

THE ROLE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Phraseological units, commonly known as idioms and fixed expressions, play a significant role in the process of language acquisition and vocabulary development. This article examines the cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical functions of phraseological units in enhancing learners' lexical competence. It highlights how the acquisition of idiomatic expressions helps learners understand figurative meanings, improve communicative fluency, and strengthen their overall linguistic intuition. The study also explores the relationship between phraseological competence and vocabulary expansion, arguing that exposure to idioms fosters deeper semantic processing and long-term retention of new lexical items. Furthermore, the article reviews effective instructional strategies that integrate phraseological units into language teaching, emphasizing the advantages of contextual learning and corpus-based approaches. The findings suggest that systematic incorporation of phraseological units into educational frameworks can significantly improve learners' linguistic proficiency and communicative competence.

Keywords: phraseological units; idioms; language acquisition; vocabulary development; lexical competence; figurative meaning; communicative fluency; pedagogy; semantic processing.

Introduction

Phraseological units, which include idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, and other fixed or semi-fixed expressions, form an essential component of any natural language [1]. They represent not only a significant portion of everyday communication but also embody the cultural, historical, and conceptual knowledge of a speech community. As a result, the ability to understand and appropriately use phraseological units is a key indicator of a learner's linguistic and communicative competence. In the field of second language acquisition, the role of phraseology has gained

increasing scholarly attention, particularly due to its strong connection with vocabulary development, fluency, and pragmatic accuracy.

Despite the recognized importance of phraseology, traditional language instruction has frequently prioritized isolated vocabulary items over multi-word expressions. Recent linguistic theories, including usage-based models and cognitive approaches, emphasize that vocabulary is learned more efficiently when presented in meaningful chunks rather than as single words [2]. Therefore, integrating phraseological units into pedagogical practices can significantly support both vocabulary acquisition and broader language development. This article aims to examine the role of phraseological units in language acquisition and vocabulary development by exploring their cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions. It also discusses effective instructional strategies and highlights the implications for language teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers. The study underscores the idea that phraseological knowledge is not an optional addition to vocabulary learning but a core element essential for achieving communicative competence in any language.

Phraseological units constitute an essential component of natural languages and represent a wide variety of fixed or semi-fixed expressions that carry meanings beyond the literal interpretation of their individual elements [3]. These units include idioms, collocations, proverbs, clichés, phrasal verbs, and other multi-word expressions that function as single semantic units. They contribute significantly to the expressive richness of a language and reflect cultural, historical, and cognitive aspects embedded within a speech community. In the field of second language acquisition, phraseological competence is increasingly recognized as a key element of communicative competence, lexical development, and overall linguistic proficiency [4]. Despite their importance, phraseological units have long been underrepresented in language curricula, often overshadowed by isolated vocabulary instruction. This article explores the fundamental role of phraseological units in language acquisition and vocabulary development, highlighting cognitive perspectives, linguistic features, pedagogical implications, and instructional strategies that support learners in mastering phraseological competence.

To understand the significance of phraseological units in vocabulary development, it is important to first consider the nature of vocabulary itself [5]. Traditional approaches have typically viewed vocabulary as a collection of individual words that learners must memorize and use appropriately. However, recent linguistic theories emphasize that much of language is stored and processed in the form of multi-word units rather than single words. Usage-based models and cognitive linguistic frameworks argue that linguistic knowledge is largely chunk-based, meaning that speakers rely on pre-constructed patterns and formulas that facilitate efficient processing and fluent communication. From this perspective, phraseological units are not marginal elements of the lexicon but central building blocks that enable learners to construct meaning more effectively.

Moreover, phraseological units carry a high degree of idiomaticity and metaphorical meaning, which often makes them challenging for learners [6]. Unlike transparent lexical items whose meanings can be deduced through constituent analysis, idioms and figurative expressions typically require holistic understanding. For example, expressions such as “break the ice,” “a blessing in disguise,” or “once in a blue moon” cannot be interpreted literally. Learners must therefore acquire not only the linguistic structure but also the cultural and cognitive associations underlying these expressions. This process contributes to deeper semantic processing, which research shows to be essential for long-term vocabulary retention. When learners engage deeply with the figurative meanings and metaphorical mappings inherent in phraseological units, they create stronger mental connections that facilitate future recall and use of related vocabulary.

Another significant contribution of phraseological units to vocabulary development lies in their ability to enhance lexical richness. Learners who acquire a broad range of idioms, collocations, and phrasal verbs are able to express themselves more naturally and precisely. Collocations such as “make a decision,” “take responsibility,” or “deeply concerned” show that natural language use relies on conventional combinations of words rather than random pairings. When learners fail to

acquire such combinations, they may produce grammatically correct but unnatural expressions that reveal their limited lexical competence. For instance, a learner might say “do a decision” instead of “make a decision,” which, while understandable, signals non-native usage. Mastery of phraseological units thus enhances both accuracy and fluency, allowing learners to communicate in a way that aligns with native speaker norms [7].

Phraseological competence further supports learners’ comprehension of authentic texts. Written and spoken discourse in media, literature, academic writing, and everyday communication is rich in idiomatic and formulaic expressions. Without knowledge of these units, learners may misinterpret messages or lose key nuances. For example, newspaper headlines often rely heavily on figurative language (“markets soar,” “government under fire,” “relations on thin ice”), and without phraseological knowledge, comprehension becomes difficult. Similarly, literary texts frequently employ metaphors, proverbs, and idioms that convey cultural insights. Understanding such expressions not only enhances language comprehension but also deepens learners’ appreciation of cultural values and perspectives embedded in phraseology.

From a cognitive perspective, phraseological units play a crucial role in the development of automaticity and fluency. Automaticity refers to the ability to retrieve and use linguistic forms quickly and efficiently without conscious effort. Since phraseological units function as pre-packaged chunks, they reduce cognitive load during real-time communication. Learners who internalize common phrases such as “I see what you mean,” “on the other hand,” or “from my point of view” can participate more confidently in conversations because these expressions help scaffold discourse. This chunk-based processing mirrors the behavior of native speakers, who routinely rely on formulaic sequences to maintain fluency and coherence. Research demonstrates that a significant proportion of natural speech consists of formulaic expressions, indicating that mastery of phraseological units is integral to achieving native-like fluency.

Despite their clear advantages, traditional language instruction has often failed to integrate phraseological units effectively. Many textbooks prioritize individual vocabulary items and grammatical structures, leaving idioms and collocations to be taught incidentally or as supplementary material [8]. This approach overlooks the fact that multi-word expressions are acquired differently from single words and require explicit, focused instruction. Additionally, learners may struggle with the figurative and metaphorical nature of idioms, which can lead to frustration and avoidance. Teachers must therefore adopt pedagogical strategies that facilitate both comprehension and productive use of phraseological units.

One effective instructional strategy involves contextualized learning. Presenting phraseological units within meaningful contexts—such as dialogues, narratives, or authentic texts—helps learners infer meaning more naturally and understand how expressions are used pragmatically. Contextualization also provides opportunities to explore connotations, cultural references, and stylistic variations associated with different phraseological units [9]. For example, teachers can present idioms in the context of stories that illustrate their figurative meanings, allowing learners to grasp both semantic and cultural dimensions.

Another useful approach is the use of corpus-based instruction. Corpora provide real examples of language use and allow learners to observe how phraseological units appear in authentic contexts. Through corpus tools, learners can explore patterns such as frequency, collocational behavior, and register variation. This data-driven learning fosters greater awareness of natural language patterns and encourages learners to adopt expressions that are commonly used by native speakers. Additionally, corpus-based activities can help learners distinguish between similar expressions and avoid common errors in collocation.

Explicit instruction in metaphorical thinking is also valuable. Many idioms and phraseological units are grounded in conceptual metaphors, such as “time is money,” “life is a journey,” or “emotions are heat.” Teaching learners to identify and interpret these metaphors enhances their ability to understand figurative language more effectively. For example, idioms such as “boil with

anger,” “cold-hearted,” or “burst into tears” reflect metaphorical mappings between emotions and physical experiences. When learners recognize these conceptual links, they can make better sense of new idiomatic expressions and expand their metaphorical vocabulary.

Further, classroom instruction should incorporate active practice through communicative activities, role plays, games, and creative tasks. Learners need repeated exposure and opportunities to use phraseological units in meaningful contexts to internalize them. Activities such as idiom matching, storytelling with idioms, phrase-completion tasks, and conversation prompts can help reinforce learning. Teachers should also encourage learners to keep personal vocabulary journals that include phraseological units grouped by theme or semantic field. This helps learners organize their knowledge and revisit expressions regularly, enhancing retention.

Assessment practices must also reflect the importance of phraseological competence. Traditional vocabulary tests often focus on isolated words, which does not accurately measure learners’ ability to understand or use multi-word expressions. Instead, assessments should include tasks that evaluate recognition, comprehension, and productive use of phraseological units in context. For example, cloze tests, paraphrasing tasks, contextual guessing, and applied writing assignments can reveal learners’ ability to integrate idiomatic expressions appropriately.

The integration of phraseological units into language acquisition also has significant implications for the development of intercultural competence. Many idiomatic expressions carry culturally specific meanings, values, and worldviews. Learning such expressions helps learners understand cultural attitudes, humor, traditions, and social norms associated with the target language. For instance, English idioms often reflect cultural values such as individualism (“stand on your own two feet”), pragmatism (“cut to the chase”), and optimism (“every cloud has a silver lining”). Understanding these expressions deepens learners’ cultural awareness and enables them to navigate cross-cultural communication more effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, phraseological units play a vital role in language acquisition and vocabulary development. They contribute to lexical richness, fluency, semantic processing, and cultural understanding. Mastery of phraseological units enhances learners’ linguistic intuition and communicative competence, allowing them to understand authentic texts, express themselves naturally, and engage in meaningful interactions. Despite their importance, phraseological units remain underrepresented in many language curricula, which highlights the need for more focused and systematic instruction. By incorporating contextualized learning, corpus-based activities, explicit metaphor training, and communicative practice, teachers can help learners develop strong phraseological competence. Ultimately, phraseological knowledge is not merely an optional supplement to vocabulary learning—it is a central component of linguistic proficiency that supports long-term language development.

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