

Approaches to teaching lexical phrases in a second language:

How research can inform practice

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with

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Or: How well do we learn from mistakes ?

Language abounds with various kinds of lexical phrases

Idioms: cut corners; back to square one

Collocations: make a mistake; tell the truth; slim chance

Phrasal verbs: turn up; figure it out

Similes: good as gold; fit as a fiddle

Proverbs: when the cat's away, ...

Aphorisms: better safe than sorry

Binomials: fish and chips; safe and sound

Prepositional phrases: at school; on purpose

Conversational formulas: How are you doing? No worries

Compounds: Life-long learning; health hazard

Etc.

Discourse is “chunky”

Are the numbers of boys and girls in families really down to the toss of a coin?

In fact, it's not quite so simple. You as an individual may actually load the dice towards a son or a daughter right at conception. The condition of mothers could be playing a part, according to some studies. Ruth Mace was in Ethiopia when that country was hit by a severe food shortage. As part of a study on nutrition she looked at the birth statistics of women caught up in the crisis: *“Mothers that had a higher body-mass index were more likely to have boys than girls.”* Why this happens is still open to debate. Valerie Grant says dominance in personality may also tip the balance towards male offspring: *“I've come to notice that dominant women tend to have more boys.”*

Knowledge of lexical phrases \leftrightarrow Proficiency

1. Because it aids receptive and productive fluency

- They make discourse predictable

As a matter of _____

Last but not _____

She's as cold as _____

- If you know them well, you can produce them from memory as intact chunks
→ positive correlations with speech fluency measures.

Knowledge of lexical phrases \leftrightarrow Proficiency

1. Because it aids fluency
2. Because it aids comprehension

Especially figurative idioms

Idioms = expressions whose meaning is hard to infer from the constituent words.

Examples:

cut corners; jump the gun; follow suit;

out on a limb; a wet blanket; against the grain.

- Knowledge of idioms matters for text comprehension
(Kremmel et al., 2017, in *Applied Linguistics*; Martinez & Murphy, 2011, in *TESOL Quarterly*).
- International students misunderstand their lecturers' use of figurative phrases
(Littlemore et al., 2011, in *Applied Linguistics*).

Knowledge of lexical phrases ↔ Proficiency

1. Because it aids fluency
2. Because it aids comprehension
3. Because it is a vital component of your expressive repertoire

→ Strong predictor of grades for productive tasks

- In speaking tasks (e.g., Boers et al., 2006; Saito, 2020)
- In writing tasks (e.g., Bestgen, 2017; Hou et al., 2018)

Especially the use of “sophisticated” lexical phrases at an advanced proficiency level

= **word partnerships involving non-frequent words.**

Combinations such as *commit atrocities* and *densely populated*

Metaphorical ones in particular?

Many phrases include words in non-literal senses.

e.g., *run a business; run risks; run an errand; run for office*

Use of metaphorical word meanings is another feature of advanced proficiency:

E.g., Hoang & Boers (2018, in *System*):

Correlation between writing grades and metaphorical word use: $r = .71$

→ Perhaps it is especially metaphorical phrases that are a feature of “phrasal sophistication”

Compare:

<i>A tall building</i>	vs.	<i>A tall order</i>
<i>A slim person</i>	vs.	<i>A slim chance</i>
<i>Pay the bill</i>	vs.	<i>Pay the price</i>
<i>Read a book</i>	vs.	<i>Read your mind</i>
<i>Break a glass</i>	vs.	<i>Break the silence</i>

Unfortunately, one can easily get them “wrong”

Examples:

?There are no doubts about it

?Let’s play it by the ear

?When I told her this, she almost bit my nose off!

?I’ve done a terrible mistake

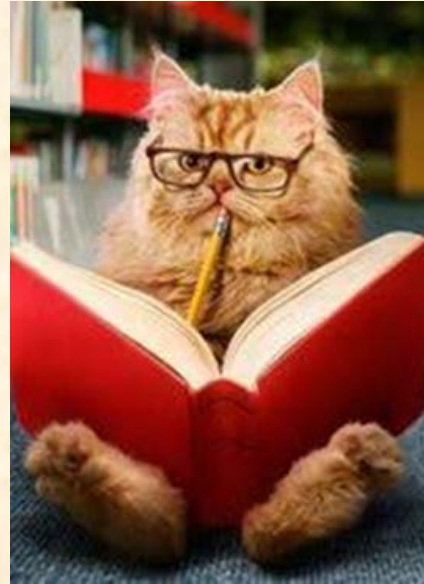
“Collocational accuracy” is a strong predictor of grades, too
(e.g., Crossley et al., 2015; Hoang & Boers, 2018).

What can teachers do to help students master lexical phrases?

Various things.

How efficient are those interventions?

= one of Frank's interests




Broad categories of interventions

- Modifying texts to make phrases more noticeable
(e.g., Boers et al., 2017, in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*)
 - Making phrases memorable
(e.g., Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009, *Optimizing a lexical approach*, Palgrave Macmillan)
 - Phrase-focused exercises
 - Fostering learner autonomy
- } today's topics, projects supported by FED and/or SSHRC



Broad categories of interventions

- Focused exercises  let's start here
- Fostering learner autonomy

Typical exercises in EFL textbooks?

→ Analysis of mainstream textbook series

(e.g., Boers et al. 2014; 2017, in *Language Teaching Research*)

Some popular books:

Headway, Straightforward, Inside Out, Cutting Edge, Total English, Interchange

Findings

- Exercises often require students to re-assemble broken-up MWEs
 - Textbooks often use exercises to introduce new MWEs
- **Trial and error**, followed by the answer key

Some typical exercise formats with a focus on collocations

Choose the right word to complete the blanks: **give, make, pay,**

- *My research team have been working hard, and we are confident we will soon _____ a breakthrough.*
- *The sales representative tried to _____ a demonstration of the efficiency of the new cleaning product.*
- *My husband just pretends to _____ attention when I talk to him.*
- *[...]*

Underline the correct verb

- *Can I **do / give / make** a suggestion? Let's talk about this again at the next meeting, when we've had time to think about it.*
- *She decided to **do / give / make** a sacrifice and give up her job so she could look after her ill father.*
- *Could you **do / give / make** me a favour and hold my glass for a minute?*
- *[...]*

Match each of the verbs on the left with the noun on the right that it often occurs with.

make

attention

meet

a suggestion

pay

a deadline

[...]

Find the odd one out

*One word in each group does **not** make a strong word partnership with the word in capitals. Which is the odd one?*

- *DO* *damage, harm, a favour, a breakthrough, homework, an exercise*
- *MAKE* *a promise, a sacrifice, an accident, a discovery, a suggestion, an effort*
- *[...]*

Let's find out how well these exercises work ...

Imitate these exercise formats in the classroom, and measure learning gains.

- pre-test
- exercise + feedback
- post-test two weeks later

Test format:

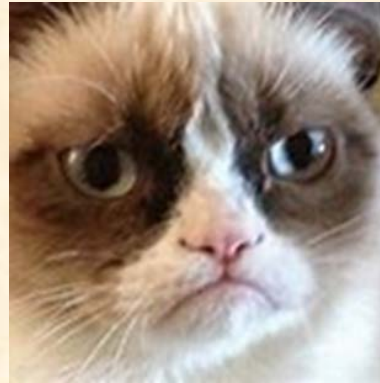
e.g., *My husband just pretends to _____ attention when I talk to him.*

How helpful?

Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead & Webb (2014), Stengers & Boers (2015),
Boers, Dang & Strong (2017)

A total of 20 trials with diverse exercise formats

Average learning gain: **16%**



See Laufer (2011) and Chen (2016) in *International Journal of Lexicography*, for equally disappointing results.

Why such poor outcomes?

Possibility 1: Simply too shallow

- no strong memories of the exercise items
- doing the exercises is a waste of time, but harmless

Possibility 2: The exercises cause confusion

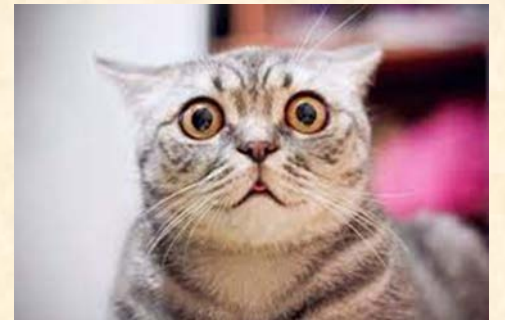
- students cannot remember what was right or wrong
- if so, the exercises are potentially harmful

A recurring observation

The distractors in the exercises seem to linger

Some examples:

- Correct on the pre-test:
[...] take a new approach to [...]
[...] keep a watch on the children [...]
- Options in the exercise:
[...] give / run / take an approach to ...
[...] hold / keep / take a watch on the children ...
- Wrong on the post-test:
**[...] give a new approach to [...]*
**[...] hold a watch on the children [...]*



So...

What are the chances of distractors lingering in memory?

→ Li & Boers (forthcoming in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*).

Participants: ESL students

Targets: 20 verb-noun collocations

2 one-on-one meetings with the researcher

Meeting 1

a. Multiple-choice exercise

Example Item of Multiple-Choice Exercise

Choose the correct answer to complete the blank in each of the following sentences.

1. Alcohol addiction can ____ a heavy toll on your health and can shorten your life by many years.

- A. have
- B. take
- C. pose

b. Feedback

Meeting 2

Re-visit the multiple-choice exercise

Example Item of Multiple-Choice Exercise

Choose the correct answer to complete the blank in each of the following sentences.

1. Alcohol addiction can ____ a heavy toll on your health and can shorten your life by many years.

- A. have
- B. take
- C. pose

Questions:

- Can you remember your response?
- Can you remember if your response was right?
- **Can you remember which of the verbs was the correct one?**

Let's first focus on items that were not yet known by participants

Any episodic memories of tackling the exercise item?

(e.g., "I remember this item; I think I chose option B")

- Yes: 66%

But did participants remember the correct answer?

- Yes: 38% 😊

- Would need to guess again: 41% 😞

- **False memory (believing one of the distractors was correct): 21% 😞 😞**

(reminiscent of Negative Suggestion effect in Cognitive Psychology)

Worse...

For the collocations that participants already knew when they first did the exercise, they could no longer recall the correct MC response for 19% of them!



Giving attention to distractors in a MC exercise → likely re-emergence in post-test?

= Question addressed in an eye-tracking study led by Deanna Friesen

If ...

selected-response formats such as MC can be problematic as a learning tool

then,

how about trying a constructed-response format instead?

→ New study (Li & Boers, in preparation)

- 56 ESL learners
- Meeting 1: learning stage and practice
 - Multiple-choice exercise or cued gap-fill exercises
 - Feedback
 - Gap-fill exercise as practice
 - Feedback
- Meeting 2 (one week later): Gap-fill post-test

Examples

- MC format

Leaders from many countries came to _____ their last respects at the late President's funeral.

- A. give
- B. show
- C. pay

- Cued gap-fill format:

The authorities have decided to s_____ new standards for health and safety at work.

- Practice/ Test format:

I told Bill to move the barbecue away from the hedge. I was afraid it would _____ fire.

Success rates ?

	exercise	practice test	post-test
Multiple choice	58%	73%	61%
Cued gap-fill	51%	77%	67% ($p < .05$)

Duplication of exercise errors in the post-test?

Multiple choice: 40

Cued gap-fill: 18

→ constructed-response format looks like the more judicious choice.

Perhaps we should not rely on trial and error so much

Instead: first present the lexical phrases intact .

→ subsequent activities then serve as retrieval-from-memory practice.

Li & Boers (in preparation):

Yes, simply giving students a couple of minutes to study collocations before practice reduces the risk of mistakes lingering in memory.

But remember: EFL textbooks mostly use trial and error...

Output-oriented activities don't need to be boring exercises...

Invent a short story about two people, Bill and Kate, and their relationship. You can work in pairs.

In your story, incorporate the following phrases that you have learned. Try to create your story without looking at the list.

Fall in love

Hit it off

Pop the question

Hang out together

So far so good

Get cold feet

In tears


Never again

See someone else

(an activity from Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008, *Teaching chunks of language*. Helbling)

(and in keeping with the Involvement Load Hypothesis, e.g., Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001)

Moving on

- Focused exercises
- Fostering learner autonomy 

One popular approach

Encourage “guessing from context”

Inferring lexical meanings

Some assumptions:

- It prompts cognitive engagement → leads to robust episodic memories
- Learners feel curious about the actual meaning → engagement with feedback
- It does not matter if the inferencing fails, because the correct meaning is established afterwards.

Sounds good, but...

- Inferencing procedures take much more time than simply giving the meanings. Are learning outcomes so much better that it is worth the time investment?
- Are wrong inferences really replaced so easily in memory by the correct meanings that are given as feedback?

Might learning outcomes be different for these two scenarios?

Correct inference + confirmation

vs.

Incorrect inference + rectification

What does the available research tell us?

Comparing learning outcomes: inferencing > meaning-given procedures?

- Mondria (2003): no difference
- Carpenter et al. (2012): no difference
- Elgort et al. (2020):
correct inferencing > meaning given
incorrect inferencing: no difference
- Yu & Boers (2023):
correct inferencing > meaning given
incorrect inferencing: no difference

A little bit more about Yu & Boers (*RELC Journal*, 2023)

- Focus on figurative idioms (e.g., *jump the gun*; *stay the course*; *pull your weight*)
- 3 conditions at the learning stage:
 - (a) meaning given + example in context
 - (b) example in context + inferencing + feedback
 - (c) example in context + with extra hint + inferencing + feedback
- Extra hint = a note about the original, literal use of the expression
e.g., *Jump the gun*: Origin = when an athlete starts running before the starting pistol is fired.
= “literal underpinning” (or “motivation”)

Some background about this extra hint

Examples of a learning procedure my Belgian colleagues and I tested many years ago

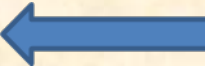
(e.g., Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004)

Origin of the idiom ***Throw in the towel***:

In a boxing match, if a coach notices his fighter is losing badly, he will throw a towel into the ring to signal surrender.

What is the figurative meaning of the following idiom:

“to throw in the towel”

- To stop cleaning
- To give up 
- To be confused

Recall

*Some of the classes at college were very hard. I was ready to throw in the
_____.*

Example study: Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers (2007)
(in *Language Teaching Research*)

6 trials, different sets of idioms (25 idioms at a time).

Productive recall post-test after a week.

Effective?

On average: **77%** correct recall



Back to Yu & Boers (2023)

Scores on a meaning-recall post-test:

inferencing from example in context + underpinning > meaning given

inferencing only from example in context = meaning given

← Inferencing may only be worthwhile if the likelihood of accurate inferences is high.

Additional observation: 13% of the wrong inferences re-emerged in the post-test.

← replacing wrong interpretations is not straightforward.

An issue with most such studies

They consist of a single learning stage followed by a post-test.

But good language courses should provide practice to consolidate new knowledge.

→ Need for a study in which the initial learning stage is followed by an exercise.

Will we find the same trend (wrong inference → poor retention)?

→ New study (Boers, Yu, & Wang, forthcoming in *Language Learning*)

- 56 ESL learners
- 21 idioms
- Meeting 1: learning stage
 - 3 conditions: meaning-given, inferencing, enhanced inferencing.
 - A counter-balanced, within-participant comparison.
 - Meaning-recall exercise, followed by feedback.
- Meeting 2 (one week later): Meaning-recall post-test.

Meaning-given

The expression **to put something on the back burner** means ‘not giving it priority, leaving it for later’.

For example: *As we cannot invest in all these projects with this year’s budget, we need to decide which of them we should **put on the back burner**.*

Did you already know this expression?

YES

NO

This expression comes from preparing a hot meal: A cooking stove typically has several burners (so you can use several pots or pans); the back burners are used for pots and pans that do not require immediate attention.

Meaning inferencing

What do you think the expression in bold means in the following sentence?

*As we cannot invest in all these projects with this year's budget, we need to decide which of them we should **put on the back burner**.*

I think it means: _____

[Next screen]

To put something on the back burner means 'not giving it priority, leaving it for later'.

Did you already know this expression?

YES

NO

This expression comes from preparing a hot meal: A cooking stove typically has several burners (so you can use several pots or pans); the back burners are used for pots and pans that do not require immediate attention.

Enhanced meaning inferencing

What do you think the expression in bold means in the following sentence?

*As we cannot invest in all these projects with this year's budget, we need to decide which of them we should **put on the back burner**.*

Here's an extra hint: This expression comes from preparing a hot meal: A cooking stove typically has several burners (so you can use several pots or pans); the back burners are used for pots and pans that do not require immediate attention.

I think it means: _____

[next screen]

To put something on the back burner means 'not giving it priority, leaving it for later'.

Did you already know this expression?

YES

NO

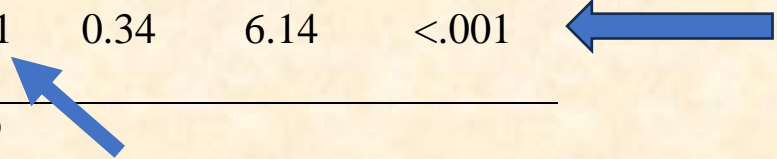
Post-test success

- Enhanced inferencing
> meaning given ($p < .006$)
- Inferencing
= meaning given ($p = 1.00$)



Inferencing accuracy \leftrightarrow Retention of correct meaning?

	Intercept	<i>OR</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Fixed effects</i>					
Intercept	-1.62	0.20	0.31	-5.22	<.001
Accuracy = 1	2.11	8.21	0.34	6.14	<.001
<i>Random effects</i>					
	<i>Variance</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Participant	0.65	0.81			
Item	0.84	0.91			
AIC	363.5				



Do wrong interpretations linger?

- 16% of incorrect initial interpretations re-emerged in the exercise
- 13% of incorrect initial interpretations re-emerged in the post-test

Again:

Learning from mistakes is not as straightforward as we tend to believe.

If time permits

Are there any quick and easy ways of helping learners remember lexical phrases?

→ here's one simple idea

What phonological property do the following expressions have in common?

time will tell, slippery slope, cut corners, a busy bee, better safe than sorry

→ Alliteration

What phonological property do the following expressions have in common?

steer clear, take a break, brain drain, high and dry, small talk

→ Rhyme and assonance

These have considerable mnemonic potential *if* they are noticed.

Simply directing students' attention to such phonological patterns helps them to remember the phrases

Example studies:

Lindstromberg & Boers (2008) in *Applied Linguistics*

Boers, Lindstromberg & Eyckmans (2014) in *Language Awareness*

Eyckmans, Boers & Lindstromberg (2016) in *System*

Eyckmans & Lindstromberg (2017) in *Language Teaching Research*

What we don't know yet is whether learners notice the phenomenon autonomously after being told about it.

Yeah, but alliteration is a rare phenomenon, right?

→ Let's read some dictionaries! (Yes, linguists can be weird 😊)

- about **20%** of the idioms in *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* alliterate/rhyme.
- about **12%** of multiword entries in the general *Macmillan English Dictionary* alliterate.

→ So, the phenomenon is in fact not so rare.

Words of a feather flock together 😊.

Alliteration across the board

baby boom; baby blues; ballot box

tell a tale; wage war; make a mess

curiosity killed the cat; that's the way the cookie crumbles

first and foremost; safe and sound

Good God! Trick or treat!

by common consent; a sight for sore eyes

Life-long learning; publish or perish

fit as a fiddle; cool as a cucumber

If you still don't believe me...

Take a look at Harry Potter

*Salazar Slitherin; Helga Hufflepuff; Godric Griffindor; Rowena
Ravenclaw; Bathilda Bagshot; Dedalus Diggle; Dudley Dursley; Piers
Polkins; Dinky Duddydums; Bertie Bott; Severus Snape; Parvati Patil;
Pancy Parkinson; etc.*

And Disney character names

Micky Mouse, Donald Duck, Peter Pan, etc.

Also movie titles, book titles, advertising slogans, names of stores, etc.

Research



Practice ?

- Research: Often brief interventions to isolate the effect of a chosen variable.
- Practice: Often a combination / sequence of different things.

For example,

- (1) highlight lexical phrases in texts,
- (2) make them memorable when possible, and
- (3) create opportunities for retrieval in communicative output activities

Suggestion

We could test the effects of different **ensembles of activities**.

Examine what combinations / sequences of activities work relatively well and see if a chosen variable makes a difference for the given ensemble .

→ A lot of work left to be done...



Some reviews about learning/teaching lexical phrases:

Boers, F. (2020). Factors affecting the learning of multiword items. In S. Webb (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of vocabulary studies* (143–157). Routledge.

Boers, F. (2021). *Evaluating second language vocabulary and grammar instruction: A synthesis of the research on teaching words, phrases, and patterns*. Routledge.

Boers, F. (2023). Approaches to teaching L2 formulaic language. In Chapelle, C. (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of applied linguistics* (2nd ed.).

Pellicer-Sánchez, A., & Boers, F. (2018). Pedagogical approaches to the teaching and learning of formulaic language. In A. Siyanova-Chanturia & A. Pellicer-Sánchez (Eds.), *Understanding formulaic language: A second language acquisition perspective* (pp. 153–173). Routledge.

Zwier, L. J., & Boers, F. (2023). *English L2 vocabulary learning and teaching: Concepts, principles, and pedagogy*. Routledge.

Thank you!

