LEARNING ENGLISH MULTI-WORD VERBS IN THAILAND

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1. Introduction

There is now plenty of evidence that formulaic language in English is difficult for EFL learners. The phrasal language of these learners tends to lag behind other linguistic aspects (Irujo, 1993). When they do use formulaic language, there is the tendency to stick with familiar and 'safe' sequences which the learners feel confident in using (Granger, 1998), although De Cock (2000) found that some formulaic sequences were overused, some underused, and others simply misused by nonnatives when compared to native norms. Given the difficulty of formulaic language, it is not surprising that some researchers have found learners simply avoid using these forms (Laufer and Eliasson, 1993; Laufer, 2000).

One type of formulaic language which learners tend to underuse is multi-word verbs (Siyanova and Schmitt, under review), which is a problem because they are an important feature of informal spoken discourse (Biber et al. 1999). Even if learners do not have productive mastery over multi-word verbs, they need to be known receptively, simply because learners will be exposed to these verbs when they communicate with native speakers or proficient L2 speakers of English.

The above research was carried out on non-Thai learners, but there is no reason to believe that Thai learners find formulaic language any easier than learners from other L1s. This paper will focus on how well Thai learners know and learn multi-word verbs. The objectives are to investigate how well Thai students know target multi-word verbs, to determine if Thai students clearly understand the meaning of multi-word verbs when they are presented in context, and to investigate the strategies Thai students find helpful to discover and to consolidate the meaning of

multi-word verbs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The population of this study was 21 Thai undergraduate students, of which 9 were male and 12 were female in the 19-22 age range. The participants were from various universities in Thailand, and studied a number of topics: Business (4), Engineering (6), Hotel Management (5), Humanities (1), Pharmacy (1), Science (3), and Social Science (1). The participants had a wide range of TOEFL and IELTS scores.

2.2. Target Multi-word Verbs

The multi-word verbs in this study were randomly chosen from the textbook, Word Power: Phrasal Verbs and Compounds (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003). Next, the list of the target multi-word verbs was refined on the basis of their high frequency of occurrence in two separate corpora. For frequency in spoken discourse (albeit somewhat formal), we consulted the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE).1 For data on predominately written discourse, we checked the British National Corpus.2 We identified 33 multi-word verbs which were relatively frequent in both corpora, thus assuring that the target verbs are frequent in both written and spoken English discourse.

2.3 Materials

The research instrument used in this study was comprised of four questionnaires which were distributed to each participant one-by-one in succession.

Questionnaire 1 used a 4-point vocabulary knowledge scale (Schmitt and Zimmerman, 2002) to measure how well the participants believed they knew the 33 target multi-word verbs:

1 I don't know this word.
2 I have seen this word before, but I am not sure of the meaning.
3 I understand the word when I see it or hear it in a sentence, but

I don't know how to use it in my own speaking and writing.

4 I know this word and can use it in my own speaking and writing.

Questionnaire 2 incorporated a 4-option multiple-choice test which provided an estimate of how well the learners actually knew the verbs, at least receptively. Each item included three acceptable synonyms for the multi-word verbs (many of which were polysemous), and one which was not. The learners' task was to mark the inappropriate synonym. In the following example, the unrelated meaning is rest.

work out

☐ plan ☐ find answer ☐ exercise ☐ rest

Questionnaire 3 explored how well the participants understood the meaning of the multi-word verbs when they were presented in context. The participants read the multi-word verbs in a sentence context, and then were required to describe the meaning of the verbs in Thai, based on their understanding from context given. For the following example, the Thai translation would be something like ระวัง.

33. You have to **watch out** because there are land mines all over the place.

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Questionnaire 4 investigated the learners' opinions about vocabulary learning strategies in regard to multi-word verbs. It was divided into two main sections: one for strategies helpful in discovering the meaning of unknown multi-word verbs, and one for strategies helpful in consolidating and enhancing knowledge of previously met multi-word verbs. The strategies were extracted from Schmitt (1997), and a 5-point scale attached each one, according to how helpful the learners thought the strategies are:

1 = not at all

2 = not really

3 = so-so
4 = quite a lot
5 = very much

The following examples show three 'Discovery' and three 'Consolidation' strategies.

What strategies do you find helpful to discover multi-word verbs meaning?

- ☐ Bilingual dictionary
- ☐ Guess from textual context
- ☐ Ask teacher to use a new multi-word verb in a new sentence

What strategies do you find helpful to consolidate multi-word verbs' meaning?

- ☐ Written repetition
- ☐ Say a new multi-word verb aloud when studying
- ☐ Connect multi-word verbs to personal experience

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 How well did the Thai students believe that they knew the multi-word verbs?

Overall, the Thai students believed they knew the multi-word verbs relatively well. The average reported score was 3.26 on the 4-point knowledge scale, corresponding to at least a receptive degree of knowledge (see Table 1). Of course, individual participants varied in their ratings, but one multi-word verb (set up) was reported as productively known (Level 4) by all respondents. Five others (check out, cut off, fill in, hold on, and make up) received ratings of at least 3 (receptive knowledge) by all learners. The least-known three multi-word verbs (put up, run on, and pass on) still received average scores of 2.43 to 2.62, indicating some familiarity with these verbs by the Thai learners as a group. On the other hand, there were 18 verbs which one or more participants rated as unknown (Level 1), but the overriding impression of the analysis is that this group

of Thai learners appear quite confident of their ability to at least recognize the multi-word verbs on the questionnaire when listening or reading.

3.2 How well did the Thai students know the multi-word verbs according to a multiple-choice test?

The above section discusses the Thai students' self-rating of their knowledge. We also gave them a multiple-choice test in which they had to actually demonstrate receptive knowledge of the multi-word verbs (Table 1). Although the learners rated their knowledge rather highly (see above), as a group they only scored 55.4% correct on the test. It seems that the learners do not know the verbs as well as they think they do. The test included polysemous meanings, which added to its difficulty, but it still only measured receptive knowledge (a productive test would have been much more difficult), and so we would have expected the learners to have performed better if they truly knew the words as well as they self-rated them.

Indeed, there appears little relationship between the self-rating scores and multiple-choice test percentages. This is apparent just by comparing the two relevant columns in Table 1, and finding verbs like pick up (with an average self-rating of 3.81 out of 4, but an average test score of only 14.3%), hang on (3.71, 28.6%), and cut off (3.52, 23.8%). This lack of relationship is substantiated by a Pearson correlation analysis, which showed no significant relationship ($p>.05$). Pedagogically, this overestimation of knowledge by the Thai learners may cause problems if they believe they can recognize/use the multi-word verbs better than they can in reality, because it may well lead to erroneous interpretations/usage. This also raises the interesting question of whether Thai learners overestimate their knowledge of other linguistic elements of English, or whether this is restricted to formulaic language.

However, perhaps we should not be too harsh in our assessment. Formulaic language is commonly acknowledged to be difficult, and the Thai learners did manage to get about half of the test items correct, which shows that they have substantial knowledge of the multi-word verbs. Considering that the test included

multiple meanings for each multi-word verb, this result can probably be considered a good start to the acquisition of a phrasal vocabulary.

3.3 How well do Thai students understand the meaning of multi-word verbs when they are presented in context?

The multiple-choice test scores show that, on average, the learners did not know about half of the 33 multi-word verbs. On the other hand, when given a context to guess the meaning of the verbs, the learners were able to produce a Thai definition 75% of the time. For 26 out of the 33 verbs (79%), the guessing scores were higher than the test scores. Some examples include pick up (14.3% correct on the multiple-choice test, but 52.4% correct when guessing from context), come along (19.0, 66.7), cut off (23.8, 95.2), move on (23.8, 66.7), end up (28.6, 71.4), hang on (28.6, 76.2), get on (38.1, 76.2), work on (38.1, 85.7), and put on (42.9, 71.4). For verbs like these, there is a clear improvement in percentage scores from the multiple-choice knowledge test to the guessing from context test. Furthermore, the three verbs which the Thai students rated lowest on the self-rating questionnaire were understood to a considerable degree when presented in context: pass on (self rating=2.62, context=57.1%), run on (2.48, 57.1), and put up (2.43, 95.2). It thus seems clear that in many cases the learners were able to use the contexts to successfully infer the meanings of the verbs. Of course, the Thai learners as a group knew over a little over half of the verbs already, but the bottom line is that a) they improved their scores over the multiple-choice test by about 20 percentage points when given context to use, and b) they were able to successfully give a Thai translation for 75% of the words which they met in a sentence context.

However, inferring the meaning from context did not always work; in the 21% of the cases, the context scores were lower than the test scores. This might attributable to the contexts themselves (they were only one sentence long, and there might not always be enough cues to guess successfully) or the tasks (the learners might have found the Thai translation task easier than the multiple-choice test for some items). It might also be because some of the verbs had multiple meanings. Learners who are familiar with only one meaning of a polyseme or

homonym do not easily abandon that meaning even though the word has a different meaning in a particular context (Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984). Some of the Thai students may have relied excessively on a primary meaning of the multi-word verbs, such as pick up = hold and lift up. When pick up was presented in the context in different sense (Women are also very quick to pick up emotional atmospheres in a room or building; pick up = become aware of), these students may have found it difficult to disregard the meaning they already knew, in order to guess a meaning more appropriate for the context.

Guessing from context is promoted as one of the main strategies for learning vocabulary in general (Nation, 1990). Although research studies to do not show impressive gains from guessing from context, there is good evidence that it can incrementally add small amounts of information to words which are unknown or partially known (see Nation, 2001, Chapter 7 for an overview). Some scholars have recommended it for multi-word items in particular, e.g. Celce-Murcia and Rosenweig (1979, cited in Moon, 1997: 61-61) and Wallace (1982: 123). This study provides evidence that guessing from context can also be used successfully with multi-word verbs by Thai learners.

3.4 What strategies do Thai students find helpful in learning multi-word verbs?

3.4.1 What strategies do Thai students find helpful in discovering the meaning of unknown multi-word verbs?

The participants considered seven strategies which are potentially useful for discovering the meaning of new multi-word verbs. Overall, the students appear rather lukewarm towards the 'Discovery' strategies, with an average rating of 3.46 (excluding Skipping, see below), a score very near to the non-committal middle of the 5-point rating scale. Even the top three strategies failed to gain particularly strong ratings: the use of bilingual dictionaries (3.67), guessing from textual context (3.62), and asking the teacher to translate or to give synonyms (3.52). The exception was skipping a new multi-word verb (2.57), a negative strategy included

on the questionnaire to check that the subjects were taking it seriously. We would expect this item to have a lower rating, and this is what we find.

3.4.2 What strategies do Thai students find helpful in consolidating and enhancing the meaning of partially-known multi-word verbs?

Similarly, we asked the participants to consider strategies potentially useful for consolidating or enhancing knowledge of multi-word verbs which are already partially acquired. The average score was almost exactly the same as for the 'Discovery' strategies (3.48), but we do find two 'Consolidation' strategies which were rated relatively highly: connecting multi-word verbs to personal experience (4.19), and using the target multi-word verbs which have just been learnt in real conversation (3.90). With the exception of these, the remaining strategies did not elicit strong feelings of helpfulness among the Thai learners.

4. Teaching implications of the study

This study suggests that Thai learners such as our particupants believe they know multi-word verbs better than they actually do. This positive attitude is probably a good thing, and when teachers point out the difference in perceived versus actual knowledge, they should not do it in a negative way. Rather, they can point out the need for further enhancement of the knowledge students think they already have. Using guessing from context seems a very useful way to do this, as this study shows that Thai learners can use context to determine meaning.

This suggests that guessing from context is a strategy worth addressing in the classroom. However, when working on this skill, instructors need to raise awareness among learners not to excessively rely on one simple meaning of lexical items, but rather to check for other possible meanings in the given context (Laufer, 1997). Also, teachers need to ensure that context is rich enough in cues to facilitate learners grasping the right meaning of multi-word verbs. Additionally, learners must know at least 95% of the words in the context to be able to make use of the cues which are available (Nation, 2001: 233).

Finally, given the relatively modest helpfulness scores for vocabulary strategies in general, it is probably worth trying to increases learners' awareness of their value. Teachers do not have time in the classroom to teach the thousands of words necessary to use English communicatively, and so learners will have to do much of the learning on their own. If they make effective use of learning strategies, they will be much more successful in this endeavor (Nation, 2001).

Notes

1. The MICASE can be accessed at:
   http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/micase/index.htm

2. The BNC can be accessed at:
   http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/

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Table 1 Thai students' knowledge of multi-word verbs

Verb	Average self-rating of knowledge (1-4 scale)	% correct on multiple-choice test	% correct guessing from context
break down	3.52	71.4	57.1
carry out	3.00	52.4	61.9
catch up	3.10	76.2	47.6
check out	3.95	42.9	95.2
come across	2.86	33.3	81.0
come along	3.00	19.0	66.7
come out	2.81	71.4	90.5
come up with	3.05	76.2	52.4
cut off	3.52	23.8	95.2
end up	3.33	28.6	71.4
fill in	3.90	66.7	95.2
find out	3.71	66.7	95.2
get on	3.05	38.1	76.2
get over	2.76	38.1	76.2
give up	3.81	81.0	85.7
hang on	3.71	28.6	76.2
hold on	3.81	66.7	76.2
keep on	3.14	57.1	81.0
look up	3.29	61.9	33.3
make up	3.86	57.1	95.2
move on	3.38	23.8	66.7
pass on	2.62	71.4	57.1
pick up	3.81	14.3	52.4
put on	3.14	42.9	71.4
put up	2.43	57.1	95.2
run on	2.48	76.2	57.1
set up	4.00	71.4	81.0

show up	3.33	66.7	95.2
send out	3.29	61.9	95.2
turn out	2.86	76.2	85.7
work on	3.14	38.1	85.7
work out	2.76	90.5	52.4
watch out	3.14	81.0	85.7
AVERAGE	**3.26**	**55.4**	**75.5**

Table 2 Thai students' opinions of vocabulary learning strategies

Strategy	**Average helpfulness rating (1-5 scale)**	**SD**
Discovery Strategies		
Bilingual dictionaries	3.67	1.15
Monolingual dictionaries	3.38	.97
Asking the teacher to translate or to give a synonym	3.52	1.33
Guessing from textual context	3.62	1.20
Asking the teacher to use a new multi-word verb in a sentence	3.29	1.27
Imagining a multi-word verb's meaning	3.29	1.01
Skipping a new multi-word verb	2.57	1.29
AVERAGE	**3.46**	

Consolidation/Enhancement Strategies		
Written repetition	3.00	1.18
Verbal repetition	3.29	1.35
Using multi-word verbs which have just been learnt in real conversation	3.90	1.18
Associating multi-word verb with its coordinates e.g. turn on the light, switch off the mobile phone	3.62	1.12
Saying a new multi-word verb aloud when studying	3.14	1.20
Connecting a multi-word verb with synonyms and antonyms	3.57	1.12
Taking notes in class	3.71	1.10
Word lists	3.00	1.34
Connecting multi-word verbs to personal experience	4.19	.75
Using imagination to build up picture or situation in mind to help remembering	3.67	1.32

Analyzing verb and preposition/ adverbial particle (remembering)	3.67	1.02
Using physical action when Studying	3.05	1.28
AVERAGE	**3.48**	

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