

The Investigation of Phraseological Units in Modern English and Uzbek

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Annotation. The article deals with the investigation of Phraseology and phraseological units in Modern English and Uzbek. In addition, it discusses the problems of teaching phraseological units.

Key words: Phraseological Units, Idioms, Collocations, Grammar, General Lexicon, Sintagmatic Combinations.

Phraseology has always been and continues being a pending subject. Although in the latest years a significant number of studies have been published about the topic, it is worth doing more research on it mainly because didactics on Phraseology has not been tackled in classrooms in the same way as other areas such as general lexicon or grammar. Likewise, we consider phraseology an interesting issue to focus on because scholars claim that it is a cornerstone within the lexicon of any language. As Melcuk states "People speak in set phrases, rather than in separate words in any language". Therefore, knowing a word implies to know the syntagmatic combinations or words that go together with it (make bed, but do homework). These prefabricated units are considered extremely difficult by non-native speakers, since they are conventional ways of expression. In Uzbek, we "vafot etmoq" or "tish tirnog'i bilan" but in English we "to join the majority" or "tooth and nail". In the same way, Uzbek and English have different social interaction formulae or diverse expressions with metaphorical or figurative meanings that are interesting to compare and contrast. Although there are several well-known authors who deal with Phraseology such as E.D. Polivanov, V.V. Vinogradov, S.I. Abakumov, G.K. Damilov, A.I. Yefimov, A. Y. Rojanskiy, F.F. Fortunatov, A.A. Shaxmatov, Sh. Rahmatullayev, Coseriu (1977), Zuluaga (1980), Casares (1992), Ruiz Gurillo (1997), Cowie (1998) or Gläser (1998), for our purposes, we will use Corpas Pastor's (1996: 20) outstanding definition of phraseological units. This author defines them as multiword lexical units composed by at least two graphical words (and a whole sentence as its upper limit), which are further characterized by a high frequency of cooccurrence of their components and by various degrees of institutionalization, such as formal frozenness, inner fixation and semantic specialization or opacity.[2]

Among them, we can find quotes, proverbs, specific-value utterances and social routine formulae, but we are just going to focus on Proverbs (utterances that constitute a complete text by themselves and that express a basic truth or practical precept) and Social Routine Formulae (utterances that need to be inserted in a specific context to make sense and that are commonly used to show the subjectivity of the speaker in his/her speech), for being considered the ones most commonly used at an everyday level. Both of them are, therefore, complete utterances, speech-acts and units that present internal and external fixation.

The importance of phraseological knowledge in L2 competence is beyond dispute. It enables learners to speak more fluently, makes their speech more understandable and helps them write or sound more native-like (Pawley and Syder, 1983; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Wray, 2002). However, L2 learners are not very used to phraseology because teachers do not usually make them aware of its relevance within vocabulary learning. They deal with this branch of lexicography without paying too much attention to its particular and unique features, and keep using classical vocabulary teaching techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, mother tongue translation and definition. As regards phraseological units, these are techniques that despite being perfectly useful are not always enough to reach successful acquisition. Consequently, students stay halfway between the input received and the final production they should be able to elicit. After some days, they will probably not remember the meaning of the words, or even worse, they will not be able to use those new words

in their proper contexts for ignoring their suitable collocates and usage. As Siyanova and Schmitt propose „teachers should make fundamental changes in their vocabulary teaching pedagogies by focusing on phrasal elements rather than individual words and they also should avoid mechanical vocabulary learning, since memorizing new vocabulary word by word without any kind of interaction does little to enrich students“ vocabulary). Therefore, a new perspective is needed to let phrasemes reach the importance they really have in second language learning. Firstly, students should notice the existence of the different categories they are going to be exposed to. They should be warned about collocations, proverbs, idioms and social routine formulae and their main characteristics in order to be able to recognize them and start using them progressively. Thus, in foreign language classes, in addition to the grammatical component, other competences and skills ought to play an essential role, for instance, the interactive competence, which intends students to produce true communication among speakers.[1]

Once these strategies are highlighted and put into practice, miscommunication and misunderstanding are likely to decrease among learners of English. Probably, this will also help to avoid further frustration on the reader/listener and it will encourage him/her to continue reading and communicating orally. Continuous exposure to real English will raise opportunities for encountering the same kind of expressions once and again and further practice and rehearsal on them will lead to final acquisition. Although the four phraseological categories we are tackling in this piece of paper share some of their features, we have considered interesting to stress some aspects related to their comprehension and acquisition in order to raise specific awareness about some specific points we consider important. Starting with proverbs, we would like to stress Wolfgang Mieder’s words (2004): “Proverbs should be used in teaching as didactic tools because of their content of educational wisdom since they belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers; they are indeed very effective devices to communicate wisdom, truth, morals, traditional views and knowledge about human nature and the world at large”. With respect to their comprehension, the development of language competence is ongoing from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. Studies on proverb comprehension have shown that in comparison with other types of figurative language (metaphors, similes...), proverbs are on the whole more difficult to comprehend. In fact, as most figurative language, they are not rule fixed, so they must be learnt through exposure, repetition and daily occurrence. Temple and Honeck discuss figurative comprehension of proverbs and explain that „it involves problem solving, entailing understanding and integration of the proverb topic, discourse context, figurative meaning and speakers “pragmatic points”. Therefore, dealing with proverbs is a way through which students can immerse themselves into the way of life of the foreign community, seeking for both the topic and the proverb to finally link them together and reach cultural understanding. It is the proverbs that are in use today that ought to be taught, since these are the ones students are likely to come across and need to internalize. The person who does not acquire competence in using proverbs will be limited in conversation, will have difficulty comprehending a wide variety of printed matter, radio, television, songs, etc., and will not understand proverb parodies which presuppose a familiarity with a stock proverb. Moving on to social routine formulae, we share Lana Rings’ view: “Language strings are interpreted and used differently by people in different situations or subcultures. Human beings, although may be speaking the same language, do not necessarily interpret that language in the same way and can misunderstand each other. When people attempt to speak or understand a foreign language, miscommunication becomes much more feasible.” These are structures that cannot be studied from grammar but that are extremely important for corresponding to certain necessities a speaker may have in particular situations. They also facilitate the quick processing of language so that speakers can devote more time to plan longer discourse units and care about social aspects in communication. Finally, as they are ways of behaviors that have been accepted by a particular community and reflect certain socio-cultural values, their knowledge provides students with relevant cultural parameters that are worth bearing in mind in communication. Alvarado Ortega hold that these formulae must be inserted from the very beginning of the teaching-learning process, since from level A1, students are considered social beings, and therefore, they are active participants in social interactions.[3]

Social routine formulae are used, for instance, to greet somebody, to say goodbye, to show gratitude, to offer condolences, to congratulate, to welcome somebody, to introduce somebody, etc. As we can see, these are common situations we can encounter very easily and which we should manage to perform properly in our foreign language. Thus, this teaching must be active, cultural and context-addressed. As García Muruais states

“learners have to take in meanings, connotations and contexts of phraseological units and be able to put them into practice in their daily conversations”. As far as collocations are concerned, we can refer to what, one day, Krasher pointed out “acquisition crucially depends on the quantity and quality of input”. What does this quote have to do with collocations? It is simple. Collocation exposure to L2 is essential to acquisition. Teachers should create the needs for using new collocational knowledge in the classroom. Wray observed that „the more often a string is needed, the more likely it is to be stored in prefabricated form to save processing effort, and once it is so stored, the more likely it is to be the preferred choice when that message needs to be expressed”. Most students cannot use English outside the classroom in real life situations in spite of having studied it for years because they have serious problems to find proper collocates of words mostly because of the differences between English and Uzbek.

As Lewin supports “knowing a noun allows students to name a concept, but this is a long way from being able to talk about the concept.” Thus, a learner who makes a collocation mistake when trying to talk about something provides the ideal opportunity to expand and organize the learner’s lexicon in an efficient way. Teachers should not just correct the mistake, but give some extra collocations as well. However, we do not have to wait until noticing a mistake for teaching collocations in context. When focusing on daily reading we can go beyond the traditional question of: „Are there any words you don’t know or need to clarify?” and highlight collocations and particular expressions that may result useful for the students’ communicative competence. We should also bear in mind that students already know a lot of “simple” words, but they are unable to use them because they have not noticed their common collocations, so, following Lewin (2001), we think that time spent on half-known language is more likely to encourage input to become intake than time spent on completely new input.” Very often the pedagogic challenge is not to focus on the brand new, but instead to make accessible the relatively new”. For this reason, the activities proposed should be communicative and authentic, focusing on everyday events that generate repeated collocational use. It is only through continuous encounters and use in communicative activities that receptive knowledge of collocations will turn into productive knowledge and learners may gradually gain confidence in L2 collocational use.[1]

Last but not least, we should comment on idioms. As mentioned above, an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements. Idioms can be either figurative or literal; for example: “one can kick a bucket and not die, pull someone’s leg and not be joking and spend their money on something that costs an arm and a leg keeping their extremities safe.” These reasons lead second language learners to encounter so many difficulties using English idioms that they often prefer to avoid them altogether. However, avoiding idioms is not the solution since students will meet them in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio, broadcasts, television programs, movies, newspapers, etc. Although some authors as Nippold (1991) affirm that the acquisition of idioms is a never-ending challenge and that „there is no clear point in human development when it can be said that idioms have been mastered”, some studies have been carried out so as to find out what is the best way to learn them and try to overcome that “idiomphobia” that seems to remain in students’ learning. Cooper conducted a study in 1999 in which he examined different strategies L2 students used to guess the meaning of some unknown idioms.

One strategy that was repeatedly and successfully observed was guessing meanings through context, so Cooper reached the conclusion that „although context cannot guarantee the correct interpretation of an idiom, it does help also proposed Conceptual Metaphors (CM) as an organizing principle for Didactics. Through some metaphors such as MORAL IS UP or MORAL IS CLEAN, some idioms could be taught in different blocks or categories: take the high road, do the dirty on someone, etc. Likewise, Irujo conducted a study to determine whether advanced learners of English used their knowledge of their mother tongue (Spanish) to understand and produce L2 expressions. The results showed that English idioms identical to their Spanish equivalents were the easiest to comprehend and produce (positive transfer from Spanish). Similar idioms were understood almost as well as identical ones, but in the production tests, interference from Spanish was prevalent (negative transfer). The idioms that were different in the two languages were the hardest for the participants to comprehend and produce. In general, participants comprehended and produced most easily and correctly the idioms that were frequently used in everyday speech, had simple vocabulary and structure, and were metaphorically transparent in that their literal meanings were closely related to their figurative meanings.

Rujo defends the fact that activities for teaching comprehension of idioms should provide students with skills in guessing meaning from context and in dealing with figurative speech. She encourages teachers to guide learners to discover whether there is an equivalent idiom in their first language and, if so, whether the two idioms are identical, similar or different. She proposes activities that compare literal and figurative meanings and provide a link from the literal words to the non-literal meaning: matching pictures showing literal and idiomatic meanings of an idiom, drawing or acting out literal meanings, playing idiom charades, making up stories or dialogues in which the literal use of an idiom creates a misunderstanding or a humorous situation, presenting short plays containing idioms or role-playing situations that lead themselves to the production of idioms. As we can see, there is a great variety of options that can be used to learn and internalize idioms at the same time L2 learners spend a good time and use real and authentic language. In short words, as Fernández Prieto states (2004): „Although the teaching of phraseology is presented as a great challenge, as professionals, we must take the bull by the horns and pull it off in the end’.

The Phraseological Minimum. In order to know what phraseological contents are needed in the levels we teach, we need to base on a precise and established minimum previously studied and analyzed. We have relied upon two important documents: the well-known Common European Framework and the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia for the purposes of our study. The Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching, established by the Council of Europe, entered the official syllabi of most European countries in the late 20th century. It entails that languages have a communicative function and should be learnt with the purpose of reaching communicative goals. The Common European Framework or CEFR affirms that “for the realization of communicative intentions, users/learners bring to bear their general capacities together with a more specifically language-related communicative competence”. Communicative competence includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. As far as these sociocultural competences are concerned, the CEFR highlights the relevance of fixed expressions and does expressly mention the four categories we are dealing with in this paper: „direct exponents of language functions” such as greetings, e.g. How do you do? Good morning!, etc; phrasal idioms, often: semantically opaque or frozen metaphors, e.g. He kicked the bucket (i.e. he died)/ It’s a long shot (i.e. unlikely to succeed); fixed collocations, consisting of words regularly used together, e.g. to make a speech/mistake and expressions of folk wisdom such as proverbs (A stitch in time saves nine). However, Cerezo (2007) conducted a study with students of first year of Bachillerato and proved that language teachers action in the classroom is not predominantly communicative in nature, since grammatical and repetitive structural activities are the most frequent ones, while the communicative or interactive activities are, on the whole, scarce. [4]

In 2009, Criado and Sánchez carried out a study to verify up to what point ELT textbooks used in Spain educational settings comply with the official regulations prescribed, which fully advocate the Communicative Language Teaching Method. The analysis conducted led to positive results since, as a whole, six of the seven textbooks analyzed adapted quite well to the expectations regarding CLT. Our aim now is to confirm whether English textbooks in the Region of Murcia provide students with the proper phraseological input within that Communicative Approach to let students reach successful communication. However, after a careful reading of the section “Foreign Language” in the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia (BORM), we confirm that there is not any Phraseological Minimum or significant criteria established for the different educational levels.

Which are, then, the objectives pursued by the BORM for Secondary and Upper Secondary Education? Starting with Secondary Education, we can see four main objectives directly related to communicative goals in which phraseology should play an essential role. Objectives 1 and 2 stress the importance of being able to understand general and specific information in diverse communicative situations as well as being able to manage and interact orally in daily common situations within classrooms but also out of school. Likewise, objective 6 highlights the importance of transferring the knowledge of the mother tongue to the learning of the foreign language in order to reach autonomy and self-reflection, and, finally, objective 9 makes reference to the importance of valuing the foreign language as a means of communication and understanding among people of different cultures and origins. Similarly, concerning Upper Secondary or Bachillerato, we also find the relevance of making the students express themselves and interact as well as making them understand general and specific information elicited in common communicative contexts (objectives 1 and 2). The objectives 6, 8 and 9 are interrelated; they have to do with the knowledge of the social and cultural features of

the foreign language in order to understand and interpret different cultures, to manage the language in particular communicative situations and as an essential means of communication and international understanding. As we can see, there are not any direct references to phraseological content in these objectives. Therefore, once these general goals have been highlighted, our main aim is to examine two different English textbooks, one of each level (Secondary Education and Bachillerato) to verify up if they cope with phraseological units as an important part of the Communicative Approach they are supposed to follow. As we can see that phraseological units are not only complicated to learn but also they are difficult to teach. We hope that we will find out appropriate methods and ways to teach phraseological units in our next investigation.

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