A Pattern for Learning Phraseology of a Foreign Language

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Abstract. Due to their idiomatic nature and fixed structure, phraseological units are the most elusive lexical items to apprehend when learning a foreign language. Offering students an equivalency-based instruction, that is, presenting phraseological units attending to the similarities found between the learner’s mother language (ML) and the foreign language (FL), has been proven to give rise to higher comprehension and production levels of these lexical units.

Categories and Subject Descriptors: A.m [Miscellaneous] — Patterns

General Terms: Languages

Additional Key Words and Phrases: lexical items, phraseology, idioms, phraseological units, locutions, learning a foreign language, foreign language teaching.

ACM Reference Format:


1. INTRODUCTION

Every human being is born with the innate capacity for acquiring any natural language within a relatively short amount of time. Likewise, and by means of an entangled construction process influenced by cognitive, attitudinal, social and affective factors, achieving an excellent command of a foreign language is within reach of every individual, with the element of time being the only limiting variable.

As language teachers, the focus of our investigation should be confined to the learning process itself, by posing questions to determine in which way it is possible to optimize the construction of the interlanguage, so that a more efficient and effective instruction can be offered to students who have to face the escalating demands of a growing globalized world.

Learning a language does not consist of memorizing grammatical rules and dreary lists of vocabulary; it means discovering a different culture and keeping an open mind towards a different way of thinking and living.

This pattern can be applied by language instructors whose students currently either learn a foreign language in a non-immersion environment or acquire a second language in an mixed immersion context. Their stadium of interlanguage shall fluctuate between B2 and C1 level of the CEFR.

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The following pattern is aimed at language instructors who have a command of linguistics and didactics. If you are not familiar with these fields take a look at the appendix to clarify the most important concepts and terms (they have been marked in bold in the text).

2. BACKGROUND

The cultural and historical components which are found in phraseological units - such as “to know the ropes” or “to be worth one’s salt” - make them the most propitious lexical items for allowing a student to get impregnated with the culture of the target language, not to mention the expressiveness and lexical enrichment that the usage of these units means to the speaker. In addition, phraselogical units have a high frequency of use in the discourse and therefore they must be gradually learnt as a part of the lexicon of the foreign language.

The urge of simplifying the aforementioned learning process and creating teaching proposals based on similarities between languages have also triggered the conception of this pattern. Throughout the last decades linguists and editors have only emphasized differences between the learner’s first language and the language to be mastered (false friends are the best example), although the key to success when it comes to language learning lies in remarking the similarities between both languages. The underlying principle supporting similarity-based language learning is the fact that the mother language (along with other second language(s) and/or foreign language(s) the user might have already acquired/learnt) is used as scaffolding during the process of learning a new foreign language, so that the new data is built upon the existing linguistic knowledge. Thus, the cognitive effort while learning a new language is reduced and the realization and storage of a new linguistic system occurs in a faster and more efficient way.

Related work

Up until now there had been few language learning proposals based on similarities between languages. One of the most recent is the one from Cecilia Ainciburu [1] which was aimed at the early stages of the interlanguage construction and dealt with lexical units in general rather than focusing on phraseological units.

Nan Jiang’s model of lexical acquisition in adult students of English [2] also regards the fact that the lexical competence of a second language (SL) is built upon the foundations of the ML.

For Michael Lewis [3] the transfer of lexical meaning is an instinctive method the mind uses to acquire a SL. Thus Lewis pleads for exploiting the natural tendency of falling back into the ML and translating chunks i.e. segments of information to facilitate the transfer from phraseological units (and further lexical items).

3. THE PATTERN

This pattern proposal is composed of the following sections: the context where the problem appears, the problem itself, the forces, the solution to the problem, the consequences of applying the solution and finally known applications and related patterns.
EQUIVALENCY-BASED PHRASEOLOGY LEARNING
Also known as Phraseological Twins

3.1. Context
In every natural language phraseological units appear in the spoken and written speech, intertwined with many other lexical items. The learner of a FL is gradually exposed to samples of language which contain these lexical units, which the learner is expected to interpret and comprehend and lastly reproduce.

3.2. Problem
Without the right input the learner of a FL can not fully comprehend and reproduce phraseological units effectively. This deficiency in the lexical competence within a given stadium of the interlanguage could jeopardize both the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences and therefore compromise the integrity of communication.

3.3. Forces
- **Idiomaticity.** Idiomaticity is one of the features which stand in the way of comprehension of phraseological units for the learner of a foreign language. These sort of elusive lexical items possess phraseological or idiomatic meaning, i.e. the meaning of the whole unit is not conveyed by the sum of the meanings of its components but formed as a result of generalized figurative meaning. The idiomatic meaning generally stems from the cultural background and the figures of speech contained in the phraseological unit, such as *similes, metaphors, metonymies, hyperboles*, etc.
- **Fixation.** Phraseological units are unique and fixed combinations of at least two constituents such that they do not function in the same way in any other combination or combinations of the kind, or occur in a highly restricted number of contexts or in a single one only. Fixation (internal or external), although there is always a certain degree of variation to be taken into account, is an inherent feature of phraseological units which make their production in writing and speech more difficult than other lexical items.
- **Exclusion.** Despite being a crucial part of the wordstock of a language in terms of frequency of use, phraseological units are seldom included in syllabuses and hardly treated at length, due their aforesaid properties. This exclusion hinders the learner from developing his lexical competence to the same extend as other linguistic competences in a given stadium of the interlanguage.

3.4. Solution
**Therefore:** Offer an equivalency-based instruction, i.e. present phraseological units attending to syntactical, morphological and lexical similarities between the learner's mother language (ML) and the foreign language (FL).

Using an equivalency-based input, having previously conducted a contrastive analysis of such units between both languages and having classified the results according to their type of similarity, enhances the comprehension and production levels of phraseological units in a given stadium of the interlanguage.

Implementation

In order to implement the solution, the following steps shall be performed:

I. Selecting a corpus of phraseological units, according to the institutionalization and frequency criteria.
II. Transferring the phraseological units from the source language to the target language and classifying the obtained results into different types of equivalency.
III. Tailoring the equivalency-based instruction and putting it into practice.
I. Corpus selection

The first step is to select a corpus of phraseological units\(^2\) of the language which is meant to be taught\(^3\). The corpus is constructed in accordance with the following criteria:

- **Institutionalization criterion:** the phraseological unit must be included in an up-to-date normative lexicographical catalogue. By doing this we ensure that the phraseological unit is still in force and has been used on a regular basis among the speakers of that particular language\(^4\).
- **Use frequency criterion:** the phraseological unit must have a high frequency of use in the discourse of the speakers of that particular language.

II. Contrastive analysis and results classification

Once the corpus has been selected\(^5\), a systematic study between the source language and the target language is necessary to determine their structural similarities and differences.

- The transfer of phraseological units from the source language to the target language is made in two steps:
  * **Semasiological phase** (from the signifier to the signified): the meaning of each phraseological unit of the source language is noted.
  * **Onomasiological phase** (from the signified to the signifier i.e. reconstruction of signified in the target language): each noted meaning is given an expression in the target language. With this two-phase procedure the phraseological unit of the source language is linked to a semantic equivalent in the target language.

- When transferring a phraseological unit to the target language, different degrees of equivalency can be found. The correlates can fall into the following main categories:
  * **Total equivalency** (TE): there is a phraseological identical correlate in the target language for the phraseological unit of the source language. In both phraseological units:
    - The phraseological meaning is identical
    - There is syntactical coincidence of their components.
    - There is semantic coincidence of their components.
    For example:  
    
    SPA. *perder los nervios* (*to lose the nerves*)  
    GER. *die Nerven verlieren* (*to lose the nerves*)  
    ENG. *to lose one’s temper*

  * **Partial equivalency** (PE): there is a phraseological similar correlate in the TL for the phraseological unit of the source language. Regarding the degree of equivalency, the correlates can fall into the following subcategories:
    - **Type 1:**
      - The phraseological meaning is identical.
      - Syntactical variation or grammatical category variation of its components.
      For example:  
      
      SPA. *asesinar a alguien a sangre fría* (*to assassinate someone with cold blood*)  
      GER. *jemanden kaltblütig ermorden*  

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\(^2\) The language instructor shall delimit the kind of phraseological units to be taught and their semantic field according to the course contents and purposes.

\(^3\) During the implementation, the language to be taught will be addressed as source language.

\(^4\) If the language to be taught is subjected to a high degree of diatopic variation (which is the case of Spanish) it is also necessary to opt for one of its linguistic variants.

\(^5\) In the present analysis the corpus of phraseological units was restricted to verbal locutions and the selected semantic field was that of somatisms.
(*to assassinate someone cold-blooded)
ENG. to kill someone in cold blood

○ Type 2:
- The phraseological meaning is identical.
- Semantic variation of the verb or its components.
  For example: SPA. pillarse los dedos.
    (*to catch one’s fingers)
  GER. sich die Finger verbrennen.
    (*to burn one’s fingers)
  ENG. to catch one’s finger

○ Type 3:
- The phraseological meaning is identical.
- Variation of the somatic lexeme.
  For example: SPA. llevar el corazón en la mano
    (*to carry the heart in the hand)
  GER. das Herz auf der Zunge tragen
    (*to carry the heart on the tongue)
  ENG. to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve.

* Zero equivalency (ZE); the phraseological unit of the source language has either a phraseological correlate or none:

○ Type A: There is a phraseological correlate in the target language with the same phraseological meaning but no formal equivalency.
  For example: SPA. hablar por los codos
    (*to talk through the elbows)
  GER. wie ein Wasserfall reden
    (*to talk like a waterfall)
  ENG. to have verbal diarrhea

○ Type B: or no phraseological correlate at all, in which case the only way to reproduce the phraseological unit of the source language is by means of a periphrasis, circumlocution or explanation.
  For example: SPA. No dejar títere con cabeza
    → To attack and kill everyone (figuratively) by cutting their heads off [Origin: novel El Quijote]

Table 1. Summarize of phraseological equivalencies and their features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TE</th>
<th>PE1</th>
<th>PE2</th>
<th>PE3</th>
<th>ZEa</th>
<th>ZEb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phraseological meaning</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>nonexistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syntactical components</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>slightly different</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>completely different</td>
<td>completely different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semantic components</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>identical</td>
<td>slightly different (verb)</td>
<td>slightly different (lexeme)</td>
<td>completely different</td>
<td>completely different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 Note that there is total equivalency between the English and the Spanish phraseological unit. Hence the importance of conducting contrastive analyses between each pair or languages.
III. Instruction

The instruction, which is based on the equivalency input, is built upon a constructivist approach\(^7\); hence it is divided into a theoretical and a practical phase. In the first phase the previously classified phraseological units are presented to the students and they are made aware of the fact that they also exist in their mother language (ML), if some phraseological units show certain variations.

- In the case of TE they are encouraged to figure out the phraseological equivalent in the FL when they are given a phraseological unit in their ML.
- In the case of PE and after having made them aware of the nature of semantic and syntactic changes, they are encouraged to reconstruct a phraseological unit of the FL by offering them the equivalent phraseological unit in their ML.
- In the case of ZE they are encouraged to complete sentences in the FL which include a phraseological unit in the FL, putting emphasis on the existence of a phraseological equivalent in their ML (ZE, Type A) or on the historical or cultural background from which the phraseological unit in the FL has evolved (ZE, Type B).

3.5. Consequences

Benefits

- After having received an equivalency input instruction, comprehension levels improve significantly, since the learner has linked the phraseological meaning of the lexical unit in this ML to the one in the FL.
- After having received an equivalency input instruction, the production levels of the students improve satisfactorily, since the learners are given the possibility to discover for themselves the close inner structural connection between the phraseological units in both languages and to observe thoroughly their syntactical, lexical and morphological composition. However, there are still minor errors in word selection (mainly prepositions and word order).
- After being instructed at length in phraseological units of a given semantic field, the learner has stored them and is aware of their existence, developing evenly the several linguistic competences within a given stadium of the interlanguage.

Liabilities

- The lack of contrastive studies as well as the shortage of lexicographical catalogues between the source language and the target language\(^8\) might present a drawback when implementing the pattern. The few available corpora of phraseological units Spanish-German are obsolete and thus, they do not reflect the current state of the wordstock of the language.
- On the other hand, carrying out a contrastive analysis between the two languages involved in the instruction and tailoring equivalency-based teaching materials requires a considerable deal of work on the instructor’s part.

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\(^7\) Traditionally, the student has been thought to be a passive recipient of information. Nevertheless, teachers nowadays should plead for a constructive approach when dealing with the learning process and transform the instruction into functional learning. Knowledge is only built through experience, and therefore, the instructor should act as guidance, providing his students not only with the key components of a language, but also with the necessary skills so that they can learn by themselves.

\(^8\) In this case Spanish as source language and German as target language.
3.6. Evidence

This pattern was conducted in June 2011, as experimental part of a master’s thesis, with a group of German students who were getting their master’s degree in Intercultural Studies and had a C1 level of Spanish according to the CERF. These students had been learning Spanish in a classroom-based environment and had had no or few experiences in Spanish speaking countries.

The corpus of phraseological units was restricted to verbal locutions\(^9\) and the selected semantic field was that of somatisms, i.e. verbal locutions which contained a lexeme which referred to a body part, for instance “to catch one’s finger”.

Pretest, instruction and posttest were conducted within four weeks.

- The aim of the pretest was to determine their comprehension and production levels of somatic verbal locutions.
- The control group was offered a traditional instruction, whereas the experimental group received an equivalency-based instruction.
- The aim of the posttest was to determine if there had been an improvement of their comprehension and production levels of somatic verbal locutions and to measure to which extent the results achieved in the experimental group varied from the ones obtained in the control group. As a matter of fact, the subjects who received an equivalency-based instruction came up with better results than the subjects who were offered a traditional instruction.

This pattern has been proven to work in the context of German native speakers who learn Spanish as a foreign language. Nevertheless, it can be also applied in contexts in which the mother language of the learner and/or the foreign language meant to be mastered belong to the Indo-European language family, i.e. Greek, Romance, Germanic and Balto-Slavic languages.

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REFERENCES


\(^9\) According to Corpas Pastor [5] phraseological units can be classified into three sub-categories: collocations (e.g. To fulfill/achieve/shatter a dream), locutions (e.g. To catch one’s fingers) and phraseological statements (e.g. The early bird catches the worm).

EuroPLoP’12, July 11-15, Irsee, Germany. Copyright 2012 is held by the author.
Appendix to:
A Pattern for Learning Phraseology of a foreign Language

List of abbreviations (In order of appearance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ML</td>
<td>mother language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEFR</td>
<td>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phraseology

Branch of linguistics dealing with phraseological units.

Phrases

Stable or fixed combination of words with idiomatic meaning.

E.g. to lose one’s temper
to burn one’s fingers
to wear one’s heart in one’s sleeve

Mother language

A person’s native language; the language acquired as a child.

Second language

A nonnative language acquired after the mother language in a context where the first is spoken. In a second language situation the person is exposed to the target language in a variety of settings, e.g. a German graduate moves to Spain and acquires Spanish as second language through immersion as he works in the country.

Foreign language

A nonnative language learnt in classroom environment and in a context where the language is not spoken outside the classroom, e.g. a German graduate who lives in Hamburg takes Spanish lessons twice a week.

CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (abbreviated as CEFR) is a guideline used to describe achievements language learners across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries around the world. Its main aim is to provide a unified method for learning, teaching and assessing which applies to all languages in Europe. The CEFR divides learners into three broad groups which can be divided into six levels:

A Basic User
- A1 Breakthrough or beginner
- A2 Waystage or elementary

B Independent User
- B1 Threshold or intermediate
- B2 Vantage or upper intermediate

C Proficient User
- C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced
- C2 Mastery or proficiency

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11 A detailed description of the four competences a learner is expected to fulfill at each level can be found at: ec.europa.eu/dgs/jrc/downloads/jobs_traineeships_cefr.pdf
**False friends**
Pair of words in two languages that are similar in spelling and/or pronunciation but have different meanings, e.g. in German *Mantel* means ‘coat’ but the Spanish *mantel* means ‘tablecloth’.

**Interlanguage**
Type of linguistic system produced by nonnative speakers in the process of acquiring a second language or learning a foreign language and characterized by interferences (Aspects which nonnative speakers incorporate from their native language).

**Competences**
General competences of a language user comprise four sub-categories:
- Declarative knowledge; resulting from experience or formal learning
- Skills and know-how; implying the ability to carry out tasks and apply procedures.
- Existential competence; comprising individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes towards oneself and others engaged in social interaction.
- Ability to learn; is the ability to engage in new experiences and to integrate new knowledge into the existing knowledge.

Communicative languages competences of a user/learner involve knowledge, skills and know-how for each of the following components:
- **Linguistic competence**; deals with formal characteristic of a language, such as phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax.¹²
- Sociolinguistic competence; concerns the socio-cultural conditions of the language use, such as politeness rules or social group repertoires.
- Pragmatic competence; covers the functional use of language in specific scenarios, such as how to act in a job interview.

**Simile**
Trope or figure of speech whereby two elements are compared based on their similarities. Such comparison is explicitly marked by the use of *as* or *like*, e.g. *They fought like cats and dogs.*

**Metaphor**
Trope or figure of speech whereby one element is substituted by another based on their similarities, e.g. *She’s a diamond* (highly valuable, esteemed).

**Metonymy**
Trope or figure of speech whereby one element is not designated by its own signifier, but by the signifier of another closely associated element, based on the contiguity between the two elements. E.g. *The old Rembrandt has been hanging in the gallery for weeks* (a painting made by Rembrandt).
Note that a metaphor creates new links between otherwise distinct conceptual domains, whereas a metonymy relies on the existing links within them.

**Hyperbole**
Trope or figure of speech based on exaggeration in which an extravagant statement is intentionally made for emphasis or effect, e.g. *He is older than those hills*.

**Somatic (adj)**
Relating to the body (Greek σωματικός; “of the body”).

¹² The linguistic competence comprises the following sub-categories: **lexical competence**, grammatical competence, semantic competence, phonological competence, orthographic competence and orthoepic competence.
Further information on this subject can be found in GREEN, A. (2012): *Language Functions Revisited: Theoretical and Empirical Bases for Language construct definition across the ability range*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.