Phraseology in Teaching and Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language in the USA

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to analyze the acquisition of phraseological units at the elementary, secondary, and university levels in order to develop a better understanding of the linguistic competence of American students in learning Spanish as a foreign language in Utah. After discussing the importance of phraseology as a fundamental part of the linguistic content in the L2 classroom, we analyze the most frequent phraseological units in L2 Spanish manuals and how students in the different academic contexts were able to identify their meaning in contextualized and non-contextualized settings. The results showed the importance of context in the identification of these phraseological units with a significantly higher percentage of accuracy in the contextualized setting. The study also addresses the important role that idiomatic expressions can play in teaching phraseology and culture thus enriching the sociolinguistic competence with diatopic variation as a core of phraseology.

Keywords: Phraseology, Didactics, Diatopic variation, Spanish, Teaching.

1. Didactics and Phraseology in Learning a Foreign Language

The large number of studies focused on different aspects of language teaching have also touched one of the most relatively new disciplines in Linguistics called Phraseology and this has become an independent field of study, known as Phraseodidactics. Thus, within the evolution of Phraseology research this branch was considered a loophole. Nowadays, this part of the didactics of languages has been of the utmost interest for European researchers [8]. Most of them are focused on new didactic materials, different approaches, and teaching methods in order to recognize these exclusive units and their recognition by also paying particular attention to learning the meaning and linguistic communication.

Native speakers acquire phraseology as they do with vocabulary, generally by “repeating, memorizing sequences and meanings of different structures” (Forment-Fernández, 1998, 341). However, the Common European Framework of Reference

for Languages reinforces not only the comprehension but also the use of most frequent familiar and everyday expressions for beginner students (A1 level). “Consequently, Phraseological units must be an integral and specific part of Teaching Plans for any foreign language (FL)” (Soslano Rodríguez, 2006).

“There is not just one tried and true ‘method’ for teaching phraseology” (Kennedy, 2008). There are some tentatives of including distributional information from a corpus in a language learner’s curriculum. This study has been divided in three different levels in education: elementary, secondary and college.

The Phraseological units selected are the ones from *Repase y Escribe: curso avanzado de gramática y composición*. (Maria Cantelli Dominicis. John J. Reynolds). This survey was taken by 80 elementary school students, 47 high school students and 138 university students.

This survey was divided in two parts. The first part was composed by 10 questions with phraseological units isolated where students had to choose their meaning, explain why they chose this option and say how often they heard it. The second part of the survey included 6 questions with phraseological units in context, in this case, students had to choose their meaning and the frequency of usage.

This survey took 20 minutes overall. It was presented to the students through Google Forms. In this case, we selected for ourselves the Phraseological units by importance on the manual and their inclusion in a lexical activity as parameters of frequency did not apply. These can lead to overlooking the kinds of semantic relationships associated with phraseology. As Wray & Fitzpatrick wrote ‘a learner-directed phraseology curriculum could be ideal, if it could relate the items to be learned and what the learner might be motivated to say or write’.

As Kisner (1994) and Ellis (1994) have argued, it seems that phraseology is learnt especially through implicit learning by unconsciously meeting multiword sequences repeatedly in context. The more we encounter these multiword units, the more fluent we become in retrieving and producing them (Byte & Hopper 2001). It is almost certainly worthwhile to use explicit instruction in teaching phraseology as vocabulary. This is the most common case scenario.

2. Phraseological unit case study

2.1. Elementary results

This survey was taken by 80 students from a Spanish Dual Immersion program from Second Grade and Fifth Grade (6-8 and 10-12 years old range). All of them are native English speakers, as an anecdote, some of them recognize Spanish as their native language for being in a Dual Immersion program and speak the L2 language all the time at school. Some of them recognized speaking to a limited extent in a foreign language at home and reading books. Most of them were studying Spanish for 1-2

years and more than 4 years. None lived in a Foreign country where the language was spoken.

According to the survey results, the phraseological units (without context) with the higher percentage of accuracy are: “Amasar una fortuna” (51.2%). “Dar la cara por alguien” (48.8%). “Poner los puntos sobre las íes” (46.3%).

The idiomatic expressions with less accuracy are: “Irse a la francesa” (20%). “Montar cachos” (31.3%). “A caballo regalado, no se le mira el diente” (32.5%).

The expressions in context with higher percentage of accuracy are: “Trabajar a destajo” (65%). “Ponerse blando” (58.8%). “Andarse con rodeos” (51.2%).

The idiomatic expressions in context with less accuracy are: “Casa que se blanquea, inquilinos quiere” (33.8%). “Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente” (36.3%). “Perro que ladra, nunca muerde” (42.5%).

When we analyzed the results of the survey, we saw the idiomatic expressions such as “amasar una fortuna” had an equivalent in English “to amass a fortune”. In this case, equivalences will be one of the most appropriate phraseological units to start with teaching in elementary schools. Followed by units like “dar la cara por alguien” or “poner los puntos sobre las íes” because they can be easily exemplified in a school context and reinforced with an image.

In this context, cultural aspects play an important role and students in elementary school know that in some European countries you greet somebody with two kisses. In this case, students identify the fact of saying ‘goodbye as a French’ by kissing on the cheek. It is also known that introducing vocabulary and expressions in context will help the student to understand and acquire any sequence.

2.2. Secondary results

This survey was taken by 47 students from different levels in high school. Most of the students (83%) belong to 15-18 age range and only 14.9% of the age range between 18-21. The rest 2.1% from 12-15 years old. In this case, we counted on more Hispanic students than elementary and college, exactly 59.6% of the students. Overall, students did not take Spanish in elementary, but they did in middle school and high school.

Most of them took 2 to 3 classes of Spanish during their education.

According to the results of the survey, secondary students achieve a higher percentage in the following phraseological units: “Dar la cara por alguien” (74.5%). “A caballo regalado, no le mires el diente” (66%). “No decir ni jota” and “Amasar una fortuna” (63.8%).

The idiomatic expressions with a lower percentage of accuracy are: “Estar en el bote” (14.9%). “Hacerle la cruz a alguien” (23.4%). “Irse a la francesa” (42.6%).

The expressions in context with higher percentage of accuracy are: “Casa que se blanquea, inquilinos quiere” (63.8%). “Trabajar a destajo” (61.7%). “Perro que ladra, nunca muerde” (57.4%).

The expressions in context with lower percentage of accuracy are: “Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente” (34%). “Ponerse blando” (48.9%). “Andarse con rodeos” (55.3%).

The results in high school were very interesting because there were more hispanic students. Equivalents still played an important role in unit recognition and common sequences. Nowadays in Spanish as “dar la cara for alguien” or “a caballo regalado, no le mires el diente” will be the ones we want to focus on teaching in our classrooms due to their frequency and popularity.

Some expressions as ‘estar en el bote’, ‘hacerle la cruz a alguien’ or ‘irse a la francesa’ are easy to perform in class or reinforce with a picture.

2.3. University results

In college, this survey was taken by 138 students at BYU. The two highest age ranges were students from 18-21 years old (43.4%) and students aged from 25-30 years old (47.8%). In this case, a minority of approximately 8% of the students are from a Spanish speaking country.

That means that a 73.2% of the students speak only English at home. The majority did not take Spanish in elementary school. Only a 32.4% had from 1-2 years in middle school and a 37% took 3-4 years at University. At least all of these interviewed had taken one class. As cultural data, most of the students serve their missions in Spanish speaking countries, which means that they lived there at least for a couple of months in contact with the language and culture.

Phraseological expressions (without context) with higher percentage in college students are: “No decir ni jota” (92%). “A caballo regalado, no le mires el diente” (87%). “Poner los puntos sobre las íes” (82.6%).

Units (without context) with less percentage of accuracy are: “Hacerle la cruz a alguien” (26.1%). “Estar en el bote” (37%). “Montar cachos” or “Irse a la francesa” (56.5%).

Idiomatic expressions in context with a higher percentage of accuracy are: “Trabajar a destajo” (92.7%). “Perro que ladra, nunca muerde” (90.6%). “Ponerse blando” (89.8%).

Phraseological expressions in context with a lower percentage of accuracy are: “Casa que se blanquea, inquilinos quiere” (79.7%). “Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente” (83.3%). “Andarse con rodeos” (88.3%).

In college, we can see an evolution in comprehension of the Phraseological units. The most accurate units are the hardest ones in other levels in education. Though simple

units, much more representative and easy to perform as ‘hacerle la cruz a alguien’, “estar en el bote” or “montar cachos” seem to be much more difficult to recognize.

3. Diatopic variation

This case study show us much more than how to teach idiomatic expressions, we can also take a step further to research the diatopic variation. The results of the survey show us that one of the hardest idiomatic expressions for students to recognize is ‘montar cachos’, which is an expression very used in Mexico. Also, the expression from the Spanish peninsula which is “irse a la francesa”. Or, easily to recognize for Hispanic students in high school the South American and Central American expression ‘casa que se blanquea, inquilinos quiere’.

Phraseology and culture are completely related. This should be an advantage for educators and learners. When assessing communication skills, the recognition and used of these native-speaker units are automatically considered as an indicator of fluency in foreign language learners. Phraseology research has specially challenged language educators to work out to maximize the exposure needed for learners to acquire phraseological units that cannot be taught explicitly. Thus, encourage students to autonomous language learning through watching movies, reading, listening to the radio, music, online, every possible way to maximize the exposure to language in use.

PU	Answer 1	%	Answer 2	%	Answer 3	%
'Poner los puntos sobre las íes'	Poner los puntos en todas	38.8%	Poner las cosas claras o	46.3%	Dejar de hacer algo y	15%
	las íes del texto.	42.6%	concretar alguna	46.8%	empezar a conversar sobre	12.8%
		10.9%	cuestión.	82.6%	un tema.	8.7%
'No decir ni jota'		33.8%		28.7%		37.5%
	No decir la verdad.	25.5%	Hablar demasiado.	10.6%	Permanecer en silencio.	63.8%
		5.8%		2.2%		92%
'De pe a pa'		42.5%	Saber algo de memoria	33.8%	Saber cosas básicas y	23.8%
	Saber algo desde el	57.4%	sin entenderlo.	17%	esenciales.	25.5%
	principio hasta el final.	78.3%		5.1%		16.7%
'Irse a la francesa'		40%		20%		40%
	Irse de un lugar y darle un	23.4%	Irse de un lugar sin	42.6%	Irse de un lugar y decir un	34%
	beso a todo el mundo.	21.7%	despedirse.	56.5%	adiós generalizado.	21.7%

'A caballo regalado no se mira el diente'	No me gusta el regalo que me han dado pero no me puedo quejar.	32.5% 66% 87%	Me gusta el regalo que me han dado tanto como a los caballos	41.3% 21.3% 4.3%	El regalo es tan feo como un caballo con dientes amarillentos.	28.2% 12.8% 8.7%
'Hacerle la cruz a alguien'	Bendecir a alguien.	26.3% 51.1% 54.3%	Marcar a alguien	30% 25.5% 19.6%	Odiar a alguien	43.8% 23.4% 26.1%
'Estar en el bote'	Estar a punto de obtener, convencer o conquistar algo o a alguien	40% 14.9% 37%	Estar a punto de atrapar algo o a alguien.	27.5% 31.9% 15.9%	Estar encerrado en algún lugar sin acceso al exterior.	32.5% 53.2% 47.1%
'Montar cachos'	Ponerse a llorar desesperadamente.	30% 19.1% 16.7%	Estar destrozado, con el corazón partido.	38.8% 27.7% 26.8%	Engañar o serle infiel a alguien.	31.3% 53.2% 56.5%
'Amasar una fortuna'	Contar mucho dinero.	23.8% 17% 10.9%	Producir mucho dinero.	51.2% 63.8% 74.6%	Usar el dinero que no es tuyo para tu propio beneficio.	25% 19.1% 14.5%
'Dar la cara por alguien'	Hacer el trabajo de otra persona.	33.8% 8.5% 9.4%	No tener vergüenza y obtener todo gratis.	17.5% 17% 11.6%	Defender o responder por alguien.	48.8% 74.5% 79%

Table 1. Table of idiomatic expressions without context, % of accuracy.

PU	Answer 1	%	Answer 2	%	Answer 3	%
Cuanto más lo pienso, más me enojo. Si vuestra relación está basada en la distancia, "ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente", ni te preocupes por lo que pase allá donde sea.						
	Me duele el corazón y los ojos de sufrimiento.	31.3% 25.5% 8.7%	No me creo lo que ven mis ojos, es mentira.	40% 44.7% 8.7%	Mejor ser desconocedor de algo para no sufrir.	36.3% 34% 83.3%
No me puedo creer que estén sacando todos esos casos en el Gobierno, al final todos los políticos acabarán en la cárcel. Sí, "casa que se blanquea, inquilinos quiere".	Todos los políticos han robado y como el dinero llama al dinero quieren más.	33.8% 63.8% 79.7%	Todos los políticos buscan nuevos inquilinos para sus casas.		Todos los políticos están en la cárcel por blanqueo de dinero y alquiler de casas.	31.3% 8.5% 9.4%
				38.8% 34% 11.6%		

Ernesto se puso muy furioso durante la reunión, empezó a discutir con todos sus compañeros de trabajo. Imagino que, "perro que ladra, nunca muerde" con lo cual podemos estar tranquilos.						
Ernesto se puso a	26.3%	Ernesto habla mucho,	42.5%	Ernesto nunca	36.3%	
ladrar y a morder	23.4%	discute mucho, pero	57.4%	hace nada malo, es	19.1%	
a todos.	2.9%	nunca hace nada.	90.6%	buena persona.	7.2%	
Miriam "no se anda con rodeos" si tiene que decirte que algo va mal, te lo diré. Me encanta su personalidad.						
Miriam no es muy	26.3%	Miriam es muy fuerte y	28.7%	Miriam es muy	51.2%	
sincera, le gusta	25.5%	rápida, siempre anda	21.3%	clara y sincera.	55.3%	
inventarse	5.8%	por los rodeos.	7.3%		88.3%	
historias.						
Mi padre siempre llega a casa el último, el pobre hombre, 'trabaja a destajo' por su familia. Le quiero un montón.						
Mi padre trabaja	65%	Mi padre no trabaja	18.8%	Mi padre ni trabaja	21.3%	
muchísimo y se	61.7%	mucho y llega a casa	17%	ni llega a casa a	21.3%	
sacrifica por su	92.7%	tarde.	4.4%	tiempo para estar	3.6%	
familia.				con su familia.		
Cuando David vio la aguja que el doctor tenía en la mano, "se puso blando" y le entró una sensación de hormigueo en las piernas.						
A David le gusta	20%	A David no le gusta ir	26.3%	A David no le		
ir al médico y	12.8%	al médico, no obstante,	40.4%	gusta ir al médico,	58.8%	
soporta cualquier	3.6%	es un valiente.	9.5%	se pone nervioso,	48.9%	
situación.				se mareo y	89.8%	
				palidece cada vez		
				que acude.		

Table 2. Table of idiomatic expressions in context, % of accuracy.

University %		Elementary %
High school %		Correct answer

4. Conclusion

These results belong to an ambitious postgraduate research where more than one manual was analyzed. The student progress in learning Phraseological units in Spanish L2 was tracked and analyzed. Also, this study shows the importance of context when teaching these idiomatic expressions and the importance of helping students develop habits for forming educated guesses. Burke (1998) claims that “knowledge of slang and idiomatic expressions is fundamental to nonnative speakers' understanding of the language that native speakers actually use” (p.5).

The study also addresses the important role that idiomatic expressions can playing in teaching a foreign language and culture, thus enriching the sociolinguistic competence with diatopic variation as a core of phraseology.

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