Lexis

Journal in English Lexicology

18 | 2021

Lexical learning and teaching

Introduction

Heather Hilton

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lexis/6154>

DOI: 10.4000/lexis.6154

ISSN: 1951-6215

Publisher

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

Electronic reference

Heather Hilton, "Introduction", *Lexis* [Online], 18 | 2021, Online since 18 December 2021, connection on 21 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/6154> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.6154>

This text was automatically generated on 21 December 2021.

Lexis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Heather Hilton

- 1 The heyday of lexical learning in the language classroom, which lasted more than 80 years (stretching from the *Méthode directe* through the Active and Audiolingual Methods) came to a relatively abrupt end in the 1980s, with the adoption of the Communicative Approach, and its almost exclusive focus on communication skills (rather than the linguistic components of these skills). One of the main supporters of the Communicative Approach in the United States, Stephen Krashen, for example, has famously postulated that incidental encounters with words during receptive activities will suffice for their acquisition (Krashen *et al.* [1984]). Currently, in France, foreign language pedagogy remains evasive when it comes to lexical acquisition, formulating taboos (such as “*les listes de mots sont à bannir*”, MEN [2012: 5]), rather than proposing a research-grounded methodology for the teaching and learning the vast numbers of words required for competent language use.
- 2 Psycholinguistic research has, however, long demonstrated the vital contribution of lexical knowledge to communicative language use. First-language (L1) research has clearly and repeatedly shown that automatic word recognition is the basis of skilled reading (Anderson & Freebody [1981]; Nagy [1988]); second and foreign-language (L2) research has confirmed the role of lexical knowledge in comprehension (for example, Kelly [1991]; Tsui & Fullilove [1998]), and also in oral and written production (Hilton [2008]; Staehr [2008]). A large body of second language acquisition research describes the circumstances that promote L2 lexical learning (summarized in Nation [2014]), but this research (primarily published in English), doesn't yet seem to have influenced our theory or practice in foreign-language teaching in France (Hilton [2019]).
- 3 In this context, we are extremely pleased to present the articles contained in this special issue of *Lexis*, which present research initiatives focusing on the teaching and learning of foreign-language vocabulary in real-world classrooms. In a departure from the English-focused orientation of this journal, the articles look at word-learning in three different languages (English, French, Mandarin), and a variety of language-learning contexts (university classrooms, study abroad, and distance learning), since we are convinced that the theoretical bases of foreign-language teaching methodology

are strengthened by research on multiple languages and contexts. The first four articles in this issue are devoted to word learning and use.

- 4 We open the issue with a masterful review article by **Amanda Edmonds, Emilie Gerbier, Katerina Palasis** and **Shona Whyte**, synthesizing more than a century of research into the distributed-practice effect – one of the most widely-studied effects in research on semantic learning. Language teachers and researchers wishing to understand the basic techniques and principles that promote robust memorization of new form-meaning associations will find many useful guidelines and conclusions in this clear and practical summary of a rich and complex body of research. The sections outlining a transition from laboratory experiments to more “ecological” classroom contexts are particularly relevant, and an important theoretical contribution of the special issue.
- 5 A more intimate, qualitative approach to foreign-language lexical learning is provided in the article by **Pascale Manoïlov** and **Nicole Divoux-Ringuette**. Their rigorous – and unusual – study of journals kept by a small group of adult French learners of English illustrates the learners’ growing understanding of the importance of vocabulary to their own communicative fluency and confidence. The well-structured English course they were following includes many metalinguistic components, and it is fascinating to read how this new knowledge (of lexical resources, learning techniques and even English phonology) influences and structures the learners’ engagement in their own vocabulary learning. Language teachers will be interested to discover the nature and structure of the authors’ activity-rich English course, which seemed to galvanize every member of their heterogeneous group of future French language teachers.
- 6 Another rigorous qualitative study is carried out by **Benjamin Holt**, who analyses lexical explanation sequences in the ISMAEL Corpus, composed of filmed interactions between tutors and adult learners of French during an online (distance) course. His theoretical summary of the multimodal dimensions of online communication is of particular use to researchers who analyze digital learning environments, or even face-to-face classroom interactions. Holt’s analyses show a wide range of strategies and techniques used by instructors and learners to scaffold meaning construction and lexical learning during these online lessons, and I was particularly interested to read the inventory of techniques used by the instructors to elicit their learners’ recall of new French words.
- 7 **Enhao Léger-Zheng** and **Olga Théophanous** provide us with an original study of the inferencing of word meaning during reading in L2 Mandarin, and the factors that influence word retention by the French learners participating in their study. The article begins with a useful summary of lexical inference in foreign-language reading, reminding teachers and policy-makers that although inferencing strategies are important for foreign-language reading (which inevitably involves encounters with unknown words), they are *not* optimal for rapid and robust lexical learning. To follow their participants’ inferencing techniques, the study uses a think-aloud protocol, combined with one-on-one post-treatment interviews and longitudinal tests of the knowledge of the words targeted in the inferencing task. The results show a mixed effect of “lexicalization” (the existence – or not – of a native-language equivalent for a foreign-language word) in L2 word processing: Chinese words that are also lexicalized in French seem harder to infer during reading, but easier to remember; and the forms of Chinese words that refer to new cultural concepts seem particularly hard to recall

over time. It is interesting that these effects contradict a large body of research on vocabulary learning through inferencing in European languages, illustrating the need for more studies of lexical acquisition in languages with non-alphabetic script, and the importance of semantic accessibility for robust memorization of new form-meaning pairs.

- 8 In response to our call for papers, we were extremely pleased to receive a number of proposals concerning the teaching and learning of multiword sequences, or formulaic language – a vital component of lexical knowledge and communication skill (Wray [2002]), which has not always received the attention it deserves in foreign language teaching methodology. The final four articles in this issue of *Lexis* deal with the analysis, acquisition and teaching of multiword units of various types: collocations, verb constructions, metaphoric expressions, and formulaic expressions containing the word *don't*.
- 9 This contraction is the subject of a longitudinal analysis conducted by **Amanda Edmonds**, **Elisa Sneed-German** and **Pascale Leclercq**, with French native speakers during their year abroad in an English-speaking country. Their article opens with a valuable summary of current trends in the field of phraseology, comparing “top-down” and “data-driven” approaches to the identification of multiword sequences in written and spoken discourse, and foreign-language discourse in particular. The authors’ meticulous study of the use of *don't* in L2 English by the five learners followed before, during, and after their year abroad illustrates the consideration of formulaic sequences from a combined perspective: both top-down and data-driven. It also constitutes a lovely model of research methods that can be used to study the emergence of lexical chunks, using fine-grained phonological analysis of an oral corpus as a means of analyzing the formulaic status of a lexical item, and the emergence of phraseological competence.
- 10 The final three articles in this special issue of *Lexis* are devoted to the teaching and learning of multiword sequences. **Catherine Fuchs** and **Sylvie Garnier** apply Adele Goldberg’s construction theory to the identification and semantic analysis of verb-noun (or noun-verb) constructions in written French for academic purposes. They propose an elegant three-dimensional semantic typology of *existence* verbs and their noun collocates that enables linguists, teachers and learners to understand *why* certain noun-verb constructions are formulaic, and others are not. The authors provide examples of the worksheets that they use to increase their learners’ meta-semantic knowledge, which clearly boosts their acquisition of these verb-noun constructions. Readers of the special issue who teach courses in academic language (in French, or other European languages) will find this concrete support material – and a clear description of how it is implemented – useful and stimulating.
- 11 Along similar lines, **Thomai Dalpanagioti** approaches the teaching and learning of metaphoric expressions by Greek learners of English at the B2 European reference level, using semantic-frame theory from cognitive linguistics. In frame semantics, lexical units evoke a frame, and the explicit analysis of the elements within this semantic frame can lead to better understanding and use of metaphoric expressions in a foreign language. Dalpanagioti gives concrete examples of structured metalinguistic activities designed around output from the *FrameNet*¹ and *MetaNet*² online databases for semantic analysis. She also argues that this type of metalinguistic work fits coherently

into task-based language classrooms, and gives an interesting set of suggestions for usage-based lexical activities.

- 12 **Magdalena Zinkgraf** and **María Angélica Verdú** analyze the acquisition of formulaic sequences by advanced learners of English in Argentina, as illustrated through their spontaneous use of a set of target expressions in written essays, over a four-month period (post-learning). One learner group received classic form-focused instruction on nine target formulaic sequences, while another group completed two dictogloss tasks (note-taking, followed by discourse reconstruction in groups). These two groups clearly outperformed a control group whose attention was focused on these forms in one learning session, without further practice. The interesting finding of their study is that the dictogloss group retained the target expressions as well as the group that completed SIX additional form-focused activities, highlighting the powerful effects of *receptive* encounters with multiword expressions of this type (since dictogloss involves intensive listening to discourse containing the target expressions).
- 13 Language-acquisition and teaching researchers will find useful theoretical summaries and interesting applications to incorporate into their own research methods in these pages. We invite teachers and policy makers to take note of the rich and up-to-date content provided by our authors, as well as their concrete ideas for incorporating lexically-focused activities into classrooms and curricula. Most of the articles deal with learners at a relatively advanced level of foreign-language competence, and we hope that a future issue might focus on lexical learning and skill at younger ages and less-advanced levels of communicative skill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDERSON Richard C. & FREEBODY Peter, 1981, "Vocabulary knowledge", in GUTHRIE J. (Ed.), *Comprehension and Teaching: Research Reviews*, Newark: International Reading Association, 77-117.
- ERMAN Britt & WARREN Beatrice, 2000, "The Idiom Principle and the Open Choice Principle", *Text* 20, 29-62.
- HILTON H. E., 2008, "The link between vocabulary knowledge and spoken L2 fluency", *Language Learning Journal* 36(2), 153-166.
- HILTON H. E., 2019, *Sciences cognitives et didactique des langues*, Rapport d'expertise pour le Conseil national de l'évaluation du système scolaire, *Conférence de consensus sur l'enseignement des langues vivantes*, Paris: CNESCO, http://www.cnesco.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/190409_Hilton-1.pdf
- KELLY Peter, 1991, "Lexical ignorance: the main obstacle to listening comprehension with advanced foreign language learners", *IRAL* 29(2), 135-149.
- KRASHEN S. D., TERRELL T. D., EHRMAN M. E. & HERZOG M., 1984, "A Theoretical Basis for Teaching the Receptive Skills", *Foreign Language Annals* 17(4), 261-275.
- MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION NATIONALE, 2012, *Programmes pour les cycles 2, 3, 4*, Paris.

NAGY William, 1988, *Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension*, Washington DC: International Reading Association.

NATION I. S. Paul, 2014, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

STAEHR Lars S., 2008, "Vocabulary size and the skills of listening, reading and writing", *Language Learning Journal* 36(2), 139-152.

TSUI Amy & FULLILOVE John, 1998, "Bottom-up or top-down processing as a discriminator of L2 Listening", *Applied Linguistics* 19(4), 429-431.

WRAY Alison, 2002, *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

NOTES

1. <https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu/fndrupal/>
 2. <https://metanet.icsi.berkeley.edu/metanet/>
-

AUTHOR

HEATHER HILTON

Université Lumière Lyon 2
heather.hilton@univ-lyon2.fr