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# THE ROLE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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## Abstract

This article deals with the problem of teaching and learning foreign languages, namely Italian, with the help of phraseological units. According to the author, collocations, unlike phraseological units that are characterized by having idiomatic meaning, are not difficult to learn and understand, since their meaning is often compositional. However, the greatest difficulty is their acquisition and storage in long-term memory and production, as well as their use as regards part of the active vocabulary.

**Keywords:** didactic, phraseology, linguistic discipline, applied linguistics, communicative competence, implicit and explicit teaching.

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## INTRODUCTION

Phraseology plays an important role in teaching and learning a foreign language. In previous centuries, importance was usually attached to grammatical rules and less to the lexicon, especially in reference to the combinations of words. In this regard, it has affirmed that a foreign language is mastered when its phraseological units are mastered. However, despite the utility that the latter have in the field of didactics, its learning is quite complex, mainly due to the scarcity of didactic materials, especially in the case of the Italian language (Quiroga 2006: 181).

Navarro (2008) states that both the structuralist model and the method of communication have left the lexical field marginalized, since it is very broad and difficult to systematize and teach. González Rey (2012) delves into the concept of didactic phrase and maintains that three different points should be differentiated:

1. the didactics of phraseology, in which didactics is represented as a discipline that belongs to linguistics, on the one hand, and on the other the phraseology that deals with the study of the phrases made of a language (Rey 2012: 68); The first stage begins the interest in the idioms of a language, especially from the point of view of teaching and learning.
2. the didactics of phraseology, being phraseology a linguistic discipline and its scope of application didactics (Rey 2012: 68); in this second stage the interest among linguists and studies of phraseology and paremiology.
3. didactic phrases, a branch of applied phraseology (Rey 2012: 68); third and the last stage that allows scholars to situate the didactics of phraseology in the center of their investigations, trying to grant a greater space within the branch of phraseology.

Rey continues to affirm that the didactics of phraseology developed before the didactics of foreign languages, in fact, there was a first attempt to introduce it as early as 1900, in a small German conversation manual made with idioms and paremias aimed at learners written by Alfred Martin and Francis Leray. The book introduces not only useful German idioms, but also exercises for their memorization. Years later, in the English-speaking world, Arthur James Worall (1932), in the prologue to his book *English Idioms for foreign students*, will talk about the importance of these Phraseological units in teaching foreign languages in 102 units, since they are used daily by native speakers. Likewise, he continues to affirm that the foreign student who wants to speak English fluently needs to have these expressions at his *fingers' ends* (at hand). The Frenchman Charles Bally, who is considered the father of modern phraseology, introduced in his works *Traité de Stylistique française I* and *Traité de Stylistique française II*, both from the year 1909, more than 250 exercises in French phraseology so that his students could obtain a communicative efficacy in the French language (Rey 2012: 70). Also in the Italian language there are monographs on the didactics of phraseology, in fact, there is a manual by the Hungarian Zsuzsanna Fábíán (1987), *Filo da torcere. Olasz frazeológiai gyakorlatok* (Filo da torcere. Exercises in Italian phraseology). In Spain, the term didactic phrase was coined by Pablo Larreta Zulategui, in his work *Contrastive Phraseology of German and Spanish* (2001) and, two years later, Corpas Pastor used the term didactic phraseology after ten years of research in phraseology: syntactic analysis- semantics, contrastive and translation (2003).

In the most recent studies of applied linguistics, the didactics of phraseology is expanding more and more, in fact, there are many linguists who are interested in

this new branch of the discipline that has become a very interesting field of research fruitful. However, as far as its didactic application is concerned, in the initial levels Phraseology is not sufficiently addressed in the teaching/learning process. In this regard, González Rey (2004) argues that these units should be taught from the initial level of the language, since if you begin to learn from advanced levels there will not be enough time to really acquire the phraseological units and, therefore, they will not be used as active vocabulary (González Rey 2004: 124).

Navarro (2004), as well as González Rey (2004), states that these units must be introduced gradually from the initial level of language learning, applying criteria such as frequency of use, syntactic structure, pragmatic and semantic issues. Higuera García (1997: 2) argues that teaching only words would be comparable to reduce the teaching of grammar to some minimal grammatical categories, such as the noun, verb, adjective, regardless of subordinate clauses or larger units like the text. According to the author, whose opinion is shared, the teaching of vocabulary implies something more than the simple action of teaching individual words (Higuera 1997: 35). One of the advantages of teaching the vocabulary in combination is that it helps the student to form the different phraseological units, while favoring their learning and improving their communicative competence in the language studied.

Lewis (1993) affirms that the study of words by linguistic blocks is of paramount importance in the process of learning a foreign language, since it helps to establish syntagmatic networks between words, favoring their storage in the mental lexicon. Likewise, teaching and learning through linguistic chunks allows students to more easily use words in specific contexts. Lewis analyzes the

role that the lexicon plays in the classroom and affirms that, when a word is taught, the other words with which it is used should also be taught. In fact, he maintains that:

Often when “new words” are introduced into the class it will be appropriate not simply to present and record the word but to explore the grammar of the word – at least nothing its main collocates, and perhaps one or two institutionalized sentences containing the word (1993: 115 – 116).

He continues affirming that the lexicon has to be learned at the same time as it is acquired, as he maintained Krashen in the natural approach. For example, dealing with the topic of irregular verbs, affirms that these same ones have to be approached from the lexical point of view before grammatical, since, in their combinatory function with nouns, they are an integral part of the vocabulary of a language. In Lewis's words:

Learning vocabulary involves a great deal more than simple memorization. If a Grammar/vocabulary represents a continuum rather than a dichotomy, although conscious learning of a vocabulary item may help, it too must ultimately be acquired – fully integrated into the learner's linguistic resources so that it is spontaneously available when needed. Vocabulary learning and acquisition can be aided through classroom procedures which:

- help students identify lexical items correctly;
- encourage recording in helpful, non-linear formats;
- encourage transfer from short-term to long-term memory (Lewis 1993: 117).

These contributions to the teaching of a foreign language are novel and mark a change in the importance given to the lexicon. Likewise, when referring to collocations, Lewis affirms that the teaching of a foreign language tends to organize words paradigmatically and vertically, for example, in English it is said: *to play tennis; to go running; to do sport* (1993: 119). What Lewis sets out to corroborate is that the phenomenon of collocations involves inserting words into their own context. In most cases, extrapolating the words from their context and context nullifies their meaning, since they take on a certain meaning when they appear together. In short, Lewis argues that students' attention should be directed towards learning the whole and not isolated words, since their co-occurrence together is more frequent. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) state that most teachers focus their attention on teaching grammar, presenting language as a set of definitions, structures, and lists. Abstract descriptions of the language system, which linguists call competencies, are discussed in general terms (1992: XIII). On the other hand, nowadays, researchers investigating the acquisition of a foreign language are focusing their attention on the study of language for its development in social interaction. Likewise, it is considered that the prefabricated units that form the language constitute an essential part in the acquisition of a foreign language (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992: XV). These scholars define lexical units as linguistic chunks of different length, for example, *on the one hand, on the other hand* words whose co-occurrence is very frequent with respect to their independent use. From the didactic point of view, such units are considered fundamental for the teaching of a foreign language, because they are capable of improving the communicative competence, as well as the fluency of the students. These chunks, as Lewis (1993) also calls them, affect all levels of the

language, from simple words to collocations, since they are considered a single lexical unit.

In the approach proposed by Lewis, one does not simply have to learn new words, but also to broaden the knowledge that we have of them, such as the different terms with which they are combined and the different meanings they acquire. As mentioned in the previous sections and chapters, the line of Lewis's research is based on the importance of lexical phrases and on the principle of idiomaticity (idiom principle), according to which the lexicon of a language is made up of prefabricated units that the speaker has memorized as a set and can combine them in their sentences. At first glance, it seems as if the lexical approach wants to remove grammar from classrooms, however grammar continues to play very important role in the teaching of a foreign language, as well as in the lexical approach, with the only difference that the grammatical explanations derive from the analysis of the lexical units.

Scholars of psycholinguistics maintain that the acquisition of the lexicon is not limited to the sum of isolated words that students progressively memorize, but that it is a gradual, dynamic process, in which the student traces networks syntactic, semantic, phonetic, etc. between lexical units. These networks link the new information to the previously known (Higuera 2006: 13). In the mental lexicon finds lexical competence, which contains both the lexical items and the rules for their formation. Therefore, learning a new word does not mean learning only its meaning, but also the relationships it establishes with other words. Since language is replete with lexical, literal, and idiomatic units, it is of a great importance for including them in the teaching process, because it improves fluency and accuracy lexicon of the students (Higuera 2006: 15).

The study of the relationships established between words takes the adjective of collocational. Nation (2001) states that making students aware of the possibility or impossibility of combining certain words, would help them to store what they have learned in the long-term memory, in addition to avoiding lexical errors and interference with the language and, finally, improve their communicative fluency. The author claims that the term Collocation is used to refer to a group of words that usually co-occur within a phrase, as in the English collocation *take a chance* (Nation 2001: 317). Also, can happen that the set of words is not transparent, as for example by the way that, as in the previous case, it is classified as placement.

According to Nation, the biggest advantage of focusing language learning on chunks is the speed, since the words are considered as a single lexical unit, which is reduces in a greater speed when it comes to recognizing and reproducing a placement. However, learning through chunks also has disadvantages, storing it's the first. There are many more possible combinations than the number of words that compose them and, therefore, although these units are stored in memory for a long time. It is very difficult to remember all its combinatory possibilities and, above all, Phraseological units in the teaching foreign languages actively use them. If these combinations are learned by heart, without further analysis, it will be impossible to create other collocations using the words that form them, in nation's words:

For example, if *Please make yourself at home* is learned as unanalyzed units, then the parts *make yourself* and *at home* are not available from this chunk to use in other patterns, *Make yourself comfortable, I really feel at home here*, and so on (2001: 320).

From the didactic point of view, Nation states that:

To simplify the discussion of teaching, let us consider three points along a scale of placement. At one end we have idioms like a red herring, you're telling me and be that as it may which are Largely fossilized and opaque. In the middle we have groups like take medicine, for example which allow some substitution, are sometimes grammatically unique, are not necessarily adjacent and are at least partially transparent. At the other end we have items like as a result, it is assumed that, Where was I?, which are grammatically well formed, allow a lot of substitution and grammatical change, and are transparent (2001: 335).

Nation also adds that these combinations should be treated as if they were words. simple, consider them as unique lexemes, since they would facilitate their learning and acquisition. In the scholar's words:

Teaching vocabulary in collocations is in some ways a reaction against teaching words in lists and is an attempt to learn words in context while keeping the flexibility of list learning (Nation 1990: 38). As it has been observed so far, most of the studies on teaching of lexical units refers to collocations, which are essential in the process of learning the vocabulary of a foreign language. Castillo Carballo (2001) affirms that the Teaching collocations is more complicated than teaching idioms. Although you are the latter present idiomatic features, it is possible to replace them with simple lexical units, which is impossible with collocations, since a term implies the presence of the another, whose appearance is unique, in fact, synonyms cannot be used. The use of phraseological units measures the level of mastery of a language of the speakers, therefore, their assimilation is of paramount importance (Higueras 2006: 29).

However, most teachers wonder what type of placements or phraseological units teach. Hill (2000) states that it is useless and counterproductive to teach each collocation or lexical unit that appears in a foreign language class, given that the number of units of a language, as also stated by Nation (2001), is enormous, therefore, it is advisable to focus on those most common, frequent in the language and according to the topic treated in the classroom.

Despite this, there is no single way on how to teach these units. Nation and Krashen claim that their acquisition has to be implicit, while Schmitt and Lewis for an explicit teaching, because they affirm that the collocations are part of the idiosyncrasies of a language and learners cannot learn them by themselves. Higuera opts for a mix between implicit and explicit teaching, because he maintains that it is essential to sensitize students to the concept of placement and to do activities so that they memorize such units, but, on the other hand, it is not possible to obtain that the students improve this competence without constant input (2006: 32).

The teaching and learning of placements does not imply the incorporation of new phraseological units, but the association of words that are already known by students and that they belong to the mental lexicon (Cavanillas, Beltrán 2003: 237). For example, a student may know the words *maintain* and *conversation*, but is unaware that both terms form a collocation of the Italian language, since to *maintain* is the only verb capable of combine with the noun *conversation* to give rise to the collocation *maintain a conversation* (Cavanillas, Beltrán 2003: 238). Penadés Martínez, in his book *The teaching of phraseological units* (1999), affirms that, from the point of view of didactics, there are many difficulties

when it comes to teach and learn phraseological units. The fact that they are combinations of words whose meaning may be non-compositional, demonstrates the difficulties in which students must face when they have to introduce these expressions in his active vocabulary (1999: 23). Penadés deals mainly with research on teaching Spanish as a foreign language, however, his theories can be applied into different languages, since the goal is the same. When it comes to teaching these Phraseological units in the teaching of a Italian language units, a teacher faces different problems, the idiomaticity of the units, the formal setting, at what level to start teaching these units and the scarcity of materials. For this reason, it is useful to introduce some didactic activities that, despite focusing on the Italian language as FL, serve as essential reference both for the elaboration of the didactic proposals, as for the analysis of the treatment of the phraseological units in Italian textbooks.

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