

# A Didactic Sequence for Phrasemes in L2 French

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with vocabulary teaching in French as a foreign language by focusing on the case of phraseological units. More precisely, it aims to design a didactic sequence for phrasemes within the theoretical framework of Explanatory Combinatorial Lexicology. Our study is based on a corpus-based experience of phraseology teaching conducted in a class of Italian university students learning French as a foreign language. Results indicated that, at the end of the course, students were able to describe the morphosyntactic structure and the use of phraseology in general or specialized language, but that they frequently made mistakes on these elements, in particular in writing, and that there was some confusion over the distinction between different types of phrasemes. Therefore, we propose a didactic sequence that focuses on a sample of phraseological units connected with discursive functions in argumentative texts and that includes the use of online resources in order to give a metalinguistic commentary. Our purpose is to draw a distinction between idioms and collocations, according to a progressive acquisition of metalexical competencies.

**Keywords:** Language Teaching; Teaching experiences; FLE; LEC; Phraseology.

## 1 Introduction

Lexical competence cannot be underestimated in the acquisition or learning of any foreign language. The lexicon is key to the development of language competence and can be built by working on multiple linguistic facets of words, whether phonetic, morphological, syntactic or semantic (Charmeux, 2010; Mel'čuk, Polguère, 2007; Picoche, 1993; Scott, Nagy, 2009). Some studies have focused on the more specific issues of teaching collocations (Lewis, 2000; Binon, Verlinde, 2004; Frassi, 2018; Tutin, Grossmann, 2002) and of phraseological units (Cavalla, Labre, 2009) by showing that their learning is necessarily the basis of any complete lexical training and that a void among L2 learners could constitute a real obstacle to understanding and producing a language. Promoting the learning of phraseology is therefore imperative.

In this paper we deal with the teaching of phrasemes in French as a foreign language. Our study is based on the results of a corpus-based experience on the teaching of phraseological units to a group of Italian-speaking students (level B1 of the CEFR)

studying a French Lexicology course at the second university cycle in Italy. Students had to learn their structure and usage in order to obtain the course certificate of achievement, the main assessment of which involved the writing of an argumentative essay with a metalinguistic dimension. Our experience shows that: 1. phraseological units are quite complex and varied lexical structures that still seem to be poorly mastered by Italian-speaking students. In classroom practices, Italian-speaking students frequently made mistakes on these elements, in particular in writing; 2. there seems to be some confusion over the distinction between different types of phrasemes.

After a brief theoretical-methodological overview of the didactics of the lexicon and phraseology within Explanatory Combinatorial Lexicology, we present the hypotheses and objectives that lead us to the realization of a didactic sequence (Cavanagh, Blain 2010; Cavanagh 2010) based on a systematic didactics of phraseology, on the use of ICTs<sup>1</sup> and on online corpora. We seek to link work on the lexicon and work on the argumentative text, by moving away from a “utilitarian” conception of phrasemes.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The design of the didactic sequence is based on the principles of Explanatory Combinatorial Lexicology (ECL), which is the lexical module of the Meaning-Text Theory (MTT) (Mel’čuk, Polguère, 2007). According to this theory, lexicon is the central component of linguistic description and, as a result, of language teaching. A series of theoretical and methodological principles have been formulated around the structured teaching of lexicon and some tools have been developed for a practical use, both for first language and second language learning. The teaching of lexicon implies the development not only of lexical competence — the knowledge of lexical units — but also of metalinguistic and metalexical knowledge. This knowledge includes a set of notions about the structure itself of the lexicon, such as *meaning*, *polysemy*, *semantic compositionality*, etc. (Tremblay, 2009). We want to focus on the notion of phrasemes and, more precisely, on the distinction between full phrasemes and semi-phrasemes, which are rigorously defined in MTT. On the one hand, a full phraseme or idiom is a multilexemic lexical unit with a non-compositional meaning and a fixed syntactic structure: for example, *en souffrance* and *levée de boucliers* in French (Mel’čuk, Polguère, 2007, 27). On the other hand, a semi-phraseme or collocation is a combination of more lexical units, whether a lexeme or a full phraseme: the base, selected freely to express a particular meaning, and a collocate, selected as a function of the base. For example, the base *argument* can combine with the collocates *massue*, *de poids* in collocations like *argument massue*, *argument de poids* (Mel’čuk, Polguère, 2007, 20). While full phrasemes are recorded as separate lexical entries in ECL dictionaries, collocations do not receive a lexical entry.

Moreover, the learning of metalexical notions should follow a progression from simple to more complex notions (Mel’čuk, Polguère, 2007). For instance, Polguère

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<sup>1</sup> Information and Communications Technology. Computer tools such as ICTs have been encouraged for several reasons, the first being related to the corpora used, which are digitized and therefore more easily accessible by computer. A second, more didactic reason is linked to the development of autonomy and learning, which is the main focus here.

and Tremblay have designed a five-step progression for future primary-school teachers (2014, 1184). After pointing out that language teaching practices and lexicographic tools make a poor use of collocations, Frassi has presented a progressive sequence for the teaching of collocation, and of its different types, based on its semantic and syntactic features (Frassi, 2018). In order to apply its theoretical principles, ECL has also created some practical tools that can be used for the teaching and learning of L1 and L2 French, such as the *Lexique actif du français* and the *DicoPop*.<sup>2</sup> Both theoretical reflections and lexicographic tools by ECL aim at text synthesis: this means that the viewpoint of Explanatory Combinatorial Lexicology on language and on language teaching is that of production or encoding.

### 3 Development of the Didactic Sequence

#### 3.1 Hypotheses and Objectives

Our working hypothesis is as follows: starting from phraseological units, we can work on written production in a different way. In other words, students can be led to shift away from their usual practices (writing a list of phraseological units and “passively” memorizing them), which result in a very seldom use of phrasemes that are appropriate to the requested textual genre. Our aim is to invite the students to recognize and reuse phrasemes in their own productions. Another objective is to train on computer media for the use of linguistic phenomena which can contribute to improving the phraseological level of Italian-speaking students. We hence have two types of linguistic and didactic objectives: to develop the ability to locate phrasemes taken from a corpus of language science articles using the *ScienQuest* database<sup>3</sup> and to describe them using metalexical competencies; to encourage the systematic implementation and recognition of phrasemes and their reuse, with a view to active memorization.

Our sequence is based on the distinction between phrasemes and semi-phrasemes. Although the borderline between these two categories is not always easy to draw, the learners will focus on their distinctive features, in order to understand them in a systematic way. It is not excluded that in future they will deal with the wide spectrum of phraseology and consider these categories in a more complex perspective, according to a progressive learning of metalexical notions.

#### 3.2 Specific Needs of Learners and Methodological Approach

Obviously, the realization of such an activity requires the prior analysis of the specific needs of learners. At present, we have 54 argumentative essays produced by Italian-speaking students. The examples collected in these productions suggest that students are partially familiar with some phrasemes (most likely because they have read or

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<sup>2</sup> *DiCoPop*, <http://olst.ling.umontreal.ca/dicopop> (Accessed in January, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The use of corpora, both for linguistic description and for the implementation of teaching activities, leads to considering these activities from the perspective of placing the lexical units to be taught in a permanent context. Thus, it is important for us to develop the use of corpora in French as a foreign language in order to multiply the examples of use of the language units taught.

heard them somewhere), but they need help to fix them. Here are some examples: *À différence du texte premier...*, *Dans ce texte, il y a la présence d'un phénomène de...*, *pour ce qui regarde la féminisation, nous voyons que...* In order to be effective, the learning of phrasemes must necessarily involve a reasoned and structured teaching of lexicon, according to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic criteria that contribute to the structural coherence of the argumentative essay. To do this, we adopt both an onomasiological and semasiological approach allowing the students to retain the meaning and form of the phraseme and its discursive function. On the didactic level, this approach will also be accompanied by a corpus extraction of the phrasemes.

### 3.3 The Didactic Sequence

The didactic path follows a standard progression where three main complementary steps are articulated and completed: the stage of exploration of phrasemes from a semantic point of view; the deepening of linguistic values and observation of the use of phrasemes in discourse through the use of corpora and the development of metalexical knowledge; text synthesis and reuse of the phrasemes discussed in an argumentative essay. These three steps are articulated in different workshops, which are as follows:

#### Step 1 – Exploration of phrasemes.

1) General comprehension of phrasemes – Number of workshops: 1; Time: 70 minutes. The workshop focuses on the recognition and overall understanding of a number of phrasemes provided by the teacher, using general questions to guide the learners towards their meaning. As the learners' linguistic level allows, we ask them from the very first exercises to arrange the phrasemes by their discursive function, which helps them to grasp their meaning through context. Here are some examples:

**Table 1.** Classification of discursive functions.

<b>Discursive functions</b>	<b>Example</b>
Exprimer son point de vue	<i>jouer en faveur de, avoir un impact moindre, etc.</i>
Nommer, définir, discuter, commenter une définition d'un terme ou d'un concept	<i>cet article affirme que, l'auteur doit envisager, etc.</i>
Exprimer une temporalité	<i>toucher à sa fin, au cours des dernières années, etc.</i>
Organiser son discours	<i>nous analysons ici, d'autre part, dans le cas de, comme l'illustre, etc.</i>

## Step 2 – Metalexical knowledge.

2) Meaning in corpus – Number of workshops: 1; Time: 70 minutes. In a second step, we plan to develop tracking activities through the decomposition of the meaning not of the units of the phraseme, but of the referent to which the entire phraseme refers. Once the students have understood how these lexical structures work, we verify their ability to extract new phrasemes in corpus. On the home page of the *ScienQuest* corpus “EEIDA français”,<sup>4</sup> students choose the discipline, the modality and the text portions that interest them. The learners thus begin their exploration and analysis on the syntactic, lexico-semantic and discursive levels. Here are some examples:

**Table 2.** Linguistic analysis of phrasemes proposed by the students.

Introduire une transition	Phraseme	Construction	Discours
	<i>Nous examinons ici</i>	Introducteur d'énoncé	Technique
	<i>D'autre part</i>	Adj+N	Multiregistre
	<i>Nous intéresser à</i>	Pron+V+prép.	Technique
	<i>Dernier point mais pas le moindre</i>	Constr. Adjectivale	Multiregistre
	<i>On peut affirmer que</i>	Constr. Verbale	Universitaire

3) Definition of idiom and collocation in ECL – Number of workshops: 2; Time: 140 minutes (70 minutes for each workshop). After dealing with phrasemes as a whole, this activity aims at distinguishing idioms from collocations according to the rigorous definition offered within the ECL framework. As students who possess some metalexical competencies are presupposed to understand these two notions properly, teachers should verify that students already possess these competencies – as it would be the case for our public of students of Lexicology<sup>5</sup> – or should introduce them to these skills in a preliminary step. For instance, students should possess the notions of lexical unit, meaning, base, collocate, etc.<sup>6</sup>, in order to understand the notion of collocation.

During the second workshop, students are asked to identify the free lexical combinations, the idioms and the collocations within each discursive function of step 1. For example, as for the discursive function *Exprimer son point de vue*, students must distinguish between the idiom *jouer en faveur de* and the collocations *résultat prometteur*, *constitue une avancée*, *moindre impact*. At the end of this activity, they

<sup>4</sup> *Corpus Études interdisciplinaires et interlinguistiques du discours académique (EIIIDA français)* <https://corpora.aiakide.net/scientext19/> (Accessed in 13 january 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Also for students of Lexicology, it could be necessary to revise some lexicological notions or to present some new ones.

<sup>6</sup> "Si l'on veut faire l'étude de la notion de collocation, d'ailleurs au carrefour de la sémantique et de la syntaxe, on doit donc d'abord maîtriser les notions qui la définissent et la caractérisent : *unité lexicale, syntagme, locuteur, sens, combinatoire restreinte, base [d'une collocation] et collocatif*" (Polguère, Tremblay, 2014, 1184).

will prepare a list of idioms (for example *toucher à sa fin*) and of collocations (*conduire une analyse, travaux antérieurs, tendance actuelle*, etc.).

4) Analysis of idioms and collocations – Number of workshops: 1; Time: 70 minutes. Students are then asked to conduct a syntactic and semantic analysis of a sample of idioms and collocations to justify their choice. As for idioms, they are asked to test the non-compositional meaning and the fixed syntactic structure of the selected items. They are supposed to identify the base and the collocate with respect to collocations. Here are some examples: *résultat prometteur* > *résultat* = base and *prometteur* = collocate; *tendance actuelle* > *tendance* = base and *actuelle* = collocate; *avancer l'hypothèse* > *hypothèse* = base and *avancer* = collocate.

5) Use of lexicography – Number of workshops: 1; Time: 70 minutes. Following this analysis, another workshop is developed around the lexicographic treatment of phrasemes in online dictionaries and resources. Students are asked to observe if the two phenomena are treated as a whole, under the category of phraseology, or whether they are clearly separated. Moreover, they have to verify if idioms constitute separate entries and whether collocations are mentioned under the heading of the base or the collocate. Students also consult two tools, the *Lexique actif du français* (Mel'čuk, Polguère, 2007) and the *DicoPop*, developed in the theoretical framework of ECL; the supervision of teachers is suggested if students are not familiar with ECL.

### **Step 3 – Text synthesis and reuse of the phrasemes**

6) Production of an argumentative text - Number of workshops: 1; Time: 70 minutes. The sequence ends with an activity of assistance in writing an argumentative text using the *Antidote* tool, a grammatical correction and writing assistance software. This software offers a series of questions that accompany the learners during the writing phase of a text, forcing them to write sentences from which a final text will be generated. The principle is based on interactivity between the learner and the software by associating the users' answers to the software's questions with the statements proposed by the tool. More specifically, students are asked to use a selection of idioms and collocations into the argumentative text.

7) Assessment - Number of workshops: 2; Time: 80 minutes (60 minutes for the written production + 20 minutes for the oral examination). After the completion of the didactic sequence, a final assessment will evaluate how much progress students have achieved in relation to the phraseological units. It involves both the evaluation of the written production and an oral examination: as for the final production, the re-use of phrasemes in an argumentative text will be considered. During the oral examination, a particular attention will be paid to the metalexical knowledge acquired by students in relation to the phraseological units discussed during the Lexicology course.

## 4 Conclusion

The didactic sequence we suggest is based on an experience of phraseology teaching that highlighted the need both of a progressive learning and of a sharp distinction between different types of phrasemes. Nonetheless, it will be fundamental to test it in a class in order to understand if further adjustments are required. Students should develop a more in-depth knowledge of different kinds of phraseological units after acquiring a certain consciousness about phraseological phenomena as a whole. So, the development of another didactic sequence aiming to explore different kinds of idioms and different kinds of collocations (about collocations, see Frassi, 2018) would be appropriate.

The didactic concept behind this sequence is to develop activities that combine several linguistic phenomena; it is not a question of setting up activities that are detached or focused on a specific point (a particular collocation), or the use of specific verbs, but rather several of these phenomena, combining syntax, lexicon and semantics, without forgetting the predominant role of corpora, which allow the context to be set and thus the identification of both the structures and pragmatic functions of each element of the discourse. These few reflections on phrasemes have allowed us to understand that their presence and that of a wide range of linguistic and textual means such as a progressive learning of metalexical notions, corpora and text writing software can contribute to the construction of semantic coherence in the writing of argumentative texts.

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