



### **Focus Framework:**

### **A New Guideline for Presenting and Evaluating Lexical Contents in ELT Materials**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Despite the not-so-distant negligence of lexicon in language instruction, it is currently taking on a core role in designing ELT materials. Selection of the lexical content is usually informed by a set of pedagogical and non-pedagogical factors like learnability, usefulness, the level of proficiency targeted, frequency, range, coverage, etc. With the lexical content selected, the next step has to do with adopting appropriate teaching techniques to present it in the most effective way. Despite the well-known pendulum swings of vocabulary learning between explicit and implicit approaches, very little attempt has ever been made as to how lexical content should be dealt with in textbooks. The present study introduces a new three-dimensional framework, namely the 'Focus Framework', which is intended to lay down some guidelines both for the presentation and evaluation of the lexical content of the ELT materials.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the not-so-distant hegemony of grammar in linguistic study and instruction which led to considering lexicon as an appendix of the grammar, research on vocabulary took off with the advent of corpus linguistics, the development of large electronic corpora and the appearance of lexical syllabus with emphasis upon the vocabulary of high frequency. Of overwhelming consensus among the stakeholders in language pedagogy is that learning vocabulary is an indispensable component of second language acquisition. This is perhaps due to the fact that "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, P. 111). As a result, the important meaning-making function of lexicon has been acknowledged, and language has come to be described more as "grammaticalized lexis" than "lexicalized grammar" (Lewis, 2000). Likewise, overall language success has come to be known largely as a function of vocabulary knowledge as research findings indicate that different language skills, success in gaining language fluency, achieving appropriate sociolinguistic knowledge, and mastering grammatical accuracy have been reported to be positively correlated with knowledge and size of vocabulary (Laufer and Goldstein, 2004; Stæhr, 2008). Given the importance of lexicon in any language curriculum, the lexical content should, therefore, be presented in such an effective way that facilitates learning and proficiency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The pendulum of vocabulary instruction has for long been oscillating between explicit and implicit approaches. Literature has witnessed an inconsistent body of research on the degree of effectiveness and applicability of each approach. On the one hand, the default mechanism for acquiring a massive body of L2 vocabulary is known to be through incidental learning (Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010; Xu, 2010). On the other hand, the acquisition of vocabulary has been found most effective when at least some content words are directly taught (De la Fuente, 2006; Laufer, 2005; Nation, 2001). Yet, it is widely observed that classroom time is usually far too limited to live up to such learning expectations.

Despite the fact that learners have to pick up most of their vocabulary incidentally through extensive reading, and that explicit instruction cannot cater for the extensive mass of words they need to acquire especially in upper levels (Stahl & Nagy, 2006), the overall picture is that implicit word learning is a 'slow and error-prone process' (Peters et al., 2009, p. 114) with relatively small gains after frequent encounters (Waring & Takaki, 2003) and a low rate of learning (Nation, 2001; Read, 2004). On the other hand, the value of word-focused instruction has been duly recognized and its effectiveness has been demonstrated in a series of empirical studies, particularly with tasks that require word production (Ellis & He, 1999; Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Laufer, 2005). Nation (2001) is, in fact, emphasizing the need for direct vocabulary instruction by holding that leaving L2 learners to learn vocabulary incidentally in context can only take them through the meaning recognition, and explicit instruction should be adopted to enable them to achieve deeper levels of vocabulary knowledge. Likewise, Laufer (2005, 2010) argues that it is theoretically indispensable to focus on forms in vocabulary instruction and that word-focused activities result in better gains in vocabulary learning than Reading Only tasks. Similarly, Peters (2012) found that a vocabulary-oriented treatment (reading text and performing two vocabulary tasks) resulted in greater gains of vocabulary learning and retention than a message-oriented treatment (reading text and answering comprehension questions). In addition, Min (2008) revealed that reading plus vocabulary-enhancement activities were more effective than narrow reading in fostering the acquisition and retention of vocabulary among EFL learners. Finally, Sonbul, and Schmitt (2010) compared the effectiveness of direct teaching of new words with incidental vocabulary learning. The findings revealed that direct instruction of vocabulary was especially effective in acquiring the deepest level of word knowledge.

In line with the above arguments, it seems sensible within the textbook context to have a number of lexical items directly instructed, bringing them to the learner's attention through different focusing techniques. The bulk of research evidence indicates that, among others, such factors as increased awareness of and attention to vocabulary items, increased manipulation of lexical items and increased interaction with lexical content are highly likely to facilitate vocabulary learning (Bowles; 2004; Newton, 1995; Keating, 2008). As a result, explicit manipulation in ELT materials of lexical items turns out to be a major pedagogical issue as no learning is expected to occur in the absence of learner attention (Hama & Leow, 2010; Schmidt, 1995).

## FOCUS FRAMEWORK

In psychological terms, very little learning can occur in the absence of attention. Materials should be noticed in order to be transferred to and retained in long-term memory; otherwise, they will stay in short-term memory for only a few seconds and then get lost. Motivated by

psychological learning principles and theories, Schmidt (1990) attaches a central role to noticing in language acquisition. To him, language learning involves three aspects of consciousness, namely awareness, intention and knowledge. He observes that, consciousness as awareness, embraces noticing, which is considered as a necessary condition for second language acquisition. In his Noticing Hypothesis, he hypothesized “what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning (Schmidt, 1995, p. 20)”. Some other researchers also conferred with Schmidt, holding that the initial stage of language learning is noticing (Sharwood-Smith, 1981; Gass, 1988), or describing noticing as “the gateway to subsequent learning” (Batstone, 1994, p. 100). In a word, “No noticing, no acquisition (Ellis, 1995, p. 89)”.

Because of the key function of vocabulary in language learning, in any well-structured language program, a large share of the syllabus is usually devoted to the teaching of vocabulary. It is perhaps a must for language teachers to explicitly teach all the vocabulary items to the beginners until they develop sufficient mastery of vocabulary to be able to guess the meaning of the unknown words from the context. Then the incidental learning of lexicon should be encouraged to cripple into the program. This process is inevitable as class time does not allow for the explicit teaching of all the new vocabulary items, but also because not all the aspects of vocabulary knowledge are open to formal instruction (Nation, 2001). With that being said, presentation of vocabulary in ELT materials calls for a balanced mix of both explicit and implicit approaches. In other words, for any language learning program to help learners obtain deeper levels of word knowledge, incidental vocabulary learning should be supplemented with explicit form-focused instruction (De La Fuente, 2002; Laufer, 2006).

Informed by Schmidt’s (1995) Noticing Hypothesis and drawing upon the findings of the experimental studies dealing with the impact of awareness and noticing on vocabulary learning (Laufer, 2005, 2010; Bowles, 2004), a three-dimension framework, Focus Framework, was developed to lay down a practical basis for the effective presentation and evaluation of vocabulary items in ELT materials. The Focus Framework defines three degrees of focus, namely Direct Focus, Indirect Focus and No Focus at all (Author).

As specified by the Focus Framework, a vocabulary item is said to be in the Direct Focus if it is typographically highlighted (bolded, underlined, slanted or colored) in the text, glossed in the margin, or addressed in the questions that follow the reading section. For instance, words or expressions “CONTEMPLATE, HARDWARE, MONITOR, AWESOME, ,ISSUE, GO BACK and LOG ON” in a text on ‘Computer’ are, regardless of their semantic relevance to the topic, in the Direct Focus state if they appear in a typographically highlighted form, are glossed in the margin, or addressed in the reading questions that follow. The writer might decide to focus on these lexical items so that the learner could pay notice to them as new vocabulary items of instructional importance outside the text. Direct focus on new vocabulary is considered to be amongst the most salient input features that activate learner noticing. By leaving flags in the text through bolding, underlining, coloring, glossing, and so forth, textbook writer can bring the new vocabulary in learners’ focus which will, in turn, enable them to develop their own mental flags serving as a means of enhancing the acquisition of the target words (Sharwood Smith, 1993).

In the Indirect Focus form, the vocabulary is not the direct focus of the text but is closely related to the topic or the whole idea of the text in semantic terms. For example, “LOG ON, HARDWARE, and MONITOR” appearing in a the same text are considered to be in the Indirect Focus status even though they are not boldfaced or glossed or addressed for the learner to notice. They are, however, lexical items that are very likely to crop up in such texts as they are semantically related to the topic of ‘Computer’. Finally, there is No Focus at all when the item is

part of the general context in which it appears and no attention is drawn to it, let's say, through highlighting, glossing, semantic relation, etc. For instance, "CONTEMPLATE, AWESOME, ISSUE and GO BACK" are considered to be in No Focus status in the same text if they are not focused in any of the techniques mentioned in the Direct Focus state. The writer might choose to use them as general lexicon simply because they fit the surrounding context rather than for their semantic association to the topic of 'Computer', hence No Focus at all.

As it was already pointed out that the Focus Framework is largely informed by the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1993). According to Schmidt, whether or not a language learner intentionally attends to a language form, it fails to serve as intake for processing and learning unless it is noticed. Therefore, it is assumed that when a learner's attention is *directed* towards a vocabulary item by typographic highlighting, glossing, etc. (Direct Focus), learning is much more enhanced than when his attention is *drawn* to it by the target item being only semantically related to the topic (Indirect Focus) or not drawn to it at all (No Focus).

## CASE STUDY

### METHODOLOGY

In order to put the Focus Framework to test, the present qualitative content analysis study was intended to investigate the pedagogical exploitation of one category of formulaic language, Phrasal Verbs, in the Malaysian ESL secondary school textbooks, Forms One through Five. In other words, an attempt was made to discuss these forms in terms of the teaching techniques, especially focusing, through which phrasal verbs were presented. It is interesting to point out that the selection of these formulaic language units was motivated by the fact that they are amongst the most notoriously challenging aspects of language acquisition for the ESL/EFL learners (Celce-Murcia, & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). They are also of high frequency of occurrence in the language and highly polysemous. Additionally, most of the research dealing with vocabulary has so far focused on single words. Researchers seem to feel more convenient in dealing with single words perhaps because electronic word processors are usually programmed to give counts of individual words.

For data collection, the researcher first adopted a well-defined description of phrasal verbs presented by Author (2013) to locate all the instances of the combinations that appeared in the reading sections of the Malaysian ESL secondary school textbooks. By definition, "any verb followed by an adjacent or non-adjacent particle of non-prepositional meaning is recognized as a phrasal verb" (Author, 2013). To put this into perspective, all the combinations of a lexical verb and a real particle (e.g., He TOOK DOWN the message) and a lexical verb and an adverb particle (e.g., He PULLED DOWN the branch) were recognized as phrasal verbs. These structures were distinguished from combinations made up of a verb and a preposition (e.g., He TOOK the picture DOWN the wall). Then a page by page query of the reading sections of the textbooks enabled the researcher to locate all the phrasal verb combinations and categorize them according to whether or not they were in direct focus for instruction. The three-dimension Focus Framework acted as the

instrument against which the combinations were identified in terms of the degree of focus they received, namely, Direct Focus (DF), Indirect Focus (IF) and No Focus (NF).

## FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the phrasal verb combinations used in the five different textbook Forms in terms of their degrees of focus.

**Table 1. Phrasal Verbs in terms of focus degree in the reading texts**

Form	PV Lemmas of DF	PV Lemmas of IF	PV Lemmas of NF	Total PV Lemmas
One	1	19	27	45*
Two	2	11	10	21 *
Three	1	20	16	32*
Four	2	18	19	32 *
Five	3	33	26	52*
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>147*</b>

\*The difference between the Focus form lemmas in columns 2, 3 and 4 and the total lemmas in column 5 is because some combinations were used in more than one Focus form.

As it is shown, a total number 147 phrasal verb items occurred in the reading texts across the five Forms. It is interesting to point out that of this seemingly considerable proportion, only very few of them were intentionally focused for instruction. Only a negligible number of 9 items, that is, 'CLAMP DOWN (Form One) (Figure 1), SETTLE IN, CHECK OUT (Form Two), CARRY OUT (Form Three), COME DOWN, TURN DOWN (Form Four), SEE THROUGH, OPEN UP, and TAKE OFF (Form Five)' were directly focused by being typographically highlighted, marginally glossed or addressed in the related reading comprehension questions.

Figure 1. A snapshot of the use of CLAMP DOWN in Form One

This time Sophie really did scream, but only for a second because very quickly the huge hand **clamped down** over her blankets and the scream was smothered<sup>4</sup> by the bedclothes.

On the contrary, a substantial number of 101 phrasal verb lemmas were in Indirect Focus state by just being semantically related to the topic of the lesson without being boldfaced, glossed or questioned. For instance, combinations 'SPEED ON' and 'RUSH ON' were indirectly focused in the passage 'City Life, Country Life' in lesson 2, Form Two. Likewise, a total number of 98 lemmas of phrasal verbs were not focused at all, being used in the text not for explicit instruction but simply because they were part of the general context. For example, items like 'PICK UP (Figure 2) and QUEUE UP' were in No Focus state in the text 'Mobile Phones' in lesson 7, Form Four.

Figure 2. A snapshot of the use of PICK UP in Form Four

Sixteen-year-old Fairuz says, "My mother is a workaholic. When she is immersed in a project, she forgets the time. I used to wait for hours for her to pick me up from my tuition classes. With a mobile phone now, I can call to remind her."

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the reading texts in the textbooks provided a large number of phrasal verbs, these combinations were, unfortunately, either indirectly focused by just being semantically related to the reading topic, or were left out of the focus, appearing simply because they fitted the general linguistic context. This shows that the phrasal verbs were included in the textbooks more for their fitness in the overall theme of each reading text than for instructional purposes, hence far from being appropriately used in terms of pedagogy. The major problem with such presentation of the phrasal verbs is that it is likely that students skip them off simply because they may fail to recognize them as unknown idiomatic combinations. Moreover, they might fall for their similarity with prepositional verbs and go on to recognize them as combinations made up of lexical verbs combined with a preposition and, therefore, try to figure out their meanings on the basis of the meanings of the parts, especially in the lower levels. On the other hand, highlighting phrasal verbs as whole units enables learners to recognize them as formulaic forms and motivates them to assign each whole combination one meaning reference rather than think of each component as a single entity with its own meaning.

Data analysis showed that there was no balance maintained in the textbooks with regard to the presentation of the phrasal verbs in terms of the three degrees of focus specified in the Focus Framework. Items of Indirect Focus and Non Focus states were overrepresented almost to the exclusion of Direct Focus ones. A more appropriate strategy in pedagogy dealing with phrasal verbs, the researcher believes, should bring into Direct Focus a larger number of combinations for explicit instruction and active use by learners. This, however, does not imply that too many new units should be highlighted in the texts as it might negatively affect the learning process. In a word, a balance of some degree needs to be stricken among the number of phrasal verbs that are presented in any of the focus states.

By and large, the more the presentation of vocabulary engages the learner, the more it improves vocabulary learning (Keating, 2008). Materials writers, therefore, should present the lexical content in such a way that promotes as much as possible the learner engagement. Given the complexity associated with phrasal verbs and the difficulty that ESL learners usually experience with them especially in the early stages, the overwhelming prevalence of the forms of Indirect Focus and No Focus states can be considered as a striking pedagogical deficiency on the part of the textbooks.

Although such an observation sounds a bit strong, there is an immense body of empirical research attesting the value of word-focused instruction in ESL and EFL contexts (Ellis & He, 1999; Laufer, 2005; Peters, 2012). Kennedy (2002), among others, assigns a pedagogical priority to the frequent combinations for explicit and direct instruction. Likewise, Nation (2001) is advocating direct vocabulary instruction by observing that L2 learners might, at best, achieve the meaning recognition of vocabulary items through incidental exposure in context. Finally, Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) hold that exposure alone is not sufficient for vocabulary learning since chances are that learners may fail to notice them at all. What the researcher intends to imply is that lack of

direct focus on phrasal verbs in the textbooks may partly explain why Malaysian ESL learners, even in Form Four, were found to have so many difficulties in dealing with these combinations (Authors, forthcoming).

It will be, the researcher believes, of much pedagogical use to textbook developers and language teachers as well to look at the presentation in ELT materials of the different components of the lexicon in terms of the Focus Framework. The framework seems to provide a practical basis on which lexical contents can be presented and elaborated in an effective way to help the enhancement of vocabulary learning. The Framework allows for abstract and idiomatic or less transparent vocabulary items to be systematically practiced in 'Direct Focus' through highlighting, glossing, teacher drilling or other traditional instructional methods that emphasize accuracy over fluency. Its 'Indirect Focus' category acknowledges that vocabulary is best learned from exposure in coherent contexts, and this is especially appropriate for semantically transparent items whose frequency makes maximum exposure easy in many semantic domains. Finally, the 'No Focus' classification could apply to those items that are so frequent, polysemous and versatile that they cannot be avoided in everyday discourse and are most easily acquired through fluency practice without the need for special noticing. It is desirable that textbooks bring to learners' attention the new vocabulary in line with the guideline established by the Focus Framework so that their consciousness of the lexical content is proportionately raised and their noticing is enhanced.

As a final remark, on the one hand, attention is believed to be limited in its scope (Kahneman, 1973). On the other hand, there are too many features of language to be acquired consciously (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, materials should be presented in a way that attention is selectively allocated to the most important linguistic elements. Just because the language learner encounters new words does not guarantee that he instantly picks them up. Previous studies have also shown that new items are acquired more effectively if they are brought to the learner's notice more explicitly (Peters, 2012). Therefore, Focus Framework postulates that, as Ellis (2008) holds, it might be necessary to deliberately pay attention to language features which learners might fail to notice that they need to be processed differently. It will, the researcher hopes, enable the textbook developers in better presentation of vocabulary items and help the ESL/EFL researchers and teachers to investigate the degree of effectiveness of the presentation of new words in terms of the degree of focus they receive.

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