Incidental learning of figurative meanings of collocations from a semi-authentic novel: Three case studies

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There is little research available on incidental learning of multiword units from reading. It is therefore still unclear whether the amount of exposure needed to learn these units, called formulaic sequences (Schmitt, 2010) is same or different than for individual words. In case of single words, research has shown that around 10 exposures are required for a considerable amount of learning to occur from reading. However, the effects of frequency for multiword phrases are still rather unclear (e.g. Szudarski, 2012; Pellicer- Sánchez, 2015). Determining this number is therefore crucial, not only because it may increase our understanding of how repetition affects incidental learning of formulaic sequences through reading, but also because it may have important implications for pedagogy and material design.

This study looked at a particular type of collocation, namely those that have both literal and figurative meanings. We identified collocations according to a statistical approach (following Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013) and focused on the acquisition of the figurative meanings of these combinations. We then explored how frequency of exposure affected these meanings. In three case studies, learners read a semi-authentic novel that included 38 collocations divided into different frequency bands. One week and three weeks after the reading, meaning recall of the target items was tested. The measurement procedure was a one-to-one interview that allowed a good indication of whether learning occurred and how much learning there was (partial versus full knowledge).

Results showed that the figurative meanings could be acquired incidentally from reading, that the point at which a substantial amount of learning occurred varied greatly among individuals, and that more exposure did not always lead to higher gains. However, in general, frequency had a significant effect on long-term retention as the results were durable for at least three weeks after the treatment.

Keywords: collocations; figurative meanings, Incidental learning, reading.