The Effects of Working on Multi-Word Expressions on the Development of Lexical Competence: A Case of 25 Students Enrolled in One Course

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Abstract

Lexical competence, comprising knowledge of individual words, their relations, combinations and fixed expressions in which they appear, is crucial for effective communication. This paper presents the effects that participation in a course which focused on English multi-word expressions had on the EFL student participants' lexical development. The discussion is based on questionnaire responses concerning student involvement in the course, and the results of three tests measuring vocabulary gains. Involving students in cooperative learning through group assignments and micro-teaching of self-chosen multi-word expressions had positive effects on their lexical development, team-work skills, information research skills and presentation skills.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence – the major objective of foreign/second language learning and teaching since the focus on Communicative Language Teaching which occurred towards the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s – has been described as consisting of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences (Richards & Rodgers 2001). Linguistic competence comprises a knowledge of the grammatical system of the language along with a knowledge of its vocabulary (Bachman 1990). It is the latter that I would like to focus on in this paper since what has come to be known as 'lexical competence' is of utmost importance for effective communication across the various levels of proficiency, in a variety of contexts.

Vocabulary is that component of linguistic knowledge that develops throughout a lifetime and, due to the disappearance of some items and the

appearance of the new ones in the lexicon, the foreign language learner has to be alert and responsive to these changes. Word knowledge develops over time on linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic levels (Richards 1976) and constitutes a combination of the pronunciation, spelling, meaning(s), syntactic properties, grammatical category, derivations, morphosyntactic behaviour, discourse and pragmatic properties, and associations, together with the relations the lexical item enters into with other words. Moreover, lexical competence is not limited to the knowledge of individual words and of the relationships among them, but also includes the ability to recognize and use fixed expressions and idioms that are tantamount to fluent language use and comprehension (Carter 1987). A lexically competent L2 user, then, is able to recognise and use the words in the language, depending on the situation in which they appear, which also includes any pragmatic constraints on their use. Such a user understands different relationships among families of words and the common collocations of words and recognises and uses fixed expressions and idioms to communicate successfully in various contexts. Recent research on formulaic sequences shows that they are processed more quickly both by native and non-native language users (Conklin & Schmitt 2008), though for non-native users the frequency of these phrases affects processing more than their length and mutual relationship (Ellis et al. 2008).

2. Multi-word Expressions

In this paper, the term 'multi-word expressions' (henceforth referred to as MWEs), is synonymous with such terms as 'phrasal lexeme', 'phraseological unit' or 'multi-word lexical item' and is used in the sense proposed by Moon (1998). She defines multi-word items as "holistic units of two or more words" (p.2) and calls them "fixed expressions". Fixed expressions include

- Frozen collocations (*addled eggs, the door stood ajar*).
- Grammatically ill-formed collocations (*at all*).
- Proverbs (*Every cloud has a silver lining*).
- Routine formulae (*I'm sorry to say*).
- Sayings (*Home, James, and don't spare the horses*).
- Similes (*as good as gold*).
- Idioms (*spill the beans*).

Compound nouns, adjectives and verbs, phrasal verbs, foreign phrases and multi-word inflectional forms of verbs, adjectives and adverbs are excluded from this category of fixed expressions (Moon 1998). Thus, in this paper, the term MWEs is synonymous with the term 'fixed expressions and idioms' (FEIs).

Since language comprehension and use are based on chunks rather than single words following one another, MWEs perform a wide range of important functions both in spoken and written discourse. They allow language users to maintain the conversation (eg., *I'm sorry about...*), talk about common topics (eg., *My name is ...*), and to organise discourse coherently (eg., *as far as I know...*) (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992). When the conversation is concerned with problem-solving, these expressions help the participants to evaluate the situation and to respond to it properly (McCarthy & Carter 1994). Their function may also depend on their role in the structure and context of the text. Informational expressions may be used to state a proposition or convey information (eg., *for sale*), evaluative expressions convey the speaker's attitude and evaluation (eg., *a different kettle of fish*), situational phrases relate to extralinguistic context in response to a situation (eg., *Excuse me!*), modalising phrases convey truth values, advice or requests (eg., *You know what I mean*) while organisational expressions organise the text by signalling discourse structure (eg., *by the way*) (Moon 1998).

These expressions are particularly useful from the language learners' point of view because they support both language comprehension and its production. As far as comprehension is concerned, they allow the learner to decode the message encoded orally or in writing not in a word-by-word manner but using chunks that the learners have stored in their memory and can identify in the text. Actually, syntactic parsing – one of the basic comprehension processes – involves fragmenting the text into smaller units in order to build the microstructure of the text (Grabe & Stoller 2002; Kintsch & Rawson 2005). When language learners are able to identify MWEs in the text and ascribe appropriate meanings to them, the speed and accuracy of decoding is enhanced. With respect to language production, MWEs help the learners to structure and organise the discourse they are engaged in. Interpersonal communication requires of the participants that they respond immediately to the interlocutor's utterance and when comprehension problems appear, the learners can use fixed phrases to recall the necessary language forms, they can divert the interlocutor's attention from the problematic issue or they can ask for clarification, as is required by the situation.

Considering the above, it seems justified to include the teaching of MWEs in any foreign language teaching program, even more so since such a way of acquiring a foreign language is close to naturalistic L1 acquisition. The question that arises with respect to this issue is whether it is necessary to focus on these expressions or whether they are acquired naturally, even in the foreign language context, by sheer exposure to the foreign language in multiple modes and forms. From the researcher's observations it emerged that exposure is not enough. What matters is the type of focus on these expressions that allows the learners to analyse their form, meaning and functions as well as the opportunity to practise their recognition and use in various contexts through a variety of activities offering such involvement.

To assist university students of English as a foreign language in their lexical development, a course on fixed expressions and idioms was offered. The aim of the empirical part of this paper is to discuss the effects that the participation in the course had on the students' lexical development.

3. The Study

The study is based on the researcher's experiences connected with teaching a course on fixed expressions and phrases that is an optional one-semester course offered to second and third year undergraduate students of English Philology at her university. It covers 30 contact hours and has the following aims:

- to sensitize students to MWEs;
- to give them the opportunity to learn some of them;
- to develop their lexical competence, and thus
- to enhance their communicative competence and their proficient use of English as a foreign language (EFL).

The course is learner-centered to promote the participants' creativity and autonomy. It also follows the principles of cooperative learning since the students worked in groups of four in which they prepared presentations of MWEs. At the beginning of the course, the teacher suggested working on the expressions based on colour terms to have the students experience both the advantages and the possible pitfalls of team work. After that, the groups were formed on the basis of shared interests and hobbies and the students selected expressions, phrases and idioms that reflected their interests. In groups, they had to negotiate which expressions to choose and how to prepare interesting, involving and effective presentations to teach these forms to their classmates. In class, the students taught selected MWEs, practising their language and teaching skills.

3.1. Objectives

The study aimed to examine whether participation in the course had any effects on the students' lexical development. In other words, it sought to answer the following questions:

- Were the aims of the course achieved?
- Were the students successful?
- What were the gains in terms of lexical development?
- What factors are related to lexical growth in the context of formal instruction?

3.2. Participants

25 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate students of English Philology, at Opole University, took part in the study. Participation in the course was voluntary and an indication of their interest in the subject-matter. The mean age of the students was 20.48 yrs (SD .58) and they had been learning English for 12.8 yrs (SD 1.96, min. 10, max. 16 yrs). There were 15 female (60%) and 10 male (40%) participants.

3.3. Instruments

In order to collect the necessary data required to find the answers to the research questions, three tests and one questionnaire were used. Test 1, a traditional achievement test, consisted of 76 items, which were MWEs covered during the winter term 2010 - 2011. They were checked by means of such techniques as definition, substitution and multiple choice. Passing the test was one of the conditions in order to get the necessary credit for the course. Test 2 contained 20 items checked by means of partial translation, that is, a sentence in L1 was presented, followed by its partial translation into English with a slot to elicit the required expression. Test 3 was a recall test in which the students were requested to write at least 10 MWEs that they had learned during the course. They could write more than 10. In terms of content selection, the tests ranged from teacher-dependent (Tests 1 and 2) to learner-dependent (Test 3).

The questionnaire contained 20 statements referring to the students' confidence about their use of English, their opinions about the course, their participation and effects of the course on their sensitivity to and their use of MWEs. They presented their opinions using a 4-point Likert scale where 1 meant *strongly disagree* and 4 stood for *strongly agree*.

3.4. Variables

Since lexical growth associated with participation in the course was in focus, it is the dependent variable in the study. Lexical development is operationalised by the scores on the three tests. Each test had a different form and purpose, thus checking different aspects of lexical acquisition.

Several factors that could explain the effects of participation in the course on the students' lexical development were also distinguished. They are the independent variables that refer to the students' investment in the course, their sensitivity to MWEs, their confidence in using them, their motivation in choosing the course and their satisfaction with the course. Analysis showed that gender is also an important characteristic, therefore it has been included in the group of independent variables.

As regards the students' investment in the course, it was operationalised by the Investment Scale (INVS), based on six statements from the questionnaire:

1. *I worked hard during the course.*
2. *I was well prepared for every class.*
3. *I liked the presentations I prepared.*
4. *I enjoyed preparing presentations in groups.*
5. *I contributed a lot to our classes.*
6. *I studied hard for the test.*

INVS is reliable as shown by Cronbach's α calculated for the scale ($\alpha = .71$). The participants' sensitivity to MWEs is shown by the following statements:

7. *I have become more sensitive to MWEs in English.*
8. *I have become more sensitive to MWEs in Polish.*
9. Their confidence in using English is reflected in 3 statements:
10. *I feel confident when I speak English.*
11. *I feel confident when I read in English.*
12. *I feel confident when I write in English.*

With respect to their motivation to participate in the course, the following statements were used:

13. *I joined the course because I wanted to expand my English vocabulary.*
14. *I joined the course because I thought I wouldn't have to work hard.*

The use of new MWEs in language comprehension and production also contributes to language growth and it was reflected in the statements 14-16:

15. *I use the expressions we were studying in speech.*
16. *I use the expressions we were studying in writing*
17. *I use the expressions we were studying whenever I can.*

Finally, the statement (17) *I'm satisfied with the course* refers to their degree of satisfaction with the course.

The data collected by means of tests and the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively. First, means and standard deviations were calculated. The means were compared by t-tests for independent samples while correlational statistics was used to find out the relations between the dependent and independent variables. The results appear in the section which follows.

3.5. Results

Firstly, the data measuring the dependent variable are shown. Then, the numerical values calculated for independent variables are presented. These values were

necessary in order to investigate the possible relations between the variables. Test scores measuring the participants' lexical development are shown in Table 1 which includes the means and standard deviations for each test and the total score for all the tests. Apart from the scores for the whole group, the scores of female and male participants are also included for the reason that gender-based differences were observed in the data.

Table 1.

Test results – means and standard deviations (in brackets).

	Whole group (WG) (N=25)	Females (F) (N=15)	Males (M) (N=10)
Test 1 (max. score 76)	51.30 (12.01)	58.80 (8.44)	40.00 (6.60)
Test 2 (max. score 20)	14.48 (2.81)	15.50 (3.01)	12.89 (1.54)
Test 3 (max. score 20)	18.00 (3.33)	18.73 (2.68)	16.90 (4.01)
Total (max. score 116)	84.11 (14.86)	92.50 (12.04)	71.05 (6.47)

All the participants passed Test 1, as was required in order to get the necessary credit for the course. The Whole Group (WG) obtained 67.63% of the correct answers, although females scored higher than males. The average score for Test 2 achieves 70.24% of the correct answers, while on Test 3 as much as 90% of the possible correct answers were provided. All the results show a consistent pattern of females performing at a higher level than males. Also, teacher-designed tests are more demanding than the recall test, as shown by the percentages of correct/possible answers.

Table 2 presents questionnaire results for the 6 independent variables.

Table 2.

Questionnaire results according to independent variables. The numbers in bold indicate statement numbers. Mean scores are shown in columns, followed by the standard deviation (in brackets).

	Whole Group	Females	Males
INVS (1-6)	2.59 (.44)	2.75 (.41)	2.35 (.41)
Sensitivity (7-8)	2.96 (.48)	3.14 (.46)	2.70 (.42)
Confidence (9-11)	3.09 (.45)	2.93 (.40)	3.33 (.41)
Motivation	(12) 3.56 (.58)	3.80 (.41)	3.20 (.63)
	(13) 2.24 (1.01)	1.73 (.80)	3.00 (.82)
Use of MWEs (14-16)	2.81 (.38)	2.84 (.43)	2.76 (.31)
Satisfaction (17)	3.32 (.48)	3.27 (.46)	3.40 (.52)

To reiterate, the participants used a 4-point Likert scale to indicate their opinions. The higher the score, the more involved, sensitive, confident, motivated and satisfied the participants were. To present a clear picture of the data, the values for the statements comprising one variable were aggregated and the resulting means and standard deviations are presented in the table. However, for the motivation variable, the means and standard deviations are shown for individual statements.

Considering the results of the whole group, the highest means are observed for the participants' need to expand their vocabulary (Motivation 12), satisfaction with the course, confidence in reading and writing, sensitivity to fixed expressions in the foreign and the native language and the use of new phrases. Investment appears to be less important than motivation for joining the course. A quick glance at the columns containing the data of females and males shows that there are some differences in the opinions presented by both genders. In fact, gender differences seem to be evident in all the data shown so far; therefore it seems justified to check whether the differences in the numbers bear any statistical significance. T-tests for independent samples were conducted in order to compare the means of both groups, that is, females and males. The results of the comparison are given in Table 3, which includes only the variables that show statistically significant gender differences.

Table 3.

T-tests results for gender differences in the performance and opinions of female and male participants

Variable	Females (mean score)	Males (mean score)	t-test/p
Test 1	58.80	40.00	t=5.09, p<.01
Test 2	15.50	12.89	t=2.40, p<.05
Total score	92.50	71.05	t=4.76, p<.01
INVS	2.75	2.35	t=2.30, p<.05
Sensitivity	3.14	2.70	t=2.41, p<.05
Confidence	2.93	3.33	t=2.40, p<.05
Motivation	(12) 3.80	3.20	t=2.88, p<.01
	(13) 1.73	3.00	t=-3.85, p<.01

Female students who participated in the study scored higher than males on all three tests which checked their knowledge of MWEs, and for each test the difference between the performance of females and males is statistically significant, as shown by p values which all fall below .05. Females also show a higher level of investment in the course, they are more sensitive to the expressions both in Polish and in English and they are more motivated to expand

their lexical resources than males. For each of the variables, the differences between females and males are statistically significant. However, when it comes to confidence about language use, males are more confident than females. In addition, when choosing the course, males were more concerned about avoiding hard work than females.

To answer the question about the factors that may be related to the participants' lexical development, as measured by test scores, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. The *r* values that show statistical significance are given in Table 4. The *p* value was set at .05 level.

Table 4.

Statistically significant correlations (*r*) between the variables. *p* < .05

Variables	Whole group	Females	Males
T1 x T2	.67	.71	
T2 x T3		.73	
T3 x Investment			.88
Total score x Investment	.46		
T1 x Sensitivity	.54		
T2 x Sensitivity	.51	.62	
T3 x Sensitivity	.66		.88
T1 x Motivation 12	.49		
Total score x Motivation 12	.46		
Motivation 12 x Investment	.56		
Motivation 13 x T1	-.63		
Motivation 13 x T2	-.57		
Motivation 13 x Total score	-.67		
Motivation 13 x Confidence	.46		
Motivation 13 x Sensitivity	-.57		

Interesting relations can be observed when the results of the whole group are analysed. Such factors as investment, sensitivity, motivation and confidence enter into statistically significant relations with test results although the strength of these relations varies. Positive moderate relations exist between the scores on Test 1 and Test 2, but not between Test 1 and Test 3 or Test 2 and Test 3. The total score on the three tests, however, is positively though moderately related to investment, and so is Test 3. Sensitivity to MWEs in Polish and English is positively and moderately related to Test 1 and Test 2 scores but the relationship is stronger for the free recall test (Test 3). The participants' need to develop their

lexical competence (Motivation 12) is positively and moderately correlated with their achievement on Test 1, the overall achievement on the tests, as well as with investment. On the other hand, expecting that hard work would not be necessary to complete the course (Motivation 13) is negatively related to Test 1 and Test 2 scores as well as to the overall test scores and to sensitivity. Nonetheless, it is positively related to confidence about language use. From the gender differences perspective it appears that for females the relations between test results are positive and strong which means that females are more consistent in their performance. In addition, their sensitivity to MWEs is positively related to their performance on the translation task (Test 2). For males, however, very strong positive relations relate to their performance on Test 3 (free recall) and investment and sensitivity.

3.6. Discussion

As the aim of the study was to investigate the effects of participation in the course on MWEs and on the participants' lexical development, it can be said that the aims of the course were achieved. Test results show that the participants managed to develop their lexical competence with respect to MWEs. They all passed Test 1, though much variation is observed as evidenced by standard deviation values. The results of Test 2 show that the participants became sensitive to the presence of MWEs in their two languages and that they were able to provide accurate translations of the phrases from L1 to L2. If they could not provide accurate MWEs, they used paraphrase or expressions that conveyed the intended meaning. The results of Test 3 suggest that they were able to recall many MWEs meaningful to them at the end of the course. The results also reveal that teacher-devised tests are more demanding than the recall test. In the former, the teacher selected items to be checked, while in the latter, the students produced the phrases they remembered best. The students were successful because they had learned a range of expressions which, according to their opinion, they use in spoken and written discourse. In addition, their satisfaction with the course is high, which suggests that the contents of the course matched their needs, at least to some extent.

Considering factors related to lexical growth in the context of formal instruction, the results imply that investment understood as involvement in class activities, preparation of tasks and working on them with other students during presentations is an important factor related to the recall test scores and the total test score. The more the students invest in the learning process, the more they gain in terms of the overall development of lexical competence

Sensitivity is another factor that shows a relation with the results of all the tests. By focusing on MWEs during classes, the students learned to recognise

their roles and functions in language use and comprehension regardless of the language they speak. They became aware of their presence in oral and written discourse and realised that using them contributes to more successful language production, by giving it fluency and flair.

Correlations show that motivation is the variable that cannot be ignored in the context of language learning as it is positively and significantly related both to test results and investment. However, when the students declare that they decided to join the course to avoid too much work (Motivation 13), the correlations become negative and statistically significant. Lexical development which includes enhanced sensitivity to verbal expressions requires the learners to process the lexical material in such a way that it becomes meaningful and memorable to them. The activities that they were engaged in during the course were prepared by the teacher, by other students and by themselves, which accounts for a large variety of approaches to MWEs and tasks used to introduce, practise and use MWEs. Some of the activities prepared by the students were very original, for example, they prepared picture puzzles to introduce the form of selected MWEs or prepared other puzzles or riddles to make the activities attractive. The preparation and presentation of these activities are likely to evoke deep processing and, consequently, more effective remembering and recall of the phrases. There is one puzzling thing about motivation 13, though. It is positively and significantly related to confidence. This might suggest that confidence about one's reading, speaking and writing skills may not depend so much on hard work but on other factors such as the students' self-image, successful communication, positive feedback from the environment, and personality and other individual factors.

With respect to gender differences the data reveal that females' scores on teacher-designed tests were significantly higher than males', which is consistent with other research findings that suggest that females outperform males on tests based on the material covered during instructional sessions, they do better at school, are more active learners in general and societies expect them to be good language learners (eg., Halpern 2004; Kimura 1999; Sunderland 1998). Indeed, the adult females participating in this study appear to be more conscientious and diligent while males are more easy-going. They also show a higher level of investment and motivation but males are more confident about using English and expect a lower level of engagement on the course. Moreover, a very significant relationship between the performance on the teacher-devised tests is observed in the female sample while an even stronger relationship between the scores on free recall, investment and sensitivity is found in the male sample. This suggests that females and males approach different language tasks differently, which may result from their cognitive abilities, as well as from social expectations, regarding gender roles.

Apart from developing their lexical competence, the students were also given an opportunity to work on social and teaching skills, for example, working in groups, collaboratively, they were likely to develop their team-work skills that are so important for the job market nowadays. Since they were to select items for presentation themselves, they practised autonomy and, in a way, worked to satisfy their own lexical needs. Preparing various activities they showed their resourcefulness and creativity, which was highly appreciated by some students. Moreover, trying to meet their classmates' and friends' expectations, they developed sensitivity to their needs, which is an important aspect of the teaching profession (some of the students will become teachers of English). They also tried out their presentation skills. As one of the participants wrote: *In my opinion it was easier to learn various expressions because of the activities we had taken part in during classes.* Another one added: *I did not like preparing and watching presentations although I must admit that the phrases presented in them are easily recalled from my memory now.*

4. Conclusions

The course was designed to develop the participants' lexical competence and motivated them to work on their foreign language lexical resources because of a wide range of activities that activated their cognitive processes and a creative approach to the tasks. Eventually, even the reluctant students appreciated this way of learning and were satisfied with the course. Apart from gains in their lexical repertoire, they practised and developed other skills that are useful both inside and outside the formal academic setting, such as team work, needs analysis and presentation skills. They became more sensitive to the role and functions of fixed expressions in verbal communication.

The positive impact of the course on the participants' lexical competence may be attributed to the fact that the students - advanced foreign language learners - were strongly motivated to probe the language more deeply because as students of English Philology, they read, write, speak and communicate in English. Access to memory reserves that hold a range of MWEs makes language comprehension and use more effective. Indeed, the academic discourse that they take part in is characterised by many formulaic sequences that could also be incorporated into the teaching program. Simpson-Vlach & Ellis (2010) provide a useful list of such formulae derived from corpora of academic discourse. This could open a number of research options, as future empirical studies may aim at finding out whether teaching these formulae contributes to more effective comprehension and use of academic discourse. At this point the question about possible ways of teaching these formulae arises. Further research might also seek to focus on the role of MWEs in language comprehension and production across age groups and proficiency levels.

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