

THAT'S THE WAY CHUNKS CRUMBLE *

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RESUMO. Este trabalho visa mostrar a importância dos diversos tipos de combinações de palavras no processo de aprendizagem de segunda língua e seu papel no desenvolvimento da proficiência lingüística. Aborda-se aspectos psicolingüísticos da aquisição da língua estrangeira e conceitos lingüísticos relativos à descrição dos itens complexos. Busca-se também apontar algumas dificuldades no tratamento pedagógico deste vocabulário e sugere-se modelos de exercícios que contemplam o tema.

ABSTRACT. The present paper aims at showing the importance of the chunks of words in the process of learning a second language and their central role in developing linguistic proficiency. The article analyzes the psycholinguistic aspects of language acquisition and the linguistic description of the items. It also points out some difficulties concerning the approach of this type of vocabulary and suggests some examples of exercises which deal with the subject.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aquisição de segunda língua, Ensino de vocabulário, Fluência

KEY WORD: Second language acquisition, Teaching vocabulary, Fluency

* Paralleling the idiomatic expression "That's the way the *cookie* crumbles", which means that is how things are (and one must accept them).

INTRODUCTION

More often than not, students of foreign languages complain they don't find the words to express their thoughts, and that the right expressions don't come up at the right moment. This phenomenon is not related to the lack of study or even motivation but probably to a lack of attention on some important aspects of vocabulary since the knowledge of isolated words by itself doesn't assure fluent and natural production.

The ideal objective of the teaching-learning process is the linguistic competence similar to the mother language one. According to Pawley and Syder (1993, p.191-196) the combination of two types of linguistic capacities concurs to proficiency: the native-like fluency and selection of expressions. Fluency is the capacity of producing a continuous and spontaneous speech. Selection may be defined as the ability of expressing meanings through grammatical sentences that sound perfectly natural in context, selected among many other grammatical possibilities which are offered by the language but would not sound natural. In other words, the native speaker's capacity of selection produces a sentence like "*I want to marry you*" instead of "*I wish to be wedded to you*" or "*I desire you to become married to me*" or "*Your marrying me is desired by me*", also grammatically perfect but by no means natural.

CHUNKS OF WORDS

There are many difficulties involving the description of the processes above (fluency and selection) in the speaker's mind, nevertheless some researchers suggest that an aspect of competence is related to memorization of prefabricated speech – a variety of word combinations such as fixed phrases, part of phrases, formulas (ritualistic, routine or poetic), collocations, idioms, sayings, proverbs, clichés – summing up, a vocabulary made up of chunks of words, not only isolated words.

Studies on the subject carried on the last twenty five years, extended the notion of lexical unit, from the orthographic unit – the word – to the assumption of chunks or groups of words that work as a single unit. Research on the frequency and use of combinations

calls attention to the role of these chunks in the process of learning first or second language and in verbal production.

In second language teaching this phenomenon is usually referred to as formulaic language and authors unanimously recognize its existence but often disagree on its importance and role: some believe it is a type of learning strategy (Fillmore, 1976, p.323-363); others regard it as a tool for communication (Krashen and Scarcella, 1978, p. 283-300); some consider it a production strategy (Pawley and Syder, 1983, p. 215-220); some as an stage in interlanguage formation (Ellis, 1985, p.75-87).

The authors basically distinguish formulaic language which is memorized and repeated without awareness of its components from creative language, whose utterances are formed from scratch by picking out single units that are combined according to the grammatical rules.

Fillmore argues the stage of memorization and repetition is central to acquisition. Researching on children learning English as second language, she concluded that the need to communicate with others forces the learner to use the memorized expressions. This memorization evolves with time: firstly it gets familiar through the repetition; secondly it is compared with other forms; after that it is decomposed and combined with other elements; finally each component is understood in isolation and form a new unit with other words.

Krashen and Scarcella define communication strategy as a tool observed in the initial stages of second language learning process, when chunks of words are memorized and consciously employed to achieve communication. Production strategy, on the contrary, is the unconscious process of linguistic knowledge in order to facilitate language production and decodification, also observed in native speakers speech.

Pawley and Syder claim the native speaker does not exercise the creative potential offered by generative grammar but draws on ready-made expressions as a strategy to speed the language process and assure a fluent discourse. These authors believe that natural selection of language does not depend on extension and simplicity only, but also on discourse conventions and, above all, on the familiarity with combination of words.

Ellis share the assumption the chunks are memorized and gradually decomposed to be reused in other contexts but he believes this strategy only extends over the first phases of interlanguage development. This is used to refer to the approximate language system that is

developed by learners independent of their mother language and different from the target language, beginning in the initial stages of acquisition and lasting until proficiency.

In spite of the variety of classifications and explanations, the common principle is that a chunk is memorized, repeated in similar contexts in order to achieve communication. Gradually the formulas are analyzed and turned into patterns

I wanna play wi'se these I wanna + VP

I don' wanna do dese I don' wanna + VP

which enable the construction of sentences like

I don' wanna play wi'dese

I wanna do dese

In addition to the studies on acquisition which point out the importance of chunks of words to learning and fluency, researches with learners of English as second language reveal that the majority of errors observed in their speech are due to the unawareness of collocations and other types of idiomatic expressions. Those deviant utterances are more frequent at the semantic level (non-idiomatic combinations such as **food little fat* for *light food*; **extravagant drinker* for *heavy drinker*; **a voyage by train* for *a journey by train*) and less frequent at the pragmatic level (*he closed the door with a key* for *he locked the door*).

Farghal and Obiedat (1995, p.315-325) describe some strategies used by learners trying to solve difficulties referring to complex lexical items:

- transference, assuming that there is a one-to-one correspondence between L1 and L2
 - *firm color* for *fast color*
 - *sweet soup* for *bland soup*
- paraphrasing, as a strategy of lexical simplification
 - *dissolves easily* for *running color*
 - *does not change* for *fast color*
- synonymy, as a failure to recognize the idiomaticity of the expression
 - *steady/stable/static color* for *fast color*
 - *top of the summer/middle summer* for *height of the summer*

- avoidance of the target lexical item in favor of another familiar combination, altering its meaning

* *quick meal* for *light food*

* *heavy drinker* for *extravagant drinker, great drinker*

Aware of the necessity of teaching the idiosyncrasies of word combinations, teachers face the problem of selecting items to teach. Some authors suggest that only the collocations that do not have a direct translation should be presented, but others point out that students will not expect the correspondence and thus all idioms which are regarded as useful should be taught. The common sense must obviously prevail and the most relevant, frequent and typical combinations should be privileged.

The presentation of this kind of vocabulary to students is another difficulty to be overcome. Some principles may be adopted in classroom procedures: the single most fundamental one is to be always prompt to teach vocabulary. There isn't that stage in the learning process which is more appropriate to teach idiomatic expressions (or vocabulary in general). The teacher should not only take all the spontaneous opportunities to present the various kinds of lexical items but should create some as well.

God bless you!

They are going steady.

Will you excuse me?

for example, are expressions that come up from the necessity of communication since the first class. Systematizing the occurrence of these items is advisable. A corner of the board for "Interesting/Useful expressions" may be filled out as the situations come about. The teacher, after writing them down in a notebook, may use the list to prepare activities, for instance a quiz similar to "Show do Milhão" dealing with the combinations of words learned during the school term).

Lewis (1997, p.45-59) explains that the central strategy is to make students conscious of the of the existence of complex units and teach them to recognize chunks of words. To achieve this goal he suggests some changes in methodology:

1. present adjective related to a noun, not isolated nouns
2. emphasize expressions which have evocative and generative potential
3. explore the environment where words occur
4. focus on pronunciation of multiple items, not on single words

Some didactic materials already present specific exercises on collocations and idioms but it is always advisable the planning of activities by the teacher himself, mainly because the difficulties vary according to the students' mother tongue. Being so, a book designed to foreigners in general will hardly meet the needs of Brazilian Portuguese speakers.

The proposition made is that the teacher, by no means resigning the didactic material and methodology so far adopted, creates opportunities to emphasize the combinations of words, using the texts, dialogues and exercises presented by the book, trying to develop the ability of identifying, recognizing and storing chunks of words.

EXAMPLES OF EXERCISES

1. Identifying word combinations

This type of exercise is very useful to make students notice the assortment of combinations in a text. Besides that, the learner who is able to correctly identify combinations of words uses the dictionary more efficiently, translates more appropriately and avoids some kinds of errors.

It is worth saying that most of the time learners are not aware of idiomacity even in their own language. Thus, the habit of asking "how do you say this in Portuguese/English/Spanish?" prevents the assumption of direct correspondence or the word-by-word translation.

Examples:

- a) Find the expression in the article that means...
- b) Find three longer expressions with their equivalents in your own language.

- c) Find word partnerships you need, with their equivalents in your own language.
- d) Using expressions from the unit, what's another way of saying ...

2. Matching

This type of exercise, usually employed for grammar practice, may be used to practice collocations, phrases in stereotypic dialogues and other expressions.

Examples:

- a) Make a phrase by matching the correct words and phrases. Try to do it without looking at the dialogue/text:
- b) Find two words which make strong partnership with each of these nouns:

3. Completing

This traditional fill-in-the-blanks exercise is adopted to practice relatively fixed collocations or expressions which allow some variation.

Examples:

- a) Complete the dialogues by adding the missing words. Choose from the box.
- b) Complete the dialogue by adding the missing-pair of words. Choose from the box.
- c) Which expression completes (or does not complete) the sentence correctly? (Multiple choice).
- d) Use the phrases above to respond in these situations.
- e) Put in a correct phrase from the text/exercise above to complete the sentences below.

4. Categorization

Perception of pattern is an aid to memory, so it is helpful to ask learners to sort words or expressions according to the categories they perceive or some guideline given by the teacher.

Examples:

- a) Choose from these words three which make strong partnerships with each of the verbs below: pay/make/give
- b) Complete each of the following dialogues with an expression containing get/do/take.
- c) What other verbs could substitute **seen** in **I've seen better**, if you were responding to the following statements.

5. Deleting

Some errors are caused by over-generalization. This kind of exercise helps the learner to predict exceptions.

Example:

- a) One word in each group does not make a strong partnership with the words in capitals.
- b) Which does not form a strong partnership with get/do/make.
- c) Circle the only word that does not collocate with the verb/noun/adjective in bolt.

6. Pronunciation

Exploit the stress pattern of expressions and compare the intonation of phrases are strategies to memorization of chunks. Lexis and pronunciation meet to help learners store things more effectively in their phrasal lexicons” says Lewis (1997, p.99).

Examples:

- a) Your teacher will read some of these sentences. Write the numbers of the ones you hear. (I don't know/I don't, no/ I'm afraid I can't/I'm afraid, I can't/Why is she here?/Why, is she here).
- b) Repeat the following fixed expressions with the same stress pattern (More haste, less speed/First come, first served/Easy come easy go/Nothing ventured, nothing gained).
- c) Underline the stressed words of the following phrases.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, the new approaches on vocabulary tend to the notion that language consists of blocks of meaning, form-function composites which contain semantic and syntactic aspects, so far considered separately as vocabulary and grammar components.

Anyone who has got through the experience of learning a foreign language by means of memorization of isolated words and following syntactic rules to combine the lexical items, knows how difficult it is to accomplish natively like fluency and naturalness. The ongoing doubts about idiomaticity of expressions (word-by-word translation is not appropriate) and conventions of use are causes of frustration and demotivation. The lack of familiarity with the idioms is detrimental to the process of understanding native discourse since decodification relies on deduction and inference based on previous knowledge of conventions.

Adopting an approach that treats vocabulary as central to language acquisition will certainly be helpful to prepare students to face everyday situations, devising more interesting and challenging lessons and making the learning process more objective and efficient.

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