Tracing the development of phraseological competence

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Corpus studies have convincingly shown that language abounds in multi-word units which deserve to be treated as basic units of language. Any ELT practitioner will agree that multi-word units are increasingly given more attention in EFL/ESL textbooks and dictionaries. Certain types of multi-word expressions, e.g. collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs, are now routinely taught in EFL classes and used to develop language tests. Furthermore, learner corpus research has provided ample evidence of multi-word units in EFL learner speech and writing, e.g. De Cock (2004), Nesselhauf (2005), Waibel (2007), Chen & Baker (2010), Grigaliūnienė & Juknevičienė (2013), which proves that learner language could be analysed in terms of phraseology.

The aim of this presentation is to reveal how learners' ability to produce multi-word units changes alongside their general language proficiency. More specifically, the study involves a qualitative analysis of multi-word units in written learner English, represented by Lithuanian EFL learners at three proficiency levels: secondary school-leavers (B1), first-year university students (B1-B2) and fourth-year university students (B2-C1). A sample of examination essays has been analysed to extract manually all possible types of multi-word units, or formulaic sequences, as they are defined in Wray (2000: 465). Preliminary results suggest that the least proficient learners use multi-word units to mark discourse organization which can be exemplified by such phrases as *first of all*, *on the other hand*, *to sum up*. More proficient learners also use discourse organizers yet their essays contain occasional phrasal verbs, collocations and idioms, whose deviation from English usage correlates with the degree of fixedness: the more fixed an expression is, the more accurately it is reproduced by the learner and vice versa. The results of the study offer various implications for language testing and assessment, e.g. the development of essay assessment scales.

References

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