Developing Communicative Skills among Foreign Language Students through the Implementation of Modern Technologies in the Teaching of English Collocations

Małgorzata Anna Łuszcz[1]

Abstract

The author of this paper will present the idea that the development of foreign language skills when using English collocations may be enriched through an intensively scrutinised application of modern technologies (e.g. VoiceThread, Vocaroo, Voki, and/or YouTube). It is assumed that these technologies are in general beneficial in reinforcing the students' willingness to acquire foreign languages and can thus be viewed as a supportive tool for communication. Therefore, implementing them as a didactic energiser in second language teaching can turn ordinary classroom exercises into more challenging and engaging routines. Moreover, such technologies can foster the students' knowledge of the English language and boost their confidence in their learning abilities.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how modern technologies can be applied not only in the teaching and learning of English collocations but also to prove whether they are truly beneficial for foreign language pedagogy. Accordingly, the results of the empirical research, which consisted of observations and tests that were conducted among Polish students of higher education who were engaged in the process of searching for selected types of English phraseological units and their interpretations, will be presented in order to estimate how the students' communicative skills may be developed and improved.

Keywords: collocations, communicative skills, modern technology in teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Many scholars point to the difficulties in using the best tool for learning and teaching English collocations while doing speaking activities (Koya 2006, Ellis 2001, Nation 2001, Wouden 1997, Herbst 1996, and Fontenelle 1994). However, they do not agree as to what tool should be used. The present article aims to present modern technologies as an effective tool for developing speaking skills connected with the use of English collocations among Polish students of higher education. These recommendations result from empirical research into English collocations with the use of modern technologies.

2. Theoretical background

The literature shows that scholars have been interested in the possible outcomes of the incorporation of modern technologies in learning and teaching of L2. Much research has been conducted on how modern technologies can be used and how people can benefit from them (see Klickaya and Krajka 2010, Wible 2008, Sharpe, Harper, and Brown 1998, Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer 1997, Noblitt and Bland 1991). However, little has been said about enriching students' knowledge regarding English collocations with the use of modern technologies.

2.1 Collocations

The notion of 'collocation' was first stressed by Firth (1957: 179), who stated that one "shall know a word by the company it keeps".

---

[1] Philological School of Higher Education in Wroclaw (Poland)

However, Nation claimed that it is not sufficient to "define a collocation as a group of words that frequently occur together." Thus, according to him collocations are "closely structured groups whose parts frequently or uniquely occur together (…) they contain some element of grammatical or lexical unpredictability or inflexibility" (Nation 2001: 324).

The notion of collocation is a vital element of phraseology that consists of multiple definitions and points of view. For the purposes of this article, Nation's definition of collocations will be of great importance.

2.2 Modern Technologies and L2 Teaching and Learning

Modern technologies can allow for more effective language acquisition than traditional tools such as books, exercise books or dictionaries. These tools have become a natural part of everyday life and are recommended in foreign language learning in order to enrich the learning process (Noblitt and Bland, 1991; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer, 1997; Sharpe, Harper, and Brown 1998).

According to Klickaya and Krajka (2010), online activities using Web 2.0. tools engage learners in deep processing. Moreover, such activities individualise the experience of language acquisition (Atay and Ozbulgan, 2007) and lead to the development of foreign language learning strategies among students. The Internet used as a tool for teaching English allows to fulfil the interdisciplinary demand and broadens horizons. In addition, it can be an excellent archive of content for both students and educators (Wible, 2008: 179).

Furthermore, as Bonk and Graham (2005) have claimed, modern technologies have expanded the possibilities for distributed communication and interaction. Web 2.0 tools offer better and faster feedback for students and richer communication between peers and between the teacher and the student. In addition, online materials provide students with access anytime and anywhere, and students can work with such materials at their own pace. This leads to higher motivation between students and to stimulation.

2.3 Web 2.0. tools and developing communicative skills when teaching English collocations

Using Web 2.0. tools in developing English speaking skills via teaching English collocations can take on several forms. The first form can be the use of Internet Voice Chatting. It can be beneficial especially when the other speaker is a native speaker. The second form can be the use of computer programs that generate voice signals and decode the student's sounds. Practising with the use of such programs can improve vocabulary skills (English collocations) and pronunciation. The third form can be the use of Web 2.0. tools such as Vocaroo, Voki, YouTube and VoiceThread. This form can be taken into account when practising English collocations with students and when developing their communicative skills; also for the purposes of this study.

Vocaroo allows students to record a voice message and to make short voice presentations for their peers and the teacher. Voki enables students to build their imaginary profile (avatar), prepare a written message and place a voice that reads the message. YouTube allows students to watch films, news, etc. and to speak about these on the class forum or to place their own self-created films and presentations.

VoiceThread, which was very often used among students during the study, allows students to prepare presentations, upload them to a website in the form of photos, slides and videos and to exchange voice, video or text comments at any time and then to share the presentations with others. VoiceThread allows the presentations to be public, devoted to specific groups, or private. So the tool can be used only in the classroom environment. This Web 2.0. tool is perfect for developing speaking skills and to enrich the students' knowledge of collocations.

3. Methods

This section illustrates a project that has been in development for introducing English collocations and developing students' speaking skills via using Web 2.0. tools.

3.1. Goal of the project

The goal of the project was to bridge the gap between the use of Web 2.0. tools and English collocations and the development of communicative skills among students. McLoughlin and Lee (2010) claimed that Web 2.0. tools in education lead to the development of the students' storage of English vocabulary. However, it would be useful to investigate whether such tools lead to the development of students' collocation knowledge and communicative skills.

3.2. Participants

Two groups of Polish students of higher education were selected to take part in this project. The students represented approximately the same level of knowledge and proficiency in terms of English collocations. The groups were selected randomly from all groups of students at a Polish college. They comprised a total of 60 students. Gender distribution was approximately 44% male and 56% female.

3.3. Design and procedure

Two groups of students involved in this project were randomly selected from all groups at the college. There were 30 students in each group and gender distribution was randomised.

The first group was named the traditional group; students from this group learnt English with the use of a traditional method. The students' main activity was to use traditional paper textbooks and dictionaries. They were not asked to do anything other than what could be found in the original syllabus for their classes. The second group was named the experimental group; in this case the method of teaching and learning the L2 language was changed. The traditional way of teaching was replaced by modern technologies. The students were taught how to use Web 2.0. tools to enhance their language acquisition. For the purposes of this research, VoiceThread, Vocaroo, Voki and YouTube were selected since these tools are excellent in developing students' speaking skills. The students used handouts prepared by the teacher which included the basic rules of using these tools. The two groups were asked to sit a collocation pre-test to evaluate their overall knowledge of English collocations and to ensure that it was similar. This pre-test constituted the first part of the data that was needed for the later comparison. Upon completion of the project, the students were asked once again to sit the test, though this time this was the post-test. The aim of this test was to evaluate whether after the project had concluded the students' knowledge in the experimental group had increased or, on the contrary, decreased. The level of difficulty of this test was greater than that of the previous test as the students had to come up with their own words. This test constituted the second part of the data needed for the comparison. All of the students were also observed while doing the speaking activities.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in two stages. First, the average results of the pre-tests for both groups were compared. The above allowed the assessment of any potential differences in knowledge of English collocations among the study's participants. This was conducted with the use of the Mann-Whitney test, whose aim was to establish whether the difference in knowledge of collocations between the groups was statistically significant. In the course of the second stage, data collected with the use of the post-tests was compared in order to see the differences in the average score for each group. The results of this comparison showed a difference in the acquisition of collocations among the two groups. The comparison of the groups' results was conducted with the use of the Mann-Whitney test in order to establish whether the difference among the two groups was statistically significant. The overall aim of the data analysis was to determine whether the results gathered in the course of the study were statistically significant. The above enabled to determine whether Web 2.0. tools can be treated as useful tools for English teachers and learners alike.

4. Results and findings of the research project

4.1. Pre-Test results

The results of the pre-test showed that students in both groups were approximately at the same level of proficiency in the English language in general and in English collocations in particular. Errors which were made by the students in most cases represent the same area of the students' knowledge, e.g. they did slightly better on verbs than on adjectives and nouns.

Students from both groups had problems with adjectives and nouns. The first five sentences proved to be the most difficult for them. However, they did not have as many problems with the verbs. Sentence nine was correct in 100% of the cases. The pre-test also revealed that in both groups there were individuals who possessed knowledge and language skills that were above average and, on the other hand, there were also individuals who were below the average level in the groups. The average number of points scored by both groups was 9/15. Thus the scores are the same.

4.2. Post-Test results

The results of the post-test revealed that there was a change in the average number of points scored by the students from the experimental group in the post-test as compared with the previous tests. The post-test was the same; however, the students had to come up with their own words and were not provided with a list of words to choose from, i.e. this was not a multiple-choice test.

Although the post-test seemed to be more difficult than the pre-test, its results show that the number of scored points was higher for every single individual who took part in the project. Students from the experimental group had better knowledge about sets of words that should be used in different contexts. The test also revealed that students from the traditional group, in which the methods of teaching had not been changed, did only slightly better than previously. The average number of points scored on the post-test in the traditional group was 12/15 points. The experimental group did much better in this test and scored 15/15 points. This indicates a 20% difference between the two methods of teaching. According to the Mann-Whitney test, the difference in knowledge of collocations between the traditional and experimental group in the post-test was statistically significant (p value <0.0001). Web 2.0. tools were better when applied while teaching English collocations.

Moreover, the project enriched the experimental group's level of creativity and development of speaking skills with the use of English collocations. The students rather did not make any mistakes connected with the appropriate choice of word that collocated with other words.

5. Discussion and conclusions

English collocations are sometimes very difficult to acquire. This problem has led scholars to search for tools that will help students to learn them more easily. The most recent development has been focused on using Web 2.0. tools for English acquisition. Modern technologies individualise the experience of language acquisition, they expand the possibilities for communication and interaction and broaden the students' horizons of learning.

The project confirmed previous research on implementing Web 2.0. tools in learning a second language as conducted by scholars and revealed that these tools can be helpful in acquiring English collocations as well. The results indicate that students who used Web 2.0. tools could better deal with problems associated with the use of collocations in English, especially in speaking activities. The 20% difference between the traditional and experimental group in acquiring English collocations is important; however, it does not suggest that Web 2.0. tools should entirely replace traditional methods of teaching. In my opinion, the results rather suggest that Web 2.0. tools can be beneficial additional sources that accompany traditional methods of teaching L2 and that teachers should implement such tools in their teaching.

References

[1]   Atay, D. and Ozbulgan, C. (2007). "Memory strategy instruction, contextual learning and ESP vocabulary recall." In *English for Specific Purposes*, 26, 39-51.

[2] Bonk, C.J. and Graham, C.R. (2005). *Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

[3] Ellis, R. (2001). *Form-Focused Instruction and Second Language Learning*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

[4] Firth, J. R. (1957). "Modes of meaning." In J. R. Firth (Ed.), *Papers in linguistics 1934-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 190-215.

[5] Fontenelle, T. (1994). "What on Earth are Collocations? An assessment of the ways in which certain words co-occur and others do not." In English Today, 40, Vol. 10, No. 4.

[6] Herbst, T. (1996). "What are collocations: Sandy beaches or false teeth?" In *English Studies* 77.4, 379-393.

[7] Klickaya F., Krajka J. (2010). "Comparative usefulness of online and traditional vocabulary learning." In *TOJET: The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol. 9 Issue 2, 55-63.
Koya, T. (2006). "What is the reality of collocation use by native speakers of English?" In *Dialogue*, 5, 1-18.

[8] Mclntosh, C. , Francis, B. , and Poole, R. (2009). Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press.

[9] McLoughlin, C., Lee, M. J. (2010). "Personalised and self-regulated learning in the Web 2.0 era: International exemplars of innovative pedagogy using social software." In *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(1), 28-43.

[10] Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11] Noblitt, J.S. and Bland, S.K. (1991). "Tracking the learner in computer-aided language learning." In B. Freed (Ed.), *Foreign Language Acquisition Research and the Classroom*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 120-131.

[12] Sandholtz, J.H., Ringstaff, C., and Dwyer, D.C. (1997). *Teaching with Technology: Creating Student-Centered Classrooms*, Teachers College: New York.

[13] Sharpe, T. L., Harper, W., and Brown, S. (1998). "In response: Further reflections on technology, science, and culture." In *Quest*, 50, 332-343.

[14] Wible, D. (2008). "Multiword expressions and the digital turn." In Meunier F. and S. Granger (eds.) (2008). *Phraseology in foreign language learning and teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

[15] Wouden, T. V. (1997). *Negative contexts: Collection, polarity, and multiple negation*. New York: Routledge.