



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

System

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/system

The impact of imposing processing strategies on L2 learners' deliberate study of lexical phrases



June Eyckmans^{a, *}, Frank Boers^b, Seth Lindstromberg^c

^a Ghent University, Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication, Groot-Brittanniëlaan 45, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

^b Victoria University of Wellington, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Kelburn Parade, Wellington 6012, New Zealand

^c Hilderstone College Kent, St. Peter's Road, Broadstairs, Kent CT10 2JW, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 March 2015

Received in revised form 14 November 2015

Accepted 2 December 2015

Available online 22 January 2016

Keywords:

Collocations

Idioms

Memorization

Lexical selection

Congruency

Alliteration

ABSTRACT

Lexical phrases (e.g., collocations and idioms) have in recent years attracted a fair amount of interest in the fields of SLA and language pedagogy. However, there is still a shortage of empirical studies of instructional methods and techniques. The present study focuses on the deliberate memorization of L2 phrases and tests the effectiveness of two proposals for how to help learners accurately recall the lexical composition of L2 phrases. EFL learners ($N = 65$) studied a list of 32 figurative VERB + NOUN-PHRASE expressions (e.g., *turn the tide*) glossed in L1. In one condition, they were only instructed to study the list. In a second, they were additionally instructed to identify phrases whose verb is non-congruent with the L1 translation. In a third, the instruction was to identify phrases that alliterate. The 32 phrases included roughly equal numbers of congruent and alliterative ones. It was hypothesized that the extra instructions would cause learners to pay closer attention to the verbs in the phrases and that this would result in better recall. Comparisons of pre- to post-test gains suggest that the instruction to look out for alliteration enhances retention, whereas the instruction to compare with L1 does not.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The past couple of decades have witnessed a proliferation of research into the formulaic dimension of language, including a steep increase of studies on the role and nature of lexical phrases (also known as collocations, idiomatic expressions, formulaic sequences, phrasal expressions and multiword units, among other terms). It is now widely acknowledged that knowledge of phrasal lexis benefits second (or foreign) language learners in various ways. For example, it facilitates fluent real-time language processing (Skehan, 1998; Wray, 2002), both receptive (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, & Maynard, 2008) and productive (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Wood, 2010); and it helps learners to produce 'idiomatic' language rather than unconventional word strings which may hinder smooth communication (Millar, 2010; Pawley & Syder, 1983) and which may negatively affect learners' scores on proficiency tests (e.g., Boers et al., 2006; Dai & Ding, 2010; Stengers, Boers, Housen, & Eyckmans, 2011). In short, mastery of a sizeable repertoire of lexical phrases is one of the characteristics of advanced proficiency in a second language (Durrant & Schmitt, 2009; Granger & Bestgen, 2014).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 474 32 07 79.

E-mail addresses: june.eyckmans@ugent.be (J. Eyckmans), frank.boers@vuw.ac.nz (F. Boers), sethl@hilderstone.ac.uk (S. Lindstromberg).

However, in the absence of massive amounts of exposure to the target language, learners tend to be very slow at developing phrasal competence (Forsberg, 2010; Kuiper, Columbus, & Schmitt, 2009; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Li & Schmitt, 2010) and so initiatives to accelerate this learning process would be very welcome (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Several types of pedagogic intervention with this aim have been experimentally tested in recent years. Some of these interventions direct learners' attention to lexical phrases encountered in texts. This can be done by manipulating the frequency of the occurrence of particular phrases in a text (Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013), by typographically enhancing phrases (Peters, 2009; 2012; Sonbul & Schmitt, 2013), and/or by providing glosses in the case of semantically non-transparent phrases (Bishop, 2004). Such interventions are in keeping with Schmidt's (1990; 2001) *Noticing Hypothesis*, which holds that attention is a crucial first step towards retention. Other interventions assign a more active, discovery role to the learners. For example, students can be asked to identify lexical phrases in texts themselves (Jones & Haywood, 2004) and they may be asked to consult dictionaries (Komuro, 2009) or web-based resources (Chen, 2011) to check the idiomaticity of their L2 output. Benefits from such approaches would be in accordance with Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) *Involvement Load Hypothesis*, which holds that the chances of incidental uptake of lexis are enhanced when learners feel the need to search for (the meaning of) lexical items and then evaluate whether the outcome of that search has fulfilled the need. Other interventions present sets of preselected lexical phrases to students for deliberate study (e.g., Webb & Kagimoto, 2011). While a language's vocabulary (including multiword lexis) is clearly too vast to be acquired through deliberate study alone (Nation, 2013: 92), deliberate study can at least speed up the learning process (Laufer, 2005). Given the growing recognition of the importance of formulaic language, it would therefore seem a welcome trend for contemporary textbooks to include exercises focusing on lexical phrases, such as exercises where learners are asked to match separated constituents of phrases or to supply the missing parts of collocations in gapped sentences. This broad type of exercise is a staple of course books for learners of English. The effectiveness of matching and blank-filling exercises which require learners to reassemble split phrases remains under-researched (but see Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead, & Webb, 2014; Boers, Eyckmans, & Lindstromberg, 2014; Boers, Lindstromberg, & Eyckmans, 2014, for preliminary evidence suggesting that the learning gains they bring about may be small).

While it is safe to say that the aforementioned interventions help raise learners' awareness of the phraseological dimension of language generally and to direct their attention to particular lexical phrases, it is possible that more "engagement" (Schmitt, 2008) with the meaning and the form of these phrases is required for learners to form accurate and durable representations of them in long-term memory. In the realm of single-word learning, explorations of the benefits of mnemonic techniques, such as the *Keyword Method* (Atkinson, 1975), have a long history (e.g., Avila & Sadoski, 1996; Barcroft, Sommers, & Sunderman, 2011; Sagarra & Alba, 2006; Shapiro & Waters, 2005). However, there have been far fewer initiatives regarding the design and evaluation of interventions intended to help learners commit multi-word items to memory. Most of those initiatives have to do with figurative idioms (e.g., *on the ropes*) and with how the imageability of a targeted idiom can be enhanced by informing learners about the context (e.g., boxing) in which the targeted expression is, or formerly was, used with a *concrete* meaning (Boers, 2013, for a review). A limitation of this technique is that it cannot be applied to all lexical phrases. Besides, it seems to foster retention of the *meaning* of idioms, first and foremost, but not necessarily their precise lexical composition. This matters because many lexical phrases are problematic for learners not because of their meanings or communicative functions but because of some feature of their form. For example, if one understands the words *tell* and *lies*, then *Don't tell lies* probably presents no challenge to interpretation – hence the distinction that is often made between idioms, whose meaning transcends the meaning of the constituent words, and collocations, whose overall meaning may be inferred relatively easily from the constituent words themselves. Especially if the objective is the accurate, productive use of lexical phrases, the challenge for learners includes mastering their lexical composition. For example, one needs to know that *lies* is typically preceded by *tell* rather than by a semantically related verb such as *say*, and that *a photo* is typically preceded by *take* rather than by *make*, and that *mistakes* follows *make* rather than *do*. The semantics of the verbs in these examples offer no obvious clues as to why one rather than the other accompanies the given noun. This arbitrariness can further be illustrated by the many examples of non-congruent verb selection across languages which share near-equivalent phrases (e.g., the Dutch counterpart of *make an effort* is *een inspanning doen*, 'do an effort').

Indeed, making the right choice of verb seems to be particularly difficult for L2 learners, according to several studies (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2005; Peters, 2016), which is why expressions consisting of verb + noun-phrase (NP) were chosen as targets for learning in the quasi-experimental study we report in this article. The study is part of an on-going quest for ways to engage learners in kinds of processing likely to help them durably entrench lexical phrases in memory. In this particular investigation, the focus is on learners' retention of non-substitutable verbs in phrases of the targeted type. We asked three groups of EFL learners to memorize a set of English intact lexical phrases, accompanied by their L1 translations. One group ($n_1 = 22$) was given no further instructions of how they should go about this. The other two groups ($n_2 = 22$; $n_3 = 21$) were given additional instructions intended to cause them to consider the composition of the phrases more closely. The nature of those instructions and the rationale behind them are explained in the next section.

2. Stimulating elaboration

We borrow the term *elaboration* from Levels-of-Processing Theory (e.g., Craik & Tulving, 1975), where it is used to refer to learners' mental operations regarding to-be-learned lexis. It was originally proposed that word retention is aided most by *semantic* elaboration, that is, by forming various associations with the meaning of the to-be-learned word. However, it has been recognized that *semantic* elaboration may not be sufficient if the aim is for learners to recall the precise *form* of words (*cf.*

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/372944>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/372944>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)