Introduction

Despite the widespread belief that multiword items (MWIs) are pervasive (e.g., Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Erman & Warren, 2000) and important for fluency and general proficiency in an L2 (Schmitt, 2004; Wray, 2000, 2002), they are often neglected in language curricula. There are several possible reasons for this. One is simply inertia. In some parts of the world the preferred L2 pedagogy still places a strong emphasis on grammar with little attention paid to vocabulary beyond single words. Nonetheless, there are likely other reasons that are more practical and less ideological and traditional. One is a lack of consistency in terminology describing MWIs, which makes them difficult for teachers and learners to fully grasp. Wray (2000, p. 465), for example, lists nearly 50 terms that have been used in the research literature to describe MWIs. Naturally, this variability in terminology makes it difficult for someone perusing the research literature to gain a solid understanding of the various types of MWIs and what differentiates them. As Wray (2008, p. 93) has suggested, “you cannot reliably identify something unless you can define it”, and MWIs have managed to evade consistent definition for quite some time (see also Wood, this volume).

To some extent, this lack of precision probably arises from confusion regarding what could be called structural vs. semantic labels for MWIs. Idioms, for example, are typically considered MWIs, and for good reason; they are typically composed of multiple words linked to a single idea or meaning (Sprenger, Levelt, & Kempen, 2006). Nonetheless, it is their opaque semantic qualities, rather than their structural qualities, that make them of theoretical interest and define them as idioms. There are relatively few structural restrictions on idioms, and as such they can take many forms such as verb phrases (e.g., to twist someone’s arm) noun phrases (e.g., the big cheese), prepositional phrases (e.g., between a rock and a hard place), etc.

Other MWIs, however, tend to be defined not by their semantic qualities but by their structural qualities. What typically makes a phrasal verb an MWI is not its degree of transparency, but rather its structural qualities as a verb followed by an adverbial particle or (sometimes) preposition. This observation notwithstanding, phrasal verbs are still often highly idiomatic
in nature (e.g., put up [with someone/something] or stick up [for someone]). Similar claims can be made in respect to other MWIs like binomials and trinomials. Many binomials will be fully transparent (e.g., black and white or bride and groom), while many trinomials will be idiomatic (e.g., hook, line, and sinker or lock, stock, and barrel).

Perhaps further complicating the situation is the fact that some researchers have approached formulaicity, which is conceptually (and practically) closely associated with MWIs, from more of a psychological perspective. Wray’s influential work in this area (e.g., Wray, 2002; 2008) is based on her definition of a formulaic sequence as “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (2000, p. 465). This definition circumvents issues regarding distinctions in structure and semantics entirely, and instead focuses on psychological aspects.

Obviously, there are no overt attempts to be deceptive or subversive amongst researchers working in these areas. Terms are being applied in a principled manner, and there is no reason why a phrasal verb, for example, cannot be simultaneously defined in terms of its structure and its degree of transparency (or possibly even its qualities as a psychologically unified sequence). Nonetheless, it stands to reason that the tendency to place MWIs into a single, overarching category that (at least partially) disregards qualitative differences amongst the different types of MWIs sometimes causes unnecessary confusion. Once the distinctions become a little clearer, we can start to see why labels for different MWIs are so often used in inconsistent and/or overlapping ways. For example, Liu’s (2003) list of the most frequent idioms in spoken American English shares a number of items with Shin and Nation’s (2007) list of the most frequent spoken collocations in British English, including expressions like in fact, as far as, and as well. In contrast, the online Cambridge Dictionary labels in fact as a discourse marker, and as far as and as well simply as adverbs. In reality, none of these labels are wrong; the authors have just approached the same structures from different theoretical and/or historical perspectives.

Nonetheless, this leaves practitioners (both teachers and materials developers) in the unenviable position of trying to sort out and explain to learners what constitutes a particular type of MWI and what distinguishes it from other similar patterns. One possible solution to this problem is simply to approach MWIs from a statistical perspective with the aid of corpora. This allows practitioners to compile lists of the most frequent MWIs in language while disregarding the sometimes tricky distinctions between types of MWIs and their associated ambiguities. From a teaching/learning perspective, however, this approach offers limited help. This is because it ignores important distinctions in types of MWIs (no matter how imprecise these distinctions sometimes are), and in doing so dismisses distinguishing aspects of MWIs that can be very helpful from a pedagogical perspective. Mastering phrasal verbs, for example, also means mastering the movement aspect of the adverbial particle, which is sometimes optional but in other cases mandatory (see later in the chapter). With collocations, on the other hand, mastery requires not only the issue of movement, but also an understanding that languages tend to prefer certain combinations of words to express a given idea, even if other configurations are grammatically possible and seem equally plausible. Furthermore, it involves understanding that “correctness” is a variable concept when applied to collocations. That is, while some word combinations are clearly preferred and others are clearly non-preferred, many others will lie between these extremes such that they might seem possible or acceptable to native speakers, even if they are unlikely or uncommon. It is for these reasons that it
seems reasonable to retain these distinctions with an eye on the fact that different MWIs will display different qualities that often lead to a unique set of challenges for learners trying to master them.

Critical Issues and Topics

In this section, I will take a closer look at three types of MWIs that seem essential for L2 learners to achieve even modest levels of mastery in English. I will start with phrasal verbs and collocations before moving on to considering idioms. My perspective on these MWIs will be pedagogical. Under this broad framework, however, I will start by considering what aspects of these MWIs are problematic for learners before moving on to some practical considerations regarding how they might be managed for curricular purposes and taught in the classroom. I will start by considering what are likely the most common and problematic MWIs for learners, specifically phrasal verbs.

Phrasal Verbs

Although phrasal verbs are pervasive in both spoken and written English, they are also some of the most difficult for L2 learners to master. Gardner and Davies (2007, p. 339), for example, assert that phrasal verbs are “one of the most notoriously challenging aspects of English language instruction”. There are likely a number of reasons for this. One is the fact that phrasal verbs are, almost without exception, massively polysemous. Furthermore, many of these meanings will vary in respect to their degree of transparency. The phrasal verb make out, for example, can be interpreted in at least five ways, as demonstrated in the following examples extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA: Davies, 2008–).

Example 1

1a I could make out a faint murmur.
1b If you’re expected to make out with a guy on the first date, then it can be creepy.
1c And to think he had the nerve to break up with me and make out like it was my fault.
1d Mr. Snow and other executives like him made out like bandits.
1e How’d you make out at the track, dear?

This is only one such instance; however, most phrasal verbs demonstrate highly polysemous tendencies. For example, in a corpus-based investigation of phrasal verbs using the British National Corpus, Gardner and Davies (2007) reported that the 100 most frequent verb + adverbial particle constructions had an average of 5.6 different meanings. Naturally, this level of polysemy means that even if a learner masters one meaning of a phrasal verb their knowledge may not serve them well in other contexts.

Related to this are issues related to the aforementioned lack of transparency for many of the meaning senses of phrasal verbs. White (2012) observed that there are no fewer than 21 different definitions for the phrasal verb go on listed in The American Heritage Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs (see also Garnier & Schmitt, 2015). Although some of these multiple definitions will be related semantically (see Ravin & Leacock, 2000), others will not. White (2012, p. 420) draws on the examples of go on meaning to start (he just went on Vicodin) and go on referring to turning a particular age (she’s going on 40). Although it could be argued that both usages refer to beginning something, White (2012, p. 420)
notes that “the relationship between beginning to take medication and turning a particular age is not obvious”.

There are also syntactic qualities of phrasal verbs that make them challenging. One is that adverbial particles in many phrasal verbs often closely resemble prepositions, and as such learners might confuse them as marking the start of a prepositional phrase. This becomes most problematic when movement is involved, since particles can be placed after the object of the phrasal verb (a regularly mandatory movement when the object is a personal pronoun), while such movement is naturally not possible for prepositions in prepositional phrases. This phenomenon can be seen in Examples 2 (particle) and 3 (preposition).

**Example 2**

\[
\begin{align*}
2a & \quad I \text{ picked up my brother.} \\
2b & \quad I \text{ picked my brother up.} \\
2c & \quad I \text{ picked up him.}^* \\
2d & \quad I \text{ picked him up.}
\end{align*}
\]

**Example 3**

\[
\begin{align*}
3a & \quad I \text{ picked on my brother.} \\
3b & \quad I \text{ picked my brother on.}^* \\
3c & \quad I \text{ picked on him.} \\
3d & \quad I \text{ picked him on.}^*
\end{align*}
\]

(Note: the asterisk symbol (*) indicates an incorrect expression or formulation.)

Other qualities of phrasal verbs that make them challenging are the fact that their use can vary according to register (Liu, 2011) and their ubiquity (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In respect to ubiquity, Gardner and Davies (2007), estimate that learners will encounter one phrasal verb for every 150 English words they encounter. Clearly then, the task faced by L2 learners and L2 teachers in respect to phrasal verbs is formidable. Nonetheless, there are some steps that can make the learning/teaching process for phrasal verbs considerably more manageable. A first crucial step is to reduce the learning load presented by phrasal verbs by lowering the number of items that need to be learned and taught, a task that can be aided by the use of corpora. Gardner and Davies (2007) observed that the 100-million-word British National Corpus contained a total of 518,923 instances of phrasal verb usage. However, they observed that more than one half of these occurrences consisted of “20 lexical verbs combine[d] with eight adverbial particles” (p. 339). Furthermore, they noted that about one-half of these instances could be accounted for by 100 specific phrasal verbs. In respect to the issue of polysemy discussed earlier, Gardner and Davies’ (2007) analysis revealed that these 100 phrasal verbs had 559 potential meanings. These are still sizeable numbers, but clearly within the range of what could reasonably be learned.

In an attempt to better understand potential effects of register on phrasal verb use, Liu (2011) revisited the issue of phrasal verbs using Gardner and Davies’ list, as well as an earlier corpus-based list compiled by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999). His investigation was supplemented through the use of four dictionaries of phrasal verbs. Liu observed that phrasal verb usage was significantly higher (per million words) in COCA’s spoken and fiction subcorpora than in the magazine, newspaper, and academic
subcorpora. Perhaps unsurprisingly, usage was significantly lowest in the academic subcorpus. Liu also generated a list of the 150 most common phrasal verbs. Although his list resembled Gardner and Davies’ (2007) list and Biber et al.’s (1999) list to a large extent, it also included additional useful information from a pedagogical perspective that highlighted the main findings of his investigation (like the dispersal ratings across corpora, for instance).

A more recent attempt to refine Liu’s list was taken up by Garnier and Schmitt (2015). Like their predecessors, Garnier and Schmitt recognized the potentially overwhelming learning burden posed by phrasal verbs and the need to identify essential phrasal verbs for pedagogical purposes. However, Garnier and Schmitt’s work makes a unique contribution by also considering the thorny issue of polysemy which, as mentioned earlier, presents one of the biggest challenges related to phrasal verbs. Garnier and Schmitt state their goal as reducing “the total number of meaning senses to be acquired down to a manageable number based on frequency criteria” (2015, p. 652). To achieve this, they drew on a number of sources, including collocational dictionaries, COCA, and human judgments. The result of their efforts was the Phrasal Verb Pedagogical (PHaVE) list. The list not only catalogs the 150 most frequent phrasal verbs, but also provides definitions for the most common meaning senses along with the percentage of usages covered by these definitions. By disregarding meaning senses that were comparatively low in frequency, Garnier and Schmitt managed to reduce the total number of senses for all 150 items down to 288, which is clearly much more manageable than 559 senses identified by Gardner and Davies (2007).

Naturally, finding ways to reduce the learning burden can help a good deal with phrasal verbs. Nonetheless, even once this has been achieved, learners are still faced with the other difficulties outlined earlier. Gardner and Davies’ (2007) investigation provided some potential solutions. From their corpus investigations, Gardner and Davies observed that the words like *out*, *up*, *down*, and *back* were usually used as adverbial particles while words like *in*, *under*, *by*, and *across* were almost always used as prepositions. This sort of information can also be imparted to learners so that they can at least make more informed assumptions regarding the likelihood of a phrasal verb vs. a verb followed by a prepositional phrase.

As far as classroom-based approaches are concerned, there have been a handful of attempts at evaluating the effectiveness of different techniques for teaching phrasal verbs. However, they have met with modest success. Nassaji and Tian (2010) investigated the effectiveness of two task types in two learning conditions on the acquisition of phrasal verbs. The tasks involved a cloze activity in which participants provided a missing phrasal verb and an editing activity in which participants identified a misused phrasal verb and corrected it. As for the conditions, Nassaji and Tian (2010) compared completion of the tasks both individually and collaboratively. The results showed better completion of the task in the collaborative condition, but no differences in respect to acquisition (as measured by a posttest). Nonetheless, they did report significant gains in knowledge for the editing task over the cloze task, a finding the authors attribute to a “higher degree of negotiation and scaffolding generated by the editing task” (pp. 412–413).

Another attempt to test the effectiveness of teaching techniques on the acquisition of phrasal verbs was reported by White (2012). Drawing on ideas from cognitive linguistics and sociocultural theory, White’s approach was to have participants focus on the “spatial sense” of the particles in phrasal verbs and to connect this sense “to the opaque or idiomatic meaning” of phrasal verbs (p. 425). Using a highly inductive approach, ESL
students were asked to identify, define, and create drawings depicting a set of phrasal verbs. These drawings were then shared with other students in the hope that they might promote acquisition and retention of the phrasal verbs. Statistical analyses performed on a pretest-posttest task showed a significant improvement for items that were evaluated in both testing sessions (specifically eight phrasal verbs ending with either the particle up or out), but no significant gains were reported for items for all 16 items used in the treatment. This indicates that there may have been a learning effect for the items that appeared on both tests, but that the teaching method as a whole did not significantly improve learning of phrasal verbs.

Given the lack of comparative teaching techniques in both these studies, and the lack of convincing results, it is difficult to conclude that either approach was particularly effective at teaching phrasal verbs. All we can reasonably conclude from these studies is that learners gained some knowledge of phrasal verbs through focused study, but it may have been the amount of study, rather than the type of study, that impacted learning. Nonetheless, given their importance and prominence in spoken English, it would seem prudent to include phrasal verbs with reference to the lists just described.

**Collocations**

As with multiword units in general, the term collocation has been subject to variation based in part on what theoretical perspective one takes (Barfield & Gyllstad, 2009). On the one hand, there is the approach that has developed since the advent of corpus linguistics in the early 1980s. This approach (e.g., Sinclair, 1991) relies on statistical measures of co-occurrence to define collocations. The operative notion underlying this approach is if a particular word co-occurs with another word (or set of words) much more frequently than we would expect given that word’s overall frequency, then it should be viewed as a significant collocation. The other view centralizes semantic issues in arriving at a definition of collocation. This view is associated with the phraseological study of collocations (e.g., Howarth, 1998). In this tradition, for a set of words to be considered a “true” collocation, one of the words needs to be used in an at least a slightly figurative sense. Thus, despite its common co-occurrence, a word combination like pay (the) bills would be considered a so-called free combination rather than a collocation, since both words are being used in their literal, core sense. A combination like pay attention, on the other hand, would be considered a collocation since pay is used in a figurative rather than a literal sense.

Where both camps agree, however, is in respect to the fact that although languages often provide a number of potential ways a particular formulation could be expressed, only a small subset of these will be seen as acceptable by native speakers of a particular language. In English, for instance, words like heavy and hard are frequently used to describe the intensity of rain, while strong and powerful are not. When it comes to wind or winds, however, heavy, strong, and powerful are commonly used, while hard is not. To some extent, this may be related to the semantic properties of the individual words, since it could be argued that collocational knowledge is in many ways an extension of semantic knowledge (e.g., Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2007, p. 74). Nonetheless, L2 learners will often not be aware of the finer semantic distinctions between near-synonyms, and as such collocational combinations may seem more or less random from their perspective. Compounding this situation is the likelihood that learners often import semantic information from L1 words to L2 words, meaning their L2 lexical entries for certain words often do not align well with native speakers’ entries for the same words (e.g., Jiang, 2000). One result of this is that learners often produce L1-like
collocations in the L2 (Wolter & Song, under review). Where there is overlap between L1 and L2 collocational patterns, this will likely not cause any issues. When there is a mismatch between the L1 and the L2, however, at best the L2 speaker’s collocational choices will mark them as sounding non-native like. At worst, it could lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication.

This situation is further compounded by the fact that because learners can often rely on word-based knowledge for comprehending collocations on a receptive level, they might not recognize a particular collocation as a standardized way of expressing a particular concept or idea. As Wray (2002) explains:

The adult language learner, on encountering major catastrophe, would break it down into a word meaning “big” and a word meaning “disaster” and store the words separately, without any information about the fact that they went together. When the need arose in the future to express the idea again, they would have no memory of major catastrophe as the pairing originally encountered, and any pairing of words with the right meaning would seem equally plausible.

Although subsequent studies have indicated that L2 learners are capable of recognizing common collocations in a manner that at least resembles holistic storage of collocations (e.g., Durrant & Schmitt, 2010), the fact remains that this compositional aspect of collocations can make them less salient to learners, which in turn may inhibit their acquisition. In short, learners often fail to recognize collocations as regularly occurring, routinized expressions, and while this may have minimal impact on them when using language receptively, it will have an effect in productive settings.

Indeed, research has indicated that productive collocation errors are common amongst L2 learners, even higher proficiency speakers, and that a key source of these errors is L1 interference. This was observed by Nesselhauf (2003) and Zhou (2016), both of whom investigated the causes of errors in L2 productive collocations. Nesselhauf, investigating the productive collocations of advanced learners of L2 English with L1 German, observed that nearly half of all the English collocational errors could be traced back to the influence of German. Similarly, Zhou, focusing exclusively on the productive use of the verb have by L1 Chinese learners of English, concluded that the learners “employed a literal translation strategy and borrowed L1 equivalence of a collocation in the production of L2” (2016, p. 49). Similar findings were reported by Altenberg (2001) who looked at the productive use of the English word make among advanced L1 speakers of both French and Swedish, and Wolter and Song (under review) who looked at the productive collocations of L1 speakers of Chinese for ten high-frequency English verbs.

In addition to potential problems caused by L1–L2 interference, another aspect of collocations that makes them challenging to L2 learners is their pervasiveness. This quality of collocations is similar to phrasal verbs. But whereas phrasal verbs tend to feature most prominently in spoken and fictional genres, collocations are found in abundance across all registers. As noted in the Oxford Collocations Dictionary, “Collocation runs through the whole of the English language. No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocation” (p. v). Nonetheless, it appears that some collocations feature much more prominently in certain registers than others, while other collocations can have different interpretations based on the register in which it is situated. McCarthy, O’Keeffe, and Walsh (2010) make this point in reference to the English collocation going forward. They argue
that in general settings, this collocation can be interpreted rather literally as an indication of movement through space. In business settings, however, they state that it is used to mean something akin to *from this point on*. Thus, collocations also seem sometimes to have an element of polysemy that is linked to register. Both of these qualities, specifically pervasiveness and variability across registers, also make collocations challenging to learners.

As with phrasal verbs, there have been attempts to identify the most common collocations for pedagogical purposes, such as Shin and Nation’s (2008) corpus-based list mentioned earlier. Such lists can provide teachers and learners with a good starting place. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine a situation in which a reasonably comprehensive, but still manageable, list of collocations could be generated. In addition to pervasiveness, one difficulty in generating such a list is the inherent flexibility of collocations. Whereas phrasal verbs behave more or less like single words, and as such a combination of a verb plus an adverbial particle either is or is not a phrasal verb, collocations typically vary in respect to their acceptability. That is, while some collocations will be viewed as definitely acceptable and others as definitely unacceptable, others will exist in a gray area where the collocation may be possible but unlikely. Compounding this situation is the fact that proficient language users will sometimes intentionally use nonstandard or entirely unique collocations in an attempt to create new perspectives on subjects. This, in turn, can create a poetic effect which can clearly be seen in many great works of poetry. One example is the final four lines of William Butler Yeats’ well-known poem “The Second Coming”:

That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Wore to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

This short passage contains a number of nonstandard collocations such as *stony sleep*, *vexed to nightmare*, *rough beast*, and *slouch toward [some location]*. Yet they serve to mark Yeats as one who has achieved great mastery of the English language rather than a person who is struggling to sound native-like. This situation with collocations, then, creates something of a double standard for L2 speakers, since their nonstandard use of collocations will often be viewed as an indication of lack of knowledge of collocational patterns rather than an expression of creativity. It is therefore important for teachers to allow for some level of creativity for collocations in settings where nonstandard uses might be warranted.

Nonetheless, there will still certainly be a number of situations in which L2 speakers generate nonstandard or even unacceptable collocations not out of attempts at creativity, but out of lack of knowledge. So it is perhaps not surprising that a number of researchers have endeavored to learn more about what leads to learning standard L2 collocations. One technique that has frequently been endorsed is simply raising learners’ awareness of collocations as a common and integral aspect of language, and asking them to attend to collocations in their language input. Lewis (1993), for example, has suggested that teachers can encourage learners to “chunk” texts by identifying multiword units such as strong collocations, a view that was later echoed by Nation (2001). Unfortunately, however, the empirical evidence suggests that this approach has only marginal impact on acquisition and retention of formulaic language, including collocations (e.g., Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, &
Demecheleer, 2006; Jones & Haywood, 2004). One solution that has been proposed is some form of typological enhancement (e.g., bold lettering, underlining, etc.). This approach has indicated that learners do notice enhanced collocations better than unenhanced collocations (e.g., Bishop, 2004; Peters, 2012), but as Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) point out, these studies involved some methodological aspects that limit the extent to which strong conclusions can be drawn.

The incidental learning technique that seems to have shown the most promise is one that exposes learners to the same collocations repeatedly. In one recent study, Pellicer-Sánchez (2017) found significant positive gains in knowledge for learners who were incidentally exposed to collocations (consisting of adjective-pseudoword constructions) either four or eight times in a self-constructed 2,309-word text. However, no significant difference was reported for the four-exposure vs. the eight-exposure group, indicating that the additional exposures had a negligible effect on learning. This finding partially overlaps with findings reported in Webb, Newton, and Chang (2013), who investigated the effectiveness of learning collocations through reading a text coupled with listening. These researchers exposed participants to collocations 1, 5, 10, or 15 times. They found significant gains in receptive knowledge of collocations that aligned with number of exposures for all four groups. Specifically, they reported gains of 27%, 33%, 55%, and 76% for the four exposure conditions, respectively. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, receptive gains considerably surpassed productive gains at all exposure levels. Other studies (e.g., Szudarski, 2012; Szudarski & Carter, 2014) have reported more modest gains through purely incidental exposure and enhanced incidental exposure (i.e., collocations presented with textual enhancement). Nonetheless the research as a whole suggests that repetition of exposure can improve collocational learning. In this respect, as Pellicer-Sánchez (2017) points out, incidental learning of collocations seems akin to incidental learning of individual words.

Other researchers have looked at the efficacy of various explicit forms of teaching collocation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most studies have found that learners do show gains in collocational knowledge from explicit instruction. However, there are some factors that seem to increase (or lessen) the effectiveness of such instruction. Laufer and Girsai (2008), for example, investigated the learning of collocations in three conditions: meaning-focused instruction, form-focused instruction, and contrastive analysis and translation. They reported significantly higher gains, both immediate and delayed, for the contrastive analysis and translation group. They attributed these findings to the hypotheses of “noticing”, “pushed-output”, and “task-induced involvement”. In terms of repetition in explicit learning, Peters (2014), found better and more durable gains in collocational knowledge for learners who took part in activities that had a greater number of repetitions. However, she noted that single words were retained better than collocations, indicating that single words were still easier to learn. In contrast to these positive findings regarding explicit learning, Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead, and Webb (2014) tested the effectiveness of three matching exercises for verb-noun collocations. They reported minimal gains in knowledge, and suggested that matching exercises might even be detrimental due to learners developing memory traces for false connections. Overall, the research indicates that explicit learning can be effective, but some approaches are more effective than others.

Aside from types of instruction, there seem to be qualities of collocations themselves that tend to make them easier or more difficult to learn. One quality that has been shown time and again to affect learning is congruency vs. incongruency (see Peters, 2014).
Congruency describes a situation in which the collocation has an equivalent form in the learner’s L1 (e.g., *strong wind* for an L1 Japanese learner who has the same word-for-word collocation of *tsuyoi kaze* in Japanese). Incongruency occurs when there is no direct, word-for-word translation in the L1 (e.g., *high wind(s)*, which would translate into the infelicitous *takii kaze* in Japanese). In fact, research investigating L2 processing of congruent vs. incongruent collocations has shown a consistent advantage for congruent collocations, even amongst high-proficiency learners (e.g., Wolter & Gyllstad, 2011, 2013; Wolter & Yamashita, 2017), indicating that this phenomenon might have a psychological basis. In addition to congruency, Webb and Kagimoto (2011) reported that collocations for node words with a higher number of collocates were easier to learn than collocations for node words with fewer collocates. Synonymy, however, had the opposite effect; it was harder to learn synonymous collocations together than it was to learn unrelated collocations. Finally, Peters (2016) reported that adjective-noun collocations were easier to learn than verb-noun collocations.

Unfortunately, the research to date has focused mostly on receptive learning, with productive knowledge of collocations being tested far less frequently. Furthermore, when productive knowledge is tested, it tends to be assessed in rather restricted tasks, such as supplying one word of a two-word collocation in a fill-in-the-gap type exercise. While these sorts of restrictions are helpful from an empirical standpoint, they also limit our understanding of how learners approach collocations in more authentic, productive scenarios. Perhaps ironically, a key to understanding how learners formulate productive collocations might involve stepping away from a focus on collocations as MWIs, and instead focusing our attention on the semantic properties of the node words in collocations. As noted previously, research into L2 vocabulary acquisition has indicated that learners regularly transfer semantic and conceptual information from L1 words to their L2 lexical entries (Jiang, 2000; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2010). When there is a very close match in semantics between an L1 word and its (so-called) L2 equivalent, this sort of transfer poses no major problems. However, this is frequently not the case, and in many cases there will be misalignment between L2 words and their common translations in the L2. Wolter (2006) for example, mentioned how Japanese-English dictionaries frequently provide a definition of *narrow* to the Japanese word *semai* and a definition of *wide* to the Japanese word *hiroi*. Nonetheless, these pairs of words are far from equivalent. *Semi* means not only *narrow*, but also *small or crowded* (e.g., with many things) in general. A similar pattern exists for *hiroi* which can be used to refer not only to wide things, but large things in general. Nonetheless, learners are often unaware of such discrepancies, and as such L1 Japanese speakers of L2 English have a tendency to produce collocations such as *narrow room* in English when *small room* would in fact be more appropriate (see also Wolter, Yamashita, & Leung, in preparation).

From a teaching and learning perspective, these results indicate that it might be useful (when possible) for teachers to point out differences in meaning between L1 words and their typical L2 translations in the hope that learners will be able to modify their understanding of the L2 words and ultimately produce more native-like collocations. This view is echoed by Liu (2010), who advocates having students, with the help of corpora, overtly focus their attention on why one keyword is chosen in place of seemingly plausible alternatives (e.g., *make a mistake* vs. *take or do a mistake*). He argues that this sort of activity not only helps learners understand which collocations are preferred in their L2, but also helps them to refine their understanding of the component words.
Overall, the research to date indicates that there are several factors that might influence the learning (and learnability) of collocations in an L2. However, simply asking learners to “chunk” or pay attention to longer stretches of language, such as collocations, might not be particularly effective. Instead, it seems the best approach is one that uses either carefully structured incidental reading activities, explicit instruction, or perhaps a combination of the two. If incidental approaches are used, then textual enhancement combined with repetition might be the most effective. If a teacher opts for a more explicit approach, then care should be taken to design activities that are going to be effective and, obviously, avoid activities, such as matching exercises, that might in fact be detrimental through the false input they provide. As far as productive training is concerned, our knowledge of this still lags behind what we know about receptive training. Nonetheless, it appears that focusing on semantic distinctions between L1 and L2 words, or various potential L2 words, may provide a useful method. One advantage of this is it has the potential to influence the range of collocations for a particular node word, which would likely be more efficient than teaching and learning collocations one at a time.

Idioms

As noted previously, idiomaticity is a quality that affects language at all grain sizes. Indeed, some researchers (e.g., Cooper, 1998) believe that even common metaphorical extensions of single words classify these words as idioms (e.g., the verb weigh in the expression weigh a decision). Wherever one chooses to draw the line between idiomatic and non-idiomatic, however, most researchers in this area would agree that there are qualities of idioms that distinguish them from other MWIs, and as such they deserve classification, recognition, and analysis as a separate category. Furthermore, most (if not all) researchers would agree that idioms display variations in two key ways: degree of idiomaticity and level of fixedness.

To account for variations in idiomaticity, several researchers have proposed frameworks for classifying idioms (and sometimes other MWIs) according to variations in semantic opacity. Howarth (1998), for example, described a continuum that classified MWIs into four categories: free combinations, collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms (see preceding for Howarth’s distinction between free combinations and collocations). Figurative idioms are expressions that have both a literal and figurative expression (e.g., under the microscope), while pure idioms are expressions that are purely figurative and have no obvious literal interpretation (e.g., under the weather). Similar categorizations for idioms were proposed by Fernando (1996, p. 32) who used the terms “literal”, “semiliteral”, and “pure”.

At first glance, these distinctions may seem more important for lexicographers and semanticists than for teachers and materials developers. However, there are clearly pedagogical implications as well. If one takes an extremely conservative approach in defining idioms, as has historically been the case in Chomskyan (1965) approaches to language, then pure idioms, and possibly some figurative/semiliteral idioms, would be the only truly idiomatic expressions. And as these are comparatively rare, and often not entirely necessary for effective expression, one might conclude that they should be reserved for upper intermediate and advanced learners of English as an L2 (to use one such idiom, the icing on the cake). However, if a more moderate (and probably more grounded) view is taken,
then it soon becomes apparent that idioms need to be learned from a fairly early stage in L2 development.

The learning challenges posed by idioms are obvious and in line with challenges posed by the other MWIs reviewed in this chapter thus far. The first concern is dealing with opacity and the fact that many learners will have been trained to use a so-called words and rules approach in deciphering language. This renders interpretation of many idioms challenging, particularly when the context is insufficient in promoting successful inference. In many cases, then, idioms will have to be learned as separate lexical items with a fairly unique meaning assigned to them. Of course, many idioms will have a more literal equivalent expression, which will express more or less the same meaning. So learning idioms also involves learning how they are different in nuance from their literal equivalent, as well as potential register restrictions that may vary from idiom to idiom. Some idioms will be mostly used in informal registers while others will find their way into a number of different registers. Another similarity with idioms (and the other MWIs addressed here) is in respect to uncovering which idioms are essential for learners and which can be left to later in their learning experience. Jackendoff (1997) estimated that there are no fewer than 25,000 idioms in the English language, which clearly represents an unobtainable goal for most L2 learners (and perhaps native speakers). Furthermore, Liu (2003) points out that there are often considerable regional differences in idiom use, no doubt due in no small part to the fact that idiomatic expressions are tightly connected with the cultures that spawn them (e.g., the number of baseball-related idioms in American English), which makes a fully universal approach difficult to realize. Indeed, perhaps more than any other aspect of language, idioms are highly representative of and deeply ingrained in the culture(s) in which they are used.

In addition to opacity, number, and the cultural aspects, another potential problem area for idioms is their propensity to vary in terms of fixedness. As is well documented (e.g., Moon, 1998) some idioms are entirely fixed expressions with no room for lexical variation. Idiomatic expressions like *kick the bucket, under the weather, shooting fish in a barrel, and between a rock and a hard place* are seemingly not open to lexical variation, and failure to recognize this will, for most native speakers, instantly flag a person as a non-native speaker (e.g., *punt the bucket or *between a stone and a hard place*). Others, however, allow for greater flexibility. Based on a corpus analysis, Moon (1998) estimated that around 40% of idioms and fixed expressions in English allowed for some form of variation. Nonetheless, these variations can also sometimes be limited, as in *beat/flog a dead horse, or up/raise the ante/stakes*, which have slots that usually vary in one of two ways. Other idioms that show greater variability include *have (one’s) cake and eat it too*, which is amenable to all possessive pronouns.

Idioms in L2 learning/teaching contexts have been extensively researched for quite some time. Unsurprisingly, a first step is to reduce the number of idioms to a more manageable number. Many major publishers have dictionaries of idioms, but these are still extensive, and as such only provide partial relief to the sizeable learning burden. It is with this in mind that some researchers have endeavored to create more manageable corpus-based lists that learners and teachers can reference for pedagogical purposes. One such list is Liu’s (2003) aforementioned collection of the 100 most frequent idioms in spoken American English. Although this approach provides an excellent starting point, it is no doubt insufficient beyond the most basic levels of proficiency.

Other strategies that have been proposed include using a word-based approach for high frequency words that appear to be rather “idiom prone” McCarthy et al. (2010, p. 66).
These include body parts like the hands, feet, and eyes that work their way into a wide range of idioms. In their *Idioms in Use* course book series, McCarthy and O’Dell (2002) group many idioms according to themes to help learners recognize (and presumably remember) sets of related expressions. These groupings include idioms based on sailing, war and conflict, games and sports, science and technology, etc. Approaching idioms in this way may help learners come to grips with not only the large range of idiomatic expressions, but also some of the historical and circumstantial conditions that gave rise to these idioms.

Others have called for a rather comprehensive approach to teaching L2 idioms. Both Liu (2008) and Liontas (2015) suggest that idioms are best learned through approaches that draw heavily on contextualized presentation coupled with a deeper understanding of the target language culture that gave rise to the idioms. Both also advocate an approach that provides structured presentation of idioms, yet encourages consciousness-raising and other discovery-based activities. The goal in both cases, it seems, is getting learners to develop autonomic skills that will allow them to recognize idioms without explicit instruction, internalize them, and finally be able to deploy them effectively in their own language use. Liontas (2015, p. 623) refers to this final stage as “idiomatic competence”, which he defines as “the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort”. Although such approaches may very well represent the best way to obtain a native-like understanding of idioms, they are likely not practical in many teaching/learning scenarios. This may especially be the case in EFL settings where there is limited exposure to input in the target language and likely even less exposure to the target language culture. (Indeed, Liontas (2015, p. 627) himself suggests that the “development of idiomatic competence is an arduous and cumbersome process that extends over many years”.)

Nonetheless there are some aspects of these approaches that seem relevant to all learners. One such factor is the role of context. In a recent study focusing on L1 English speakers learning L2 Korean, Türker (2016a) investigated the influence of context on three types of idioms: (1) idioms with the same form and the same meaning (e.g., *to catch one’s eye*, which has the same composition and same meaning in Korean), (2) idioms with the same form but a different meaning (e.g., *to have a heart*, which has the same composition in Korean but means to be willing to do something, rather than to have compassion or kindness as it does in English), and (3) idioms that had no formal equivalent in the learners’ L1. She found that the benefits of linguistic similarity in idiom learning were greatly lessened when sufficient contexts were provided. This finding resonates with Cooper’s (1999) observation that learners tended to rely more heavily on contextual cues (28% of the time) than L1-based assumptions (5% of the time) when trying to determine the meaning of idioms in an L2.

Türker’s (2016a) and Cooper’s (1999) findings underscore the oftentimes complex interaction between the L1 and the L2 when it comes to idiom learning. Though it has been shown in some studies that idiomatic congruency (i.e., having the same idiom in one’s L1) can play a facilitative role for L2 idiom learning (e.g., Irujo, 1986; Laufer, 2000; Türker, 2016b), learners have also shown a reluctance to apply L1-based assumptions too liberally. Laufer (2000), for example, found greater avoidance for idioms with partial form similarity (e.g., the English idiom *miss the boat* and its Hebrew equivalent *miss the train*) than idioms which had either exact translations in both English and Hebrew or idioms which were entirely formally distinct in the L1 and the L2 (e.g., English *to take someone
for a ride vs. Hebrew to work on someone). This tendency to avoid excessive reliance on the L1 when attempting to decipher L2 idioms is likely conditioned, at least in part, by a learner’s psychotypology (i.e., a learner’s perceptions about the transferability of L1 forms to the L2, regardless of the accuracy of these assumptions). Most learners have perceptions about idiomaticity in their own language, which in turn makes them reluctant to assume similarity between idioms in the L1 and the L2. This was demonstrated by Kellerman (1979) who asked L1 Dutch learners of L2 English to judge the acceptability of number of English translations for Dutch sentences. All sentences included the Dutch word broken and its English translation of break, and all sentences were possible in both languages. Nonetheless, Kellerman found that the participants showed a strong reluctance to assume transferability for sentences that used non-core (i.e., more idiomatic) instances of broken/break (e.g., the underground resistance was broken; some workers have broken the strike; his voice broke when he was 13). It is worth noting, however, that learners and teachers may not always have the same perspectives on semantic transparency and subsequent transferability. Boers and Webb (2015), for example, found that there was often considerable disagreement between teachers and advanced learners regarding which expressions they considered to be transparent vs. opaque. This suggests that teachers should make a point of consulting students before investing a good deal of time and energy to the study of idioms.

Overall, then, it seems that from a teaching and learning perspective, approaches which present idioms in highly contextualized materials are likely to be more effective than those that rely on isolated presentation. Nonetheless, other factors have been shown to influence learners’ tendency to remember L2 idioms. One such factor is phonological redundancy built into many English idiomatic expressions. Eyckmans and Lindstromberg (2017) found that idioms with repetition of sounds (both in the form of alliteration and assonance) were learned better than idioms with no such repetition (see also Boers, Lindstromberg, & Eyckmans, 2013; Boers, Lindstromberg, & Webb, 2014). However, this was only the case if the learners were made aware of sound repetitions during the treatment phase of the study; no such finding was reported for a control group who received no awareness training or attention direction. Given the observation that English idioms tend to incorporate alliteration and assonance more than we would expect by chance (Eyckmans & Lindstromberg, 2017), it seems prudent for practitioners to take advantage of this to lessen the challenging task of learning a wide array of idioms.

Future Directions

One thing that should be evident from this chapter is the fact that practitioners would benefit from more uniformity in respect to the terminology used to describe the various MWIs. However, any attempts to simplify terminology in a way that ultimately obscures the important distinctions between different types of MWIs should be avoided. In the end, it might be best to start with structural qualities of different MWIs (e.g., phrasal verbs, collocations, etc.), then consider the relative frequency, flexibility, and idiomaticity of these. In respect to idiomaticity in particular, it would appear to be useful to disentangle the label “idiom” from the more general principle of “idiomaticity”, as these seem to be related but separate phenomena.

In respect to actual teaching practices, there are now a number of published works identifying aspects of MWIs that seem to affect acquisition. However, these remain disjointed in many respects. Ultimately it would be useful to try to gain a better understanding of
how the different elements underpinning acquisition of MWIs can be woven into an integrated tapestry. Ideally this needs to take into account distinctions in MWIs, task type, environmental factors, and individual differences in learners (e.g., L1, psychotypological beliefs, cultural difference, etc.). Devising such a unified, holistic understanding of MWI acquisition is obviously no small task, but it represents a reasonable goal. Perhaps in the short term, researchers should endeavor to at least incorporate multiple factors into their research designs to observe how these interact, such as in Laufer’s (2000) and Türker’s (2016a) studies on idioms.

Further Reading


This book takes a comprehensive and integrated look at idioms and considers three aspects: (1) definition and use, (2) comprehension and processing, and (3) acquisition and pedagogy. One particular strength of this text is the close integration between theory and practice.


This book represents a very practical guide to issues related to learning and teaching vocabulary, with a strong emphasis on MWIs.


This book played a major role in bringing MWIs to the fore in second language vocabulary research. Though many of the claims have been hotly contested, it still presents an ambitious attempt to explain how differences in L1 and L2 might lead to differentiated learning of MWIs.

Related Topics

Defining multiword items, types of multiword items, factors affecting the learning of multiword items, resources for learning multiword items, measuring knowledge of multiword items

References


Key Issues in Teaching Multiword Items


