Part time job<  
       (16 lines omitted.)  
 06. Yuri: Morning?  
 07. Miyu: Lunch Lunch hhe he Good afternoon  
 08. Yuri: Afternoon afternoon afternoon  
 09. ah:Twelve?  
 10. Miyu: Yes.  
 11. Yuri: A: : :h  
 12. Miyu: How about you?  
 13. Yuri: I I go I went back home

In excerpt 2, Yuri proffers a topic in line 01, namely, talk about last weekend's activities. This topic is taken up by Miyu who answers that she worked in her part-time job. The talk then continues on this topic for some time (the 16 lines omitted here). Yuri asks Miyu a series of questions about this work, to which Miyu provides minimized answers. Yuri and Miyu stick to the roles of questioner and answerer respectively for this sequence, which concludes in lines 10 and 11. In line 12 the roles of questioner and answerer are reversed and Miyu asks Yuri the question 'How about you?'. Yuri orients to this as a nomination to 1) speak and 2) to answer the question that was posed in line 01, namely, 'What did you do last weekend?'.

Both excerpt 1 and excerpt 2 are dyadic interactions, featuring only two

speakers, which greatly simplifies the question of who the next speaker is. According to the system of turn taking described by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) the current speaker can select the next speaker (in direct or indirect ways) or, the current listener can self-select as the next speaker. In the following excerpts the interaction takes place between three people and so the question of who the next speaker should be is more complex.

Excerpt 3. Golden week

- 01. Rei: What, what are you
- 02.       doing in Golden week?
- 03. Aya: I go (.) go to Aqua Resort.
- 04. Rei: Aqua?
- 05. Chie: Aqua resort?
- 06. Aya: Aqua resort.
- 07. Rei: Ah, sounds good. How about you?
- 08. Chie: Uhm...I....maybe I didn't I work every day.

In this excerpt Rei begins the sequence with a general question about proposed activities during the upcoming Golden Week holidays. (Golden Week refers to a series of back-to-back public holidays that occur at the beginning of May in Japan.) After Aya answers this question in a minimal fashion (*I go to Aqua Resort*) Rie receipts this with an assessment (*Sounds good*) and then turns to Chie, the third participant in this triad and asks *How about you?* This is perceived by Chie as 1) a nomination to take the next turn and 2) a tacit invitation to answer the question that was posed by Rei to Aya in line 01, i.e. *What are you doing in Golden Week?* Chie aligns with this proposed course of action by taking the turn as nominated and answering the tacitly embedded



question, stating that she hasn't decided yet, but will probably be working part-time, as she is now seeking a job.

A variant of *How about you?* is the minimized chunk *And you?* This is a very common formula in the English of Japanese learners, most commonly found in the second pair part of a greeting as in:

A: How are you?

B: Fine thank you, and you?

This minimized chunk also gets utilized in much the same way as *How about you?* as illustrated in excerpt 4.

#### Excerpt 4. Chinese restaurant

01. Seiji: Ah, where did you go on Saturday?
02. Taro: Ah, I didn't go anywhere but
03. I had part time job in Osho.
04. Seiji: Osho? Is Osho Chinese restaurant?
05. Taro: Osho it is very yummy.
06. Seiji: Oh really?
07. Taro: Yeah.
08. Seiji: What did (.) what did you do in Osho?
09. Taro: Ah I'm washing dishes and cooking ah fryer
10. Seiji: Oh I see
11. Taro: And you?
12. Seiji: I'm go, I went to part time job on
13. Saturday too from eight (.) from nine
14. o'clock morning to five thirty afternoon

This sequence again begins with a direct question, *Where did you go on Saturday?* This question is answered in an orderly fashion and there is some expansion of the topic in lines 02 to 09. Taro then asks *And you?* in line 11 and this is oriented to by Seiji as an invitation to answer the sequence opening question that was posed in line 01. In this sequence *And you?* seems to be deployed for the same purposes as *How about you?* in the previous excerpts, that is, to initiate speaker transition and to refer back to a question that was asked at the opening of the sequence, despite its minimized form and the multiple affordances for further talk that have occurred since the asking of the sequence-initiating question.

A further variant of the *How about you?* question is *What about you?* as shown in the following excerpt.

#### Excerpt 5. Train accident

01. Yuto: Yeah it's a very big accident actually
02. (2.1) the accident was on headline
03. (.) of newspaper
04. Aya: Uh huh
05. Yuto: Yeah (.) I'm bored so (.) I'm tired, >you know
06. wharrimean<?=
07. Aya: =I think so (.) so::
08. Yuto: Wharrabout you? =
09. Aya: =>Do< what e. when did you:: arri:ve your home?

In this case, Yuto has been telling a story about being delayed on a train due to an accident at a level crossing. The sequence is rather different from the earlier illustrations in that the telling was not initiated by a question from Aya

(this is the same Aya from excerpt 3), but was initiated by Yuto as a news telling immediately after the exchange of opening greetings. Thus the *Wharrabout you?* cannot have reference to a sequence initiating question as was the case in the previous excerpts, although, like them, it serves as a next speaker nomination (or, seen from a different perspective, current speaker self-deselection), generally indicating that the current speaker (Yuto) perceives his telling to have concluded, marking this with an upshot assessment (*bored and tired*), a turn ending discourse marker (*you know wharrimean*) and an explicit other-nomination (*Wharrabout you?*). Aya does not accept that the train story sequence is now concluded, and disattends to Yuto's *Wharrabout you?* by pursuing further talk on the train delay. This can be seen as starting with the extended *so* in line 07 and continuing with her high-speed *Do* in line 09 which is latched to *Wharrabout you?* It is unclear from the video data whether Yuto intended to add a further increment to the question posed in line 08, i.e., whether he was going to expand on his other-nomination with a question that adumbrated A's upcoming turn in some recognizable way. A's rapid onset in line 09 prevented Y from developing any such expansion and served to re-visit the train story for more details. It turns out that Aya had misapprehended the temporal setting of the story, (such orientation not being given by Yuto) thinking it concerned a train journey in the evening. She was concerned to know whether Yuto could arrive home that night. In fact, the story referred to a morning incident and Yuto missed some classes at university as a result of the delay. Aya's pursuit of further details cleared up this misapprehension, which would never have occurred if she had aligned with Yuto's proposed transfer of speakership.

*How about you?* in learner materials

In a survey carried out by the author, (See appendix 2) all respondents, who were Japanese native speakers studying English at a private University (N=20), reported that they had been specifically taught the formulaic sequence 'How about you?' during formal English instruction. In follow up questions, all respondents asserted that they had been taught it as a way to nominate the next speaker and that they considered it a very natural way to do so. This may in some way account for its relatively high frequency in the talk of Japanese learners of English. The high frequency of this formulaic utterance in learner talk stands in contrast to the near absolute absence of other high frequency chunks such as discourse markers like '*You know*' and '*I mean*'. For example, a search of the British National Corpus (Davies) shows 754 instances of 'How about you' versus 24, 158 instances of 'I mean'. Even though both chunks have a variety of meanings (For example, *How about for you* for suggestions and *I mean* as a propositional statement) the frequent use of the other nomination function in learner talk and the total, or near total, absence of the discourse markers in learner talk (see Campbell-Larsen, 2012) is notable.

In a survey of a number of texts approved for use in Japanese schools to teach English, the 'How about you?' formula was found in several instances. The following excerpts are illustrative.

## A) Sunshine English Course 1, Itagaki (2011, p. 39)

- Mike: What do you usually do on Sunday, Yuki?  
 Yuki: I clean my room.  
 Mike: Oh, good. I listen to music. How about you Takeshi?  
 Takeshi: I usually play basketball. Sometimes we have a recycling day.

## B) One World English Course 1, Mastsumoto (2011, p. 44 – 45)

- Mei: Do you have any pets?  
 Aya: Yes, I have some hamsters and a dog. How about you?  
 Mei: I don't have any pets. My parents don't like animals.

## C) New Crown English Series 2, Takahashi (2011, p. 54)

- Ken: The day at work program is coming next month.  
 Emma: Right. I want to go to a farm. How about you?  
 Ken: I want to work in a department store.  
 Emma: We'll have a great time.

In text A, there are three participants in the interaction and the interaction seems to be centered on Mike, who acts as the 'pivot' through which talk proceeds. In this case the 'pivot' uses an address term to nominate the next speaker. In text B we can see the pattern where participants are in a dyad and a sequence is initiated by a direct, non-complex question. This question is answered in minimalistic fashion by the addressee who, after completing the answer, references the sequence opening question and redirects it back to the original questioner by means of the formula *How about you?* The question is then answered by Mei, again in a fairly minimalized way. Aya's answer to Mei's opening question is not referenced in any way by the original poser of the question, Mei. Not only is the answer presented in minimalized terms, there is no uptake of the answer, there is no commentary or reaction to the contents of Aya's answer. Indeed, the deployment of the *How about you?* formula precludes any such uptake from occurring. Although the deployment of the formula points to a certain kind of orientation to turn management, it can be seen in another light, i.e. as an impediment to progressivity and intersubjectivity.

In text C the sequence is not initiated by question, either stand-alone or embedded in some meta-commentary. Instead, Ken's mentioning that that a 'day at work' program is coming up is taken up by Emma who understands its interactional function as proffering a topic and inviting her to speak on that topic. Emma receipts this proffer with *Right* and then chooses to inform Ken that she wishes to work on a farm on this day. Without any elaboration or details about this activity, or any reason as to why she opts for this kind of work, she immediately prompts Ken to take a turn by means of the *How about you?* formula. Ken orients to this nomination as a prompt to talk about what kind of work he wishes to do. Again, the deployment of the formula precludes the addressee from developing the contents of the prior turn in any way with commentary, reaction, or even claims or demonstrations of understanding. The sequence is ended by Emma's upshot assessment that they will both have a great time.

These examples illustrate that the *How about you?* formula is quite frequent in learner materials and also highlight the kinds of minimized interactions that serve as a model for learners. Naturally, a balance has to be struck when it comes to learner materials, and some simplification needs to occur, especially for lower level and younger learners. However, it could be argued here that, unwittingly, the authors have focused on a turn transition mechanism when, in fact, turn transition is not really problematical for learners. The use of the formula does, however, have a real impact on progressivity in that it prevents the subsequent speaker from building in any way on the contents of the turn that preceded the formula. In short, the use (perhaps overuse) of the formula offers support where none is really needed (turn taking) and inhibits students from doing what they often really struggle with, which is maintaining progressivity and expanding on turn content.

***How about you?* in native English speaker talk**

One of the main differences between *How about you?* in learner data and native speaker data is the prevalence of the term in the former and its scarcity in the latter. In my own data, the term or some variation thereof, appears 26 times in approximately 100 minutes of peer talk among students. In data collected by Greer and Potter (2008) a similarly high level of use was clear (36 instances in 60 minutes of student to student conversations). By contrast, in data of a multi-party interaction among native English speakers collected by the author there are zero instances of *How about you?* in 55 minutes of data. By any measure, the expression is much more frequent in learner talk than in native speaker talk in data collected by the author.

Corpus data supports the view that *How about you?* is not as widespread and frequent in conversation as may be suggested by the formula's appearance in textbooks for even quite elementary English language learners. In the British National Corpus, (Davies 2004) the string *How about you?* appears just 76 times in the whole corpus of written and spoken English (approximately 100 million words). Of these 76 occurrences only nine were from spoken data, the genres being: conversations, broadcast discussions, meetings and classroom talk. On closer inspection, four of the nine instances of *How about you?* in spoken data were of the string being used to make a suggestion, as in the following two excerpts

Excerpt 6. BNC/BYU: KBE.

I said to Julie I said you're at home *how about you* taking this washing machine with you when you go because...

## Excerpt 7. BNC/BYU: JJS

Well, I'll tell you what then erm *How about you* (pause) constructing your own worksheet on this. Would you like to?

The other 67 instances in BNC were primarily from written prose fiction. Nine instances of spoken data in 100 million words, of which approximately half are carrying out the 'next speaker nomination' function reveals the relative scarcity of this formulaic sequence in spoken English.

In a related corpus study, the on-line site YouGlish allows users to input a search item word or string of words and find instances of the word or sequence of words in close proximity in YouTube videos. The site will link to the videos and specifically the section of the video containing the searched for item and it allows the user to watch the relevant sections of the videos one after another. The primary aim of the site is to help English learners to improve their pronunciation, but it is a very useful resource for seeing language use in context with visual performance data that is not accessible in concordance line corpus studies. The string *How about you?* entered into the search field brings up 2,246 instances. This seems to run counter to the data in the BNC corpus study, indicating that *How about you?* is quite a frequently occurring string in spoken English. (Entering the string into the search field without the question mark brings 17,580 hits, but this includes a large number of instances of the suggestion function. Including the question mark in the search field brings up mostly, but not entirely, the 'other nomination' function) Examination of the videos reveals that *How about you?* occurs most often in very specific genres of speaking and often occurs in concert with other pragmatic language, rather than as a stand-alone utterance at the end of a speaker's turn as was the case with the student data above.



The YouGlish data is drawn from YouTube and by its very nature will feature talk from a very wide variety of genres such as interviews, scripted dramatic performances, political speeches, workshop presentations and so on. Ordinary, mundane, social talk, i.e. conversation, will probably be underrepresented in the YouTube corpus as most mundane social interaction goes unrecorded and indeed the presence of recording equipment may distort any conversational interaction (see Warren, 2006). The YouGlish data for *How about you?* is almost entirely from the genres of panel discussion or presentation with audience interaction or other such situations that have the following things in common:

- 1 ) The talk is between the ratified participants but is designed with the knowledge that there are ratified overhearers, i.e the audience. (See Goffman, 1981) This audience may consist of the co-present persons, (for example, those seated in the lecture room) or an overhearing but non-present audience such as listeners at home and so on. It is also assumed that the co-present audience will have access to the recording of the interaction at some later time. In some cases, co-present audience members may become ratified participants, but usually only at the explicit invitation of the main speakers and only for a limited time before reverting to their previous listener role.
- 2 ) The speaking rights of the ratified participants are not evenly distributed. There is usually a person who has the role of chairperson or host or moderator. This person has rights to allocate turns, change the topic, ask questions and so on and is generally responsible for the progressivity of the interaction. The other ratified participants align with this person's speaking rights and generally defer to that person during the interaction. The chairperson is also more generally responsible for ensuring that all ratified participants are given roughly equal opportunity to speak and roughly equal time in which to speak.
- 3 ) The interaction has a topic agenda which is usually adhered to in tight or loose terms. A panel discussion of experts on some scientific topic,

convened to discuss that topic, will probably be tightly constrained and not stray too far from the topic. A discussion with a movie star will probably range over a wider range of topics, but not all topics will be considered suitable, and there exist tacit constraints about what can and cannot be talked about. In addition, in panel type discussions, it is relevant and proper that each person be given an opportunity to speak on the currently underway topic segment before the talk progresses to the next sequence.

Analysis of the use of *How about you?* in these videos shows a variety of practices that are not apparent in the student data. Firstly, a common feature is the use of address terms such as a person's name, often accompanied by some gesture towards the addressee, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 8. Book award

(Library of Congress 1:08:28 – 1:08:35)

01. M: I gotta lotta things I want
02.     but (( laughter )) let's not get
03.     into that how bout you Kathleen?
04.     (.)
05. K: hh. Well I guess

Excerpt 9. Follow your instincts

(Stanford eCorner, 21:17 – 21:22)

01. M: that's a very difficult thing to do
02.     (1.2)
03. H: How [bout you Lisa?]

04. L: [hhhhhhhh. ] A::h I think  
 05. for me a::h it's

Excerpt 10. Caring for parents  
 wpsu b (2015, 3:10 – 3:16)

01. F1: with their own stories (.)  
 02. a lot like yours.  
 03. (0.9)  
 04. H: Gwen how bout you?  
 05. G: And I come from it from both  
 06. a formal

In each of these excerpts the other-nomination is made explicit with the addressee's name, either after the nominating expression as in excerpts 8 and 9 and or preceding it as in excerpt 10. In excerpts 9 and 10, the formula is deployed by the person whose function can be described as 'host' or 'moderator' (indicated by H in the transcript). In Excerpt 8 the other-nomination is carried out by one of the panel members, not the host, but this is not the usual case. In cases where the host nominates a person from the audience to speak, using the person's name is usually not an option, so the address term is sometimes 'sir' or 'ma'am' (uttered prior to or subsequent to the nomination expression) or some other indicator such as '*you in the back*' or '*you with the pink shirt*' or just a stand-alone *How about you?* with strong gesturing towards the nominated person.

In the three excerpts above, the numbers of ratified participants is four, three and four respectively, which is to say that, unlike dyadic interactions, the question of who speaks next is not as fixed. In dyadic talk, at a point where

speaker transition becomes possible, either the ‘other’ speaks or the current speaker self-selects for an additional turn. In cases of more than two speakers the use of address terms in combination with *How about you?* and overt gesturing towards the addressee makes a lot of sense, especially when there are genre constraints on speakers’ rights and responsibilities.

In the first 100 samples of *How about you?* on the Youglish search, there is only one example of a spontaneous, unscripted dyadic interaction where *How about you?* is used to nominate the other participant to take a turn.

Excerpt 11. On-line activity

(Hyatt, 2014, 3:14 – 3:20)

01. F: Because I can’t be on line twenty four
02.       hours a day how bout you? =
03.       [hu huhhh.     ]
04. M: = [No same thing] I do schedule some

This excerpt was from a radio broadcast and this genre may be under special constraints as the talk is designed for the audience who are not co-present, cannot participate and do not have visual cues that help to support understanding of the interactional, turn-taking aspects of the conversation. This leads to a strong orientation to avoid silence. In this case the male speaker’s response is precision timed with the end of the female speaker’s turn and also in overlap with her laughter. Whatever the special features of this genre of speaking, the comparative rarity of *How about you?* in dyadic interactions in general is notable.

In addition to the use of address terms to specifically indicate the nominated next speaker in multi-party (more than two) interaction, a further component

of the *How about you?* turn that emerged from analysis of the video data is the overt inclusion of a question or other such utterance that explicitly projects the expected content of the nominated speaker's upcoming turn. This can be seen in the following excerpts

Excerpt 12. Entrepreneurs

wspu (a) (2015, 13:14 – 13:21)

- 01. H: And how about you? You've sold
- 02.     Xobni but you now have uh.Sincerely
- 03.     and Postagram [How] many people are=
- 04. M:                     [Yeah]
- 05. H: = you employing?

Excerpt 13. Innovation

RIT Production services (2013, 14:03 – 14:10)

- 01. H: Great (.) Paul how about you? what's
- 02.     your philosophy on innovation?

Excerpt 14. Writers

The Richmond Forum (2013, 1:04:54 – 1:04:59)

- 01. H: How about you Doris? uhh are
- 02.     do you have a ritual as a writer?

In these three excerpts (all of them in the 'panel' genre) the host nominates the next speaker with the *How about you?* formulation, either with or without

an address term, and then proceeds to add a question after the nomination, providing an explicit indication of the expected contents of the proposed upcoming turn. The questions are not recycled questions of the kind that were observed in the student data, where a question is asked to an addressee and then, when that person is finished answering the question, the next nominated speaker is directed to answer the exact same question (by implicit means). In excerpts 12, 13 and 14, the question is prompted to a greater or lesser extent by some preceding talk but the question itself is asked as if initiating a new sequence, rather than circling back round to the same initiation by question that was used previously in the kind of 'speaking in rounds' style of conversation (see Hauser, 2009).

## Discussion

From the above analysis, there are several points to be made regarding the occurrence of the formula *How about you?* in student talk. Firstly, it seems to be a much more frequently used item in student conversation than in native / proficient speaker conversation. Secondly it is used in a very particular way in terms of its sequence placement and function. In dyadic student interactions, sequences are very commonly initiated by asking a stand-alone, unelaborated question. The addressee answers this question, often in minimalized fashion. At the conclusion of this answer, the answering person asks the formula question to the original questioner, nominating that person to speak and to answer the question that was asked at the outset of the current sequence. The answer that was given by the first addressee is therefore not open to discussion, commentary or assessment, and is thus considered closed. The person nominated by the formula question is therefore constrained to provide a turn in a fairly narrow way, that is, to answer the original question and probably in minimized form. Once this person has provided an answer, the

sequence is deemed to be complete and the (so-called) conversation moves onto new matters, often initiated by a stand-alone question that is topically unrelated to the previous round of questions and answers. A variation of this pattern is multi-party talk of more than two participants where the original asker of the question waits for the addressee to complete their answer and then that person (the original questioner) deploys the formula question to nominate a third (or fourth) speaker to likewise answer the question, thus acting as a 'pivot' for the conversation's progressivity.

These patterns are, of course, not the default settings by which mundane conversation outside the language classroom proceeds and may stem from a form of classroom interaction that is common in many communicative language teaching contexts driven by textbook formats. In these cases, a specific grammar or lexical item is the target of the lesson. After various explication and practice phases, there is often a list of questions which are lexically or grammatically focused but often have little thematic coherence and implicitly preclude any uptake or commentary on the provided answer. (See appendix 1 for examples.) The learners are directed to simply ask and answer the questions in sequence and complete the task. ('Now ask your partner', being a common instruction). The architecture of the classroom interaction that takes place in response to these cues will be: 1) question, followed by 2) answer, appended with 3) 'same question back to you', followed by 4) answer, followed by 5) a new question that initiates a new sequence. This format lends itself to the use of *How about you?* as learners proceed through the list to complete the task, with each participant orienting to the need to ask and answer each question in turn and with the certain knowledge that another question is about to be asked until the list of questions is completed and the institutionally mandated speaking task is accomplished. This further question is set down in advance and is not prompted by the contents of the answer given

to the prior question. In effect, the students orient to an 'asked and answered' framework for each question and answer sequence. If this is a common (perhaps the most common) opportunity for learners to use the L2 in lessons, it is, perhaps, not surprising that the Q + A plus 'same question back to you', format becomes established in student speaking.

The relative rarity of the formula in native speaker interactions points to a wider variety of speaker transition practices used by native / proficient speakers, in addition to the 'current speaker selects next speaker' format that inheres to *How about you?* Not only is its occurrence quite rare, it also seems to be concentrated in a particular genre of speaking; namely the panel-type discussion. In this genre one person has certain rights to allocate turns and nominate the topic, and this type of interaction often comprises a larger number of ratified participants than regular conversations where any number above three has the possibility, and perhaps the tendency, to subdivide into smaller groups. Some panels in the data quoted comprised seven or more members and turn allocation here may need to be rigorous to avoid an anarchy of overlaps and interruptions, while still giving all participants equal speakership but avoiding fracturing into smaller interactional groups.

A further noticeable difference in the use of the formula in learner talk and non-learner talk is the talk surrounding the formula. In learner talk the formula usually appears at the end of a sequence that was an answer to some question. The formula is usually stand-alone and unsupported. In the non-learner data, the formula was very often accompanied by an address term such as the addressee's name, or some other identifying phrase, used either immediately before or immediately after the formula. A further feature of the non-learner use of the formula was the co-occurrence of a question or other commentary that adumbrates the expected contents of the nominated next speaker's turn, which may be connected either closely or perhaps only loosely



to the preceding talk. This is in stark contrast to the learner data where *How about you?* is stand-alone and references the previous question in unambiguous terms. It is perhaps natural for language learners to latch onto a formula in the target language and deploy it at regular intervals. However, in the case of *How about you?* not only is it often overused, its actual effect on the interaction, that is, its inhibitive effect on the next speaker enlarging on the turn just given and being forced to move onto their own talk, may have a deleterious long-term effect on the development of interactional competence.

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## Appendix 1

Question sequence example.

Taken from New Crossroads (Fuller and Merenda, 2005.)

**EXERCISE 2**

**INTERVIEW**

 **CD 21**

Ask your partner the questions below. Write short answers.  
It's OK to give extra information or to ask other questions.


**Example**

**A:** What do you usually do on Saturday?

**B:** I work on Saturday from 4:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.

**A:** Where do you work?

**B:** I work at a video rental store.



1. What do you usually do on Saturday?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How do you usually spend Sunday?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What are your plans for this weekend?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What would be a fantastic weekend in your opinion?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you sleep in on weekends? What time do you get up and go to bed?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Which day do you prefer, Saturday or Sunday? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What do you need to make your weekends more exciting?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What are some things you have to do on weekends? (e.g., cook, wash clothes)  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Would you prefer to go to a concert or to a movie this weekend? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What are some weekend activities a person can do that don't cost a lot of money?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**New Crossroads**

## Appendix 2

Look at the following expressions.

Check the box if you have studied these expressions before.

次の式を見てください。

以前にこれらの式を勉強したことがある場合は、チェックボックスをオンにします

1. At the end of the day\_\_\_\_ ☐
2. Nice to meet you \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
3. Mind you \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
4. At any rate \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
5. The thing is \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
6. Fine thank you and you\_\_ ☐
7. You are welcome \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
8. How about you? \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
9. I see what you mean\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 10.And so on \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 11.On the other hand \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 12.Moreover \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 13.By the way \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 14.To tell the truth \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 15.Let me see \_\_\_\_\_ ☐
- 16.First things first \_\_\_\_\_ ☐