

Enhanced teaching of word combinations in tourism study programmes in Slovenia

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Abstract

The paper reports on a research into teaching English with special attention to word combinations recently conducted at the Faculty of Tourism Studies in Portorož, Slovenia. The study involved two groups of students studying English as a foreign language. We aimed to find out whether enhanced teaching of word combinations influences students' test results in general language tests. While the control group was taught with no special attention paid to word combinations, the experimental group received a considerable amount of exercises and the students were constantly reminded of the importance of word combinations in the English language. Both groups were tested at the beginning and end of the academic year with two tests, the Oxford Placement Test and the Test of English for International Communication and students also had to fill in Common European Framework Self-assessment Forms. The data analysis indicates that the experimental group scored better results.

Key words: teaching English for specific purposes, language of tourism, word combinations

1 Introduction

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment - CEFRL (2001, 44) claims that teachers and authors of course books should first analyse the needs of their students and answer the following questions: what will their students be using the foreign language for, what do they have to study in order to be able to use the foreign language for this purpose, and in the first place, why do they want to study the foreign language? The answers introduce us to the language for specific purposes, in our case the language of tourism. Students of tourism need to be proficient in several foreign languages. In Slovenia, they are expected to be able to communicate with tourists from the neighbouring countries in Italian, German, and perhaps also Hungarian and Croatian. However, since Slovenia as a tourist destination attracts also tourists from other countries, the English language tends to be spoken as a lingua franca. Apart from that, English is constantly used in international business communication, therefore, students need to be proficient in English as well.

1.1 Vocabulary

Despite the fact that many authors consider vocabulary, particularly specialist vocabulary, a key element of English for specific purposes (ESP), vocabulary studies appeared to have been somewhat neglected in ESP. In the past in many cases lists of terms for particular specialist areas were compiled, but it was later recognised that such lists had limitations. Nation (2001, 13) divides vocabulary into four levels: high frequency words, academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary and low frequency words. High frequency words are the most frequent 2000 words of English and may be called general service vocabulary since they are used no matter what the language is being used for. Academic vocabulary is common to a wide range of academic fields and is not typically associated with just one field. Technical vocabulary consists of technical words occurring frequently in a specialised text or subject area. It is of particular interest to those working in a specialised field. The fourth level of vocabulary consists of all the remaining low frequency English words.

Robinson (1991, 28) speaks about three levels of vocabulary. The first level of ESP vocabulary is specialist vocabulary which comprises words occurring in one scientific area. Practitioners generally agree that this level is not the one to focus on in a foreign language classroom. The second level of ESP vocabulary is often referred to as semi-technical and includes words from a number of scientific areas. It consists of items necessary for discussing the research process as well as for analysing and evaluating data, whatever the academic discipline. Practitioners generally agree that this level should be taught in an ESP course. The third level is general and non-academic vocabulary, English central to any general course.

However, some authors think (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, 50; Alexander, 2007, 209) that to say the teaching of specialist vocabulary is not the responsibility of the ESP teacher and that priority should be given to the teaching of semi-technical or core vocabulary is to oversimplify it. While they generally agree that teaching specialist vocabulary should not be the responsibility of the ESP teacher, they also point out that in certain specific contexts it may be the duty of the ESP teacher to check that learners have understood technical vocabulary appearing as carrier content for an ESP exercise. They consider it necessary to ensure that learners have understood the technical language presented by a subject specialist or assumed to be known by a subject specialist.

No matter how we divide vocabulary and how we define the vocabulary of a particular field, the majority of ESP teachers would agree on the fact that we would like to teach students the vocabulary they will need when they start working in the field they are currently studying.

Successful retrieval of a vocabulary item from memory can be aided by the grouping of words according to their meaning, either according to topic (situational sets) or chains of association (semantic sets). Learners should be encouraged to build their own sets. The development of the corpora of specific texts (Gledhill, 2000, 120ff) has provided the opportunity to draw up

lists of key lexical items in a general context as well as in specific disciplines. In this way we may also examine lexical sets or families of words, the members of which collocate with each other and avoid unnaturalness of the word combination.

1.2 Word Combinations

Cowie (1998, 57) explains that phraseology is the study of the nature and distribution of words that are not completely free in combination. There is strong evidence that phrasal items of various sorts account for the larger proportion of words in much of language production and therefore constitute a significant proportion of a speaker's vocabulary.

Sinclair (1991, 109) speaks about two principles of language organisation. The first one is the *open choice principle* or *slot-and-filler principle*, where a sentence is built word by word according to grammatical rules. For instance, the sentence *she gave me a ...* can be finished in different ways, *she gave me a sign/letter/book*. The second is the *idiomatic principle*, where a sentence cannot be built word by word due to the fact that some words will occur together and some will not. In order to build a correct sentence word combinations have to be taken into account. For instance, the sentence *I wanted to present...* cannot be finished by adding *some insight*, for the simple fact that the expression **to present some insight* is unacceptable in English. Native speakers of English will say either *to offer an insight* or *to present findings*.

Research into vocabulary learning (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, 20ff) has also suggested that learners do not store vocabulary as individual words, but as chunks of language also referred to as lexical phrases. They are short sets of phrases that are frequently used in communication. In ESP such phrases can provide learners with valuable vocabulary and improve their language competence.

There are many different word combinations, collocations are one of them and are very common in the English language. The definition of collocations sometimes

varies from author to author, but they are usually described as loosely fixed and semantically transparent word combinations. Benson (1997, XVff) writes that a grammatical collocation is a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun, adjective, verb) and a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause. For example, *blockade against, a pleasure to do, an agreement that, by accident, angry with, necessary to do*. Grammatical collocations are more deterministic and more often found in dictionaries. Lexical collocations are more problematic for non-native speakers and also more difficult to find in dictionaries. They consist of different combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. For example, *come to an agreement, reject an appeal, strong tea, alarms go off, a swarm of bees, deeply absorbed, affect deeply*.

In the introduction to the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* (2002, VIIff), Diana Lea defined collocation as the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. She sees word combinations ranged on a cline from the fixed and idiomatic, such as *not see the woods for the trees*, to collocations, such as *see danger, see reason, see the point*. She adds that the collocationally rich language is also more precise. It should be emphasized that learning collocation does not necessarily mean learning new words. It is about putting together the words learners may already know.

Collocations, word combinations whose meaning is in most cases transparent, should not cause many problems for non-native speakers when translating from English into their mother tongue (decoding). However, the same cannot be said for translating from the non-native speaker's mother tongue into English (encoding). If we use a wrong collocation in English, it does not necessarily cause a communication breakdown. The message may get across, but native speakers may find the way the words were put together unusual, inappropriate or humorous. The correct use of collocations may be a very thin line non-native speakers have to cross to become fully proficient speakers of English, but needless to say this line is very difficult to cross. For instance, Slovene speakers of the English language will make the mistake **to be interested for* because of the

* indicates wrong usage

collocation in the Slovene language - they automatically translate the Slovene preposition into English. In a way, the Slovene collocation misleads them into using the wrong preposition in the English collocation. Many Slovene speakers of English will, for the same reason, say **sea fruit* instead of *sea food*, **with big speed* (at high speed), **lie on the sun* (*lie in the sun*).

In order to avoid such mistakes, speakers of the foreign language should be made aware of word combinations and the problems they might have in the process of encoding, that is translating from their mother tongue into a foreign language.

2 Outline of the course

The Faculty of Tourism Studies, Portorož, Slovenia, offers a three-year course at a tertiary level which involves studying two or three foreign languages. The major language, in this case English, is studied for three years. Since English is taught in most primary and secondary schools in Slovenia, the majority of students will choose English as their major language. Due to the fact that first year students come from different types of secondary schools their knowledge of English varies accordingly. While some of them are fluent in English and have good language skills in terms of speaking, writing, listening and reading, some others may still be struggling with basic structures when speaking and even more in writing. The first semester of the first year is spent revising basic structures of the English language. A general English course book (Broadhead, 2000, 6ff) is used and additional literature is recommended to students who encounter difficulties. In the second term ESP (in this case the language of tourism) is introduced using the course books written for students of tourism (Čeh, 2003, 6ff; Čeh, 2007a, 6ff). They offer texts on tourism introducing the topic to a non-specialist and consolidate the basic structures students learned in the first term. Many students are successful when learning the essentials of the foreign language, but later on they find themselves on a plateau unable to make any further progress. The reason for the plateau is frequently their inability to use appropriate word combinations. Students may have a very good

knowledge of English words, but at the same time they are unable to put them together correctly and appropriately. This was the reason for more attention paid to word combinations and as well for the introduction of word combinations, mostly collocations, in the second year (Čeh, 2006b, 6ff) and in the third year (Čeh, 2009, 6ff). It seems necessary for an English teacher to react to wrong word combinations used in the classroom by giving suggestions which word combinations should be used instead. There are numerous suggestions for teaching collocation currently available (Lewis, 2000, 6ff; Woolard, 2004, 4ff; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005, 6ff; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008, 6ff).

With word combinations that are semantically transparent it can be noted that problems usually occur in the process of encoding, translating from one's mother tongue into a foreign language. In the process of decoding, translating from a foreign language into the mother tongue, much less problems will occur for the above mentioned fact that word combinations are semantically transparent. Examples of students' collocation mistakes were collected during English lessons as well as in the papers students handed in. By doing so, a considerable amount of collocation mistakes that had been made in the process of encoding were collected and as such they may be considered typical of Slovene speakers of English as a foreign language studying tourism. This was the quality that is frequently missed in otherwise perfect English course books. Most of them are written for all nationalities of students learning English, but for none of them in particular. A recently published course book may include a lot of word combinations, but maybe none of those that Slovene speakers of English find problematic. Such words have already been collected (Gabrovšek, 1998, 112ff; Čeh, 2006a; Čeh, 2007b, 161), but it may be considered an invaluable advantage to have a list of word combination mistakes made by students of tourism. In this way it was possible to write special word combination exercises for students of tourism. After several generations of students being taught word combinations systematically it seemed necessary to measure the result of the teaching.

2.1 Background school of thought

When reading the research report on the strategy for learning idioms called etymological elaboration (Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans, 2004, 6ff) one comes to realise that foreign language learners may be helped in various ways when learning word combinations. Although the research carried out at the Faculty of Tourism in Portorož did not include idioms as such, it was nevertheless obvious that students need to be encouraged to pay attention to chunks of language, in our case word combinations. One of the ways to do so is reminding them of the fact that word combinations are the most important part of the English vocabulary and that by learning whole word combinations they will have whole chunks of language ready to be used in communication. It is useful to help them with additional exercises encouraging them to deal with the word combination mistakes they tend to make in the language production process.

3 Selected details from the research

Due to the fact that the research was meant to investigate the influence of enhanced teaching of word combinations on general language test results, the following procedure was adopted. There were two first-year groups of students, the control and experimental, 30 students each. Both groups consisted of mixed abilities students and were taught by the same teacher. The control group students were taught with no special attention paid to word combinations. In the first term the general English course book (Broadhead, 2000, 6ff) was used and in the second term the course books introducing the language of tourism (Čeh, 2003, 6ff; Čeh, 2007a, 6ff). Although the experimental group students were using exactly the same course books, from the very beginning they were weekly given additional material with word combination exercises. Some of them were chosen randomly from different sources and mainly included word combinations relevant to the language of tourism. Simultaneously students were given also exercises written on the basis of collected word combination mistakes made by themselves and

their colleagues in the process of studying English at the faculty. It may be concluded that the majority of those mistakes may be considered to be typical of Slovene speakers of English as the most probable reason for making a particular mistake is obviously literal translation from Slovene into English. Students consequently received the feedback and were at the same time encouraged to use the correct word combinations in their oral and written communication. The purpose of this activity was not necessarily to teach students particular word combinations, but primarily to raise their awareness of the importance of learning word combinations.

The typical exercise given to students would have been of the following type:

Fill in the blanks.

I'd like to introduce you to my friend who studies with me because she is interested _____ catering. She is good _____ combining recipes which are typical _____ the different regions in our country. She is also aware _____ the different needs of our potential customers who might be allergic _____ a variety of ingredients. She considers herself fortunate because she is married _____ a chef who works the same unsociable hours as she does. How they spend their free time depends _____ the season. They are both keen _____ outdoor activities, in the winter they go cross-country skiing and in the summer diving.

The exercise includes the collocations often problematic for Slovene speakers of English, since in the process of encoding they tend to translate literally from Slovene into English and for this reason make the following mistakes: **interested for*, **good in*, **typical for*, **allergic on*, **married with*, **depend of*. The rest of the phrases were introduced for the reason that students frequently use the wrong preposition.

The second type of exercise would have been of the following type:

Is there a better way of saying it?

The Slovene coast is very short and heterogeneous.

In Ankaran you can lie on the sun on a sandy beach.

The next part lies by a traffic road.

Cars rush by with a big speed.

There is also a path for cyclists and rollers, but it is unpleasant because of the noise and smoke.

For the same reason you will not enjoy having a bath in the sea.

After Izola the coast becomes more interesting.

There is no road, it is very quiet.

The cliff is steep, you can see different layers of earth.

In the vicinity of Strunjan they grow sea shells.

I think the water must be very clean there.

In Fiesa you can see something very strange.

Right next to the sea there is a small sweet water lake.

There is also a small camp place if you do not want to stay in the hotel.

Portorož attracts a lot of young people and also a lot of gamblers.

It offers rich night life.

In Seča you can see how they produce salt in salt pools.

There are also many plants and birds that you cannot see very often.

In the text there are a lot of wrong word combinations (**lie on the sun*, **a traffic road*, **with a big speed*, **have a bath in the sea*, **sweet water lake*...) and most of the mistakes may have been made under the influence of the Slovene language for the obvious reason that students were translating literally from Slovene into English. Students were asked to correct the text by using collocation dictionaries or any other source available to them. However, the suggestions for a better way of saying it offered in the key of the course book used by the students were prepared in cooperation with a native speaker of English.

At the beginning and end of the academic year, two tests, the *Oxford Placement Test (OPT)* and the *Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)*, were applied in both groups. Both of them may be considered to be general English tests, although the second one was often used for professional purposes. In the former, 21 out of 200 questions may be considered to be of collocational nature, although they are difficult to define due to the generally acknowledged fuzzy criteria for different word combinations. In the latter, out of 200 questions 14 are considered to be of a collocational nature. In order to complement the results of the two tests mentioned with the students' own perception of their knowledge, the students were asked to evaluate their knowledge of English at the beginning and end of the academic year by filling in self-assessment forms from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001, 231–243).

Table 1: OPT in both groups

	OPT total
A–C	161
%	104.0
+/- %	4.0
B–D	-243
%	94.8
+/- %	-5.2

Table 2: TOEIC in both groups

	TOEIC total
A–C	11
%	100.3
+/- %	0.3
B–D	-94
%	97.9
+/- %	-2.1

The results in the control group are labelled with letters A and B (A-beginning and B-end of the academic year), and the results in the experimental group with C and D (C-beginning and D-end of the academic year).

The selected data illustrate that the students of the control group had an advantage over the students of the experimental group at the beginning of the academic year in both tests (the result A–C in Table 1 for OPT and the result A–C in table 2 for TOEIC). In spite of this advantage of the control group at the beginning or the academic year, the experimental group was better at the end of the academic year (the result B–D in table 1 for OPT and the result B–D in Table 2 for TOEIC).

Since we wanted to find out how both groups of students performed just in parts of the two tests where they had to deal with word combinations, those parts of the tests were singled out as it has been mentioned before.

The self assessment test was included in the research out of curiosity in order to find out how students assess their own knowledge of the English language and whether the results of self assessment compare with the results of the two tests used in the research. The self-assessment results show that the students from the control group had a very high opinion of their knowledge of English at the beginning of the academic year (result A for different skills). At the end of the academic year the students from the control group were not as sure of their knowledge of the language skills in listening and reading, in other skills their self assessment was either the same or slightly improved (result B for different skills). The students from the experimental group were less self-confident than the students from the control group in all language skills at the beginning of the academic year (result C for different skills).

Table 3: *Word combinations in both tests in both groups*

	OPT	TOEIC	Total
A–C	17	15	32
%	105.1	106.2	105.5
+/- %	5.1	6.2	5.5
B–D	-13	-3	-16
%	96.8	99.0	97.7
+/- %	-3.2	-1.0	-2.3

Table 3 illustrates that the control group scored better results at the beginning of the academic year in word combinations in both tests (A–C in OPT and TOEIC). However, the control group was outperformed by the experimental group at the end of the academic year in both tests (B–D in OPT and TOEIC).

However, their perception of their knowledge improved by the end of the academic year in all areas (result D for different skills).

4 Discussion

At the beginning of the first academic year at the tertiary level we may not be fully aware of how much the knowledge of English varies from one student to another. Not only that they come from different secondary schools, but also their attitude to learning foreign languages might differ significantly. Many of them do not have any work experience and may not be aware of the importance of foreign languages in tourism. Others may have had some experience working in travel agencies or hotels and are well aware of the fact that they are studying the foreign language

Table 4: *Self-assessment in both groups*

	LISTENING	READING	SPEAKING- INTERACT.	SPEAKING- PRODUCT.	WRITING	AVERAGE
A	4.10	3.80	3.63	3.43	3.37	3.67
B	4.03	3.77	3.63	3.67	3.47	3.71
+/-	-0.07	-0.03	0.00	0.23	0.10	0.05
C	3.60	3.57	3.13	3.17	3.07	3.31
D	4.00	3.87	3.80	3.70	3.10	3.69
+/-	0.40	0.30	0.67	0.53	0.03	0.39

in order to be able to use it at work as well as in their private lives.

Since English is already taught at primary and secondary school level, students come to our college with certain learning habits and they have already adopted some learning strategies (Jurković, 2007, 283ff). It proves to be difficult to convince them that not all language skills may be improved solely by reading foreign language texts. Especially when written communication should be learned they tend to be reluctant to start writing in order to improve their writing skills. It has been noticed that younger generations of students enter the faculty with considerably better speaking skills, but unfortunately with increasingly worse writing skills. The problems some of them may have are further compounded by lack of vocabulary, particularly the lack of the language of tourism vocabulary. They may well be familiar with everyday spoken language, but considerably less with formal expressions used in specialised texts.

As it has already been mentioned, the control group performed better in both tests at the beginning of the academic year. Students from this group also had a better opinion of their knowledge of English. However, the experimental group outperformed them at the end of the academic year in both tests, but they did not become as self-confident about their knowledge in all language skills. Unfortunately, the factors influencing the self-assessment results were not researched and may only be speculated about. One of them may have been the awareness of the type of the secondary school students from the group in question had finished. Namely, in Slovenia it is widely believed that students coming from other secondary schools rather than grammar schools are at a certain disadvantage. Since in the control group there were more students who had finished grammar school, they may have been more self-confident generally speaking. Unfortunately it could not be statistically proved.

The fact that the students from both groups scored different results in each of both tests may be explained in the way that each test is different. In the OPT test, there are different types of exercises, 10.5% of them are

word combinations. Although the advantage of the control group at the beginning of the academic year was considerable, they were outperformed at the end of the academic year by the experimental group. The same may be said about word combinations since the control group was better at the beginning, but worse at the end of the academic year in this part. In the TOEIC test, 8% of exercises are word combinations. The test results at the end of the academic year show the same, namely the experimental group outperformed the control group. It has to be added that the test results of most students from both groups were in the region or approaching the level of the First Certificate Examination at the beginning and approaching the level of Certificate in Advanced English at the end of the academic year. If the results are mapped on the *Common European Framework* levels (Tannenbaum & Wylie, 2004), most TOEIC results are at or above the B1 level which is important for the professional use of the language.

It may be concluded that enhanced teaching of word combinations did improve the test results in the experimental group. Nevertheless, there are still numerous questions to be researched and answered. The authors who looked into the problem of teaching word combinations (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993, 102ff; Lewis, 2000, 7ff; Brown, 1994, 24ff; Shei & Pain, 2000, 168ff; Nesselhauf, 2003, 224ff; Gitsaki, 1996, 6ff) each of them pointed out different problems students might come up against in the process of learning them. One of the questions still calling for an answer is how exactly non-native speakers learn word combinations. Some authors think we have to encounter a word combination up to seven times in order to remember it and after a considerable span of time to be able to retrieve it. It may be true, but I hasten to add that to remember a word combination we most probably have to come across a word combination in different activities, receptive and, even more importantly, productive. I tend to believe that non-native speakers also have to use word combinations in the encoding processes in order to remember them and be able to retrieve them later.

Another question that each foreign language teacher intending to teach word combinations has to answer at

the beginning is which word combinations we should teach. Is it those that are most common in a foreign language, those that are most useful for our students, or those that a certain group of speakers, for example, Slovene speakers of English, find most difficult due to the fact that they are structurally or semantically different from collocations in their mother tongue? This is still to be found out. In our research we opted for the word combinations students of tourism used wrongly in their language production.

5 Conclusion

Hopefully, there will be more and more research into teaching and learning word combinations and teachers will be well provided with all the necessary information to make decisions before starting to teach them to their students. Nevertheless, in my opinion it is important that teachers continue to research what the results of their teaching are and in this way assist their students to improve their language skills.

Intenzivno učenje besednih zvez na turističnih študijskih programih v Sloveniji

Povzetek

Članek ponuja rezultate raziskave poučevanja angleškega jezika, ki je usmerjena posebno v besedne zveze. Pred kratkim je bila izvedena na UP Turistici – Fakulteti za turistične študije v Portorožu, Slovenija. Vanjo sta bili vključeni dve skupini študentov, ki sta se učili angleškega jezika kot tujega jezika stroke. Želeli smo ugotoviti, ali je intenzivno učenje besednih zvez v tujem jeziku mogoče opaziti na rezultatih v splošnih testih znanja tujega jezika. Kontrolna skupina je med predavanji delala po ustaljenem programu brez dodatnega učenja besednih zvez. Nasprotno pa je bilo v eksperimentalni skupini študentom skozi vse študijsko leto ponujeno več različnih vaj z besednimi zvezami. Prav tako se je v tej skupini nenehno govorilo o tem, kako pomembne so besedne zveze v angleškem jeziku. V obeh skupinah je bilo izvedeno testiranje na začetku in koncu študijskega leta s testoma Oxford Placement Test in Test of English for International Communication. Študenti so morali izpolniti tudi lestvico za samooceno v Common European Framework Self-assessment Forms. Analiza rezultatov je pokazala, da so bili rezultati v eksperimentalni skupini boljši.

Ključne besede: angleški jezik kot jezik stroke, učenje tujega jezika, jezik turizma, besedne zveze

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