

## MULTI-WORD LEXICAL UNITS IN L2 TEXTBOOKS

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the last 30 years the leading role of vocabulary in L2 teaching has been recognized. Thus, nowadays L2 vocabulary research does not look at whether vocabulary should be taught but rather what aspect of vocabulary should be emphasized. This study researches the treatment given to multi-word lexical (MWL) units in 24 currently available English and Spanish L2 textbooks at three proficiency levels. The results indicate that it lacks systematicity and scientific rigor apart from being rather traditional. Firstly, explicit vocabulary selection criteria are absent in most of the textbooks. Secondly, the greater presence of MWL units in advanced level textbooks is not supported by empirical research; instead, it follows the traditional belief that advanced L2 learners are better equipped to deal with these units. Thirdly, tradition is also present in the overuse of closed exercises and the total absence of communicative activities.*

**KEY WORDS.** *Textbook, vocabulary, multi-word lexical unit, selection, practice.*

**RESUMEN.** *En las tres últimas décadas en la enseñanza de L2 se ha pasado de cuestionar la importancia del vocabulario a centrarse en qué aspecto léxico se debe enfatizar. Este estudio analiza el tratamiento dado a unidades léxicas pluriverbales (ULP) en 24 libros de texto en uso para la enseñanza del inglés y del español como L2, procedentes de tres niveles de lengua. Los resultados muestran que el tratamiento a dichas unidades carece de sistematicidad y rigor científico aparte de ser bastante tradicional. Primero, los criterios de selección del vocabulario no se explicitan en la mayoría de los libros analizados. Segundo, la mayor presencia de estas unidades en libros de nivel avanzado no queda justificada por medio de estudios empíricos, sino que más bien se sigue la idea tradicional de que los estudiantes de nivel avanzado están mejor preparados para aprenderlas. Tercero, el excesivo uso de ejercicios cerrados frente a la total ausencia de actividades comunicativas refleja un enfoque tradicional.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Libro de texto, vocabulario, unidad léxica pluriverbal, selección, práctica.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: L2 TEXTBOOKS, VOCABULARY TEACHING AND MULTI-WORD LEXICAL UNITS

The L2 textbook has always enjoyed a central role due to its flexibility to adapt to new technologies and teaching methodologies. New technologies are responsible for the more sophisticated format that nowadays textbooks present. They have become more colourful and frequently accompanied by supplementary materials in the form of CDs, CD-ROMs, and videos. From a methodological viewpoint, textbooks have been a reflection of the techniques and activities that characterize the different methods and approaches. For the last decade, a return to formal aspects has been detected in textbook design.

Regarding the teaching components of textbooks, vocabulary has not always received the same amount of attention, being at the expense of different methods and approaches. It was not until the publication of *The Lexical Approach* (Lewis 1993) and *Implementing the Lexical Approach* (Lewis 1997) that the importance of vocabulary was recognized. Since then, L2 vocabulary research has entered a new phase in which the focus is no longer looking at whether vocabulary should be taught but rather what aspect of vocabulary teaching/learning should be emphasized.

This study focuses on the treatment given to *multi-word lexical* (henceforth MWL) units in English and Spanish L2 textbooks. The term MWL unit refers to a lexical chunk that represents the most usual way for a native speaker or an advanced L2 learner to express a concept. Among the diverse number of MWL units this article pays attention to three types, that is, lexical collocations, idioms, and compounds.

## 2. MULTI-WORD LEXICAL UNITS: LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS, IDIOMS AND COMPOUNDS

### 2.1. *Lexical collocations*

In the literature there have been many attempts to define the concept of *lexical collocation*. In the present study, we follow Higuera's (2004: 71) definition, as it effectively takes into account different points of view, that is, psychological and semantic perspectives, frequency of use, combination preference, and combination restrictions:

a type of lexical unit (Lewis 1993; Higuera 1997), a psychological unit for native speakers of a language (Benson et al. 1986), constituted by two lexemes<sup>1</sup> (Mitchell 1971) that frequently co-occur, and which show a typical relationship between both (Koike 2001). Collocations are partially compositional since the base retains its original meaning; however, the collocate takes up a special one when it appears with the base (Corpas Pastor 1996; Castillo Carballo 2001; Koike 2001). Collocations also show combinatory preferences and restrictions imposed by usage and norm (Corpas Pastor 1996: 76; Zuluaga 2002: 106). Such preferences and restrictions might come from our world knowledge or they might be due to idiosyncratic reasons related to individual languages.

There are different types of lexical collocations such as: (a) noun *subject* + verb (English: *blizzards rage, bees sting*; Spanish: *ladrar un perro, estallar una guerra*); (b) verb + noun *object* (verb+preposition+noun) (English: *squander a fortune, burst into tears*; Spanish: *poner a prueba, entablar amistad*); (c) adjective+noun/noun+adjective (English: *weak tea, rough estimate*; Spanish: *éxito fulgurante, fuente fidedigna*); (d) noun+preposition+noun (English: *a colony of bees, a pack of dogs*; Spanish: *un banco de peces, un enjambre de abejas*); (e) verb+adverb (English: *affect deeply, apologize humbly*; Spanish: *desear fervientemente, negar rotundamente*); (f) adverb+adjective (English: *sound asleep, strictly accurate*; Spanish: *estrechamente ligado, rematadamente loco*).

## 2.2. Idioms

Defining the concept of *idiom* has been a thorny issue from theoretical and applied perspectives since idioms form a heterogeneous category. Some of the basic criteria for an expression to be considered an idiom are their non-compositionality (Fernando and Flavell 1981) and frozenness or fixedness (Grant and Bauer 2004). A non-compositional expression implies that its (figurative) meaning cannot be deduced from the sum of the different parts. However, scholars (cf. Nunberg et al. 1994) claim that some idioms allow a compositional analysis and their decomposability cannot be measured in absolute terms. Instead, it should be dealt with as a gradient concept. For the purpose of this research, an inclusive definition of idioms that comprises ‘figurative idioms’ (e.g., *kick the bucket*) and ‘idioms proper’ (e.g., *bury the hatchet*) (Cowie 1981: 229) will be adopted. If the figurative sense of the idiom is the only existing one, the expression should be identified as an ‘idiom proper’; however, if a literal interpretation is still possible, the expression is called ‘figurative idiom’.

In terms of their fixedness, idioms lack morphosyntactic flexibility (Fontanelle 1994). For example, they hardly allow substitution (e.g., *\*kick the pail; \*de obsérvame y no me toques*), elimination or addition (e.g., *\*the student tried to lick the teacher’s leather boots; \*matar pájaros de un tiro*), passivization (*\*the teacher’s boots had been licked; \*la pata fue estirada*) or re-ordering of the elements (*\*it was my boots that he had tried to lick; \*dar liebre por gato*).

## 2.3. Compounds

A compound can be defined as “a lexical unit consisting of more than one base and functioning both grammatically and semantically as a single unit” (Portero Muñoz 2004: 98). Different types of compounds can be identified depending on the grammar categories of the words that conform the unit.

The main categories in English are those that function as (a) adjectives (i.e., adjective+noun: *red-gold sunset*; adverb+adjective/participle: *well-known actor*; adverb+adjective: *carefully worked canvas*; noun+past participle: *handwritten*;

adjective+noun+-ed: *old-fashioned*; noun/adjective/adverb+present participle: *bone-chilling*, *long-lasting*; noun+noun: *Iron Age manufacture*; verb+preposition: *bang-up job*; noun+adjective: *user-friendly*; adjective+adjective: *dark green*, *icy cold*; preposition+adjective: *overwhelming*); (b) nouns (i.e., noun+noun: *broom closet*; verb+noun: *scarecrow*; adjective+noun: *high school*; preposition+noun: *undergraduate*; noun+verb-er: *bookseller*; noun+verb-ing: *sheep-shearing*; verb+preposition: *breakup*), and (c) verbs (i.e., verb+verb: *freeze-dry*; preposition+verb: *underestimate*).

Likewise, in Spanish the resulting combinations work as (a) nouns (i.e., verb+noun: *espantapájaros*; preposition+noun: *antebrazo*; noun+noun: *célula madre*; noun+de+noun: *agente de seguridad*; noun+noun/adjective+noun: *caradura*); (b) adjectives (i.e., adjective+adjective: *agridulce*; noun+adjective: *pelirrojo*; verb+noun: *abruptas*; preposition+noun: *contrarreloj*), and (c) verbs (i.e., noun+verb: *fotocopiar*; adverb+verb: *malcriar*).

#### 2.4. Differentiating among lexical collocations, idioms, and compounds

This section focuses on those structural combinations which may yield to confusion since they are shared by two or more MWL units.

In the case of lexical collocations and idioms, they have in common the phrases adjective+noun/noun+adjective (e.g., *black market*, *mercado negro*) where the adjective presents a figurative meaning, whilst the noun, that is, the base maintains its literal sense. According to Corpas Pastor (1996: 73), if the base allows for paradigmatic substitution without the adjective losing its abstract meaning (e.g., *black market/money*), the combination should be considered a collocation.

Regarding lexical collocations and compounds, the structural combinations that follow are shared by both types of MWL units: noun+noun (e.g., *dance hall*, *ciudad dormitorio*), noun+prep.+noun (e.g., *herd of buffalo*, *árbol del paraíso*), adjective+noun/ noun+adjective (e.g., *high school*, *mano negra*), adverb+adjective (e.g., *carefully worked*). Due to a lack of clarifying criteria in the literature, in this article the phrase noun+noun will not be considered a lexical collocation as Benson et al. (1986) suggested, but a compound (cf. Koike 2001), where the first noun, in the case of English (e.g., *land reform*→*land*), and the second noun, in the Spanish language (e.g., *visita relámpago*→*relámpago*), acts as a specifier of the other constituent. The combination noun+prep.+noun will be approached as a lexical collocation if the first noun indicates a unit or measure (e.g., *herd of buffalo*, *enjambre de abejas*); otherwise, it will be treated as a syntagmatic compound (e.g., *árbol del paraíso*). In the same way, the lexical phrases adverb+adjective (e.g., *carefully worked*) and adjective+noun/noun+adjective (e.g., *weak tea*, *correo electrónico*) will be regarded as lexical collocations if they are not hyphenated and are partially compositional.

Finally, Spanish multi-word expressions that are non-compositional such as *lágrimas de cocodrilo*, *cortina de humo*, *oro negro*, *pan comido* could be classified as

idioms (Corpas Pastor 1996) or compounds (Val Álvaro 1999). In this article, non-compositional noun+prep.+noun and noun+adjective phrases will be treated as idioms (e.g., *cortina de humo*, *pan comido*). On the other hand, compositional noun+prep+noun sequences (e.g., *árbol del paraíso*, *melón de agua*) will be considered syntagmatic compounds since the base (*árbol*, *melón*) retains its literal meaning and it does not indicate a unit or measure.

### 3. TEACHING MULTI-WORD LEXICAL UNITS IN AN L2

The explicit teaching of MWL units has not always been welcomed by scholars (cf. Krashen and Scarcella 1978; Yorio 1980; Schmidt 1983; Ellis 1984; Granger 1998). Yorio (1980) claims that adult L2 learners' production does not present extensive use of prefabricated MWL units, and when it does, they do not use them to further their language development. Ellis (1984) concludes that it is not necessary to teach MWL units explicitly due to their high frequency in the L2 input and their communicative power.

On the other hand, a considerable number of researchers (Willis 1990; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992; Irujo 1993; Lewis 1993; Wray 2000, 2002; Schmitt 2004; Boers and Lindstromberg 2005) have found evidence that the L2 learner may benefit from explicit teaching of MWL units. Among the gains, they are fundamental to maintain speech fluency and, in written expression, for the development of textual cohesion. In addition, Wray (2000) acknowledges that understanding where the difficulty of learning MWL units lays is the only way to provide a successful methodology.

Early attempts have been made to introduce MWL units into the syllabus in a principled way. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) focus on the usefulness of individual examples of sequences in teaching conversation. More specifically, they suggest practicing them in drills to develop fluency and confidence. Later on, the teacher should allow for controlled variation using substitution drills, so that students may analyze them further. However, Wray (2000) warns that not all formulaic phrases can be fully analyzed into different parts and, consequently learners will not be able to make generalizations about their grammar. Wood (2002) adds that the segmentation and analysis of formulaic sequences very much depend on the cognitive and learning styles of the L2 learner. Lewis (1993) proposes the selection of archetypical lexical phrases that are useful from a pragmatic perspective. Overall, he aims to reach a balance between rare words with a high lexical content and frequent sequences with a low lexical content. Wood's (2002) approach to formulaic language teaching methodology demands a large amount of exposure to natural, native-like input together with a great deal of interaction by means of negotiation-based tasks. Schmitt (2005-2006) claims that there should not exist a single pedagogical treatment to MWL units, as they are processed and stored in the learner's mind differently.

With reference to lexical collocations, studies on these combinations have proliferated over the last 20 years. The results of these studies indicate that it is

necessary to teach the concept of collocation (Bahns and Eldaw 1993; Nesselhauf and Tschichold 2002; Higuera 2004, 2007) and explicitly teach those collocations which are different in the students' L1 and their L2 in order to avoid mistakes caused by crosslinguistic influence in general and L1 transfer in particular (Corpas Pastor 1996; Gitsaki 1996; Castillo Carballo 2001; Koike 2001; Laufer and Girsai 2008). In addition, research shows that deficits in collocational knowledge are attributed in part to the excessive emphasis on traditional 'grammar' and the practice of 'free selection' of L2 vocabulary by textbook writers to the detriment of the principle of idiomaticity (Gitsaki 1996).

Concerning the literature related to teaching and learning collocations, Higuera (2007) points out that the concept of lexical collocation is frequently present in pedagogical resources for ESL/EFL vocabulary teaching, whereas in the case of L2 Spanish instruction, this concept cautiously appears in recently published teacher training books and texts that particularly center on vocabulary learning. This author, nonetheless, advises the explicit introduction of lexical collocations in the teaching of L2 Spanish.

As for the proficiency level to begin introducing lexical collocations, there is no established consensus. Castillo Carballo (2001) and Higuera (2007) assume the necessity to introduce them at the beginning level. Castillo Carballo (2001) argues that a lack of knowledge about combinatory restrictions imposed by usage and norm (Corpas Pastor 1996) is what separates the native speaker from the L2 learner. Thus, its early introduction in the L2 classroom is advisable. On the contrary, Hill (2000) points out that at the elementary level emphasis should be placed on learning individual lexical items. It will be at the intermediate level when students need to start increasing their collocational knowledge of vocabulary items that they already know. At levels above the intermediate, due to the great amount of extensive reading, priority should be given to learning word collocates in order for advanced learners to become more autonomous readers.

In the existing literature, various pedagogical proposals for teaching L2 lexical collocations have been put forward (Brown D. F. 1974; Lewis 1997, 2000; Higuera 2004). Higuera's (2004) proposal is based on language and language learning theories and it advises to train teachers on the concept of lexical collocations (this is considered one of the most original aspects of this proposal). Nonetheless, the pedagogical proposals advanced so far are rather limited in their scope together with no specifications of syllabus or course planning in terms of proficiency levels (Higuera 2004). Additionally, in these proposals there is a conspicuous absence of presentation techniques for lexical collocations and activities that practice these combinations within a truly communicative context. Thus, most of the practice is characterized by its controlled nature, that is, the learner needs either to recognize the collocation itself, a mechanical exercise, or to know the meaning of the words in order to obtain the correct collocation. This type of practice does not necessarily lead to the acquisition of L2

lexical collocations due to their non-compositional nature since, as expressed before, the collocate adopts certain features only in the presence of the base rather than in isolation.

Regarding idioms, Boers and Lindstromberg (2005) state that the methodology based on the memorization of a vast number of multi-word expressions proposed by Lewis (1993) in the Lexical Approach is not sufficient especially in a foreign language teaching context. Apart from the frequency and utility criteria, they propose a third selection criterion, that is, memorability. This last criterion can be tackled on the basis of the phonological salience (e.g., alliteration) and the etymology of multi-word expressions. The phonological salience of certain patterns, alliteration, consists in the repetition of word-initial consonants (e.g., *time will tell, done and dusted*). Boers and Lindstromberg (2005) researched the effect of alliteration in semi-fixed English idioms that shared the same frequency and phrase length. They found out that alliterating phrases were more likely to be recalled than non-alliterating ones. The second mnemonic technique, etymological elaboration, explores the possibility of presenting figurative idioms through their etymology to enhance their retention instead of the more traditional approach of mere memorization as the Lexical Approach offers (Boers et al. 2007). Boers et al. (2007) base their study on the findings of cognitive semantic research that focuses on figurative expressions. This research has revealed that the meaning of a high number of idioms is not arbitrary. In other words, the meaning of the figurative idiom may be inferred from the knowledge of its etymology. The authors concluded that the pedagogical technique of etymological elaboration not only helped learners understand the meaning of the figurative expression but it also facilitated its retention in the long term memory. In a recent paper by García Moreno (2011), the author suggests the use of etymology combined with other didactic tools such as illustrations, games, and dynamic exercises as an aid for teaching L2 idioms within a learner-centered pedagogy. In the studies reviewed above there is no explicit mention of the recommended language level to start instructing students in L2 idioms. As for compounds, no specific literature on teaching these combinations has been found.

#### 4. THE STUDY

The main goal of this study was to research the treatment given to the selection and practice of multi-word lexical units, that is, lexical collocations, compounds, and idioms, in 12 English textbooks (henceforth EngTBs) and 12 Spanish textbooks (henceforth SpaTBs) at three proficiency levels (i.e., beginning, intermediate, and advanced), four at each level. The analysis also provides a special emphasis on the treatment given to lexical collocations in the scrutinized textbooks, taking into account the weight that recent empirical studies have placed on the teaching of these combinations, as stated in the above section.

##### 4.1. *Instruments*

The 12 EngTBs and 12 SpaTBs analyzed were aimed at young adults (16-18) and adults (18 and older) and were published between 1999 and 2009 by European and North

American publishers. For admission as data in the present study, the textbooks were required to have been designed for non-intensive language study and have explicit vocabulary sections not shared with any language skills (e.g., reading or writing). An additional requirement was for the textbooks to include at least three skills besides the grammatical and lexical components.

The different vocabulary exercises/activities were analyzed following a typology<sup>ii</sup> based on the relative degree of control over the answer. This typology is an adaptation of Aski's (2003) classification. Previous proposals (cf. Lewis 1997, 2000; Higuera 2004) for the teaching of MWL units have not been considered since they have not been subjected to empirical evaluation. The typology employed in this study includes the following categories: (a) mechanical exercise: explicit comprehension of the lexical item is not necessary; there is only one correct answer (e.g., completing a word with the missing vowels and/or consonants); (b) closed exercise: a greater degree of comprehension of the target vocabulary is needed, and there is still only one option or valid answer (e.g., fill-in-the-blank exercises); (c) open activities: students are required to understand the target vocabulary, and there are various possible options and various valid answers and there may or may not be explicit information gaps<sup>iii</sup> (e.g., question-and-answer activities based on the target vocabulary, giving a definition of a word); (d) communicative activity: there is an open answer and/or a lexical choice that is necessary to complete the activity, along with explicit information gaps; the instructions ask students to interact with each other to achieve a predetermined final outcome which may not be reached individually (e.g., writing advertisements in pairs using the vocabulary provided); and (e) ambiguous exercise/activity is a single exercise or activity which contains features of more than one of the previously mentioned categories.

#### 4.2. Results

The results of the first part of the analysis (selection of vocabulary) show that the selection criteria for the vocabulary to be taught were not explicitly identified in most of the textbooks under scrutiny. Only two (8.33%) of these textbooks acknowledge the sources of the vocabulary included in them. These sources are "The Cambridge International Corpus", "The Cambridge Learner Corpus", and "Frecuencia de uso y estudio con especial aplicación a la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera, H004/2000".

In the practice of the EngTBs and the SpaTBs analyzed, the presence of lexical collocations and idioms is similar in both sets of textbooks, whereas in the EngTBs there is a much higher percentage of compounds than in the SpaTBs (see Figure 1).



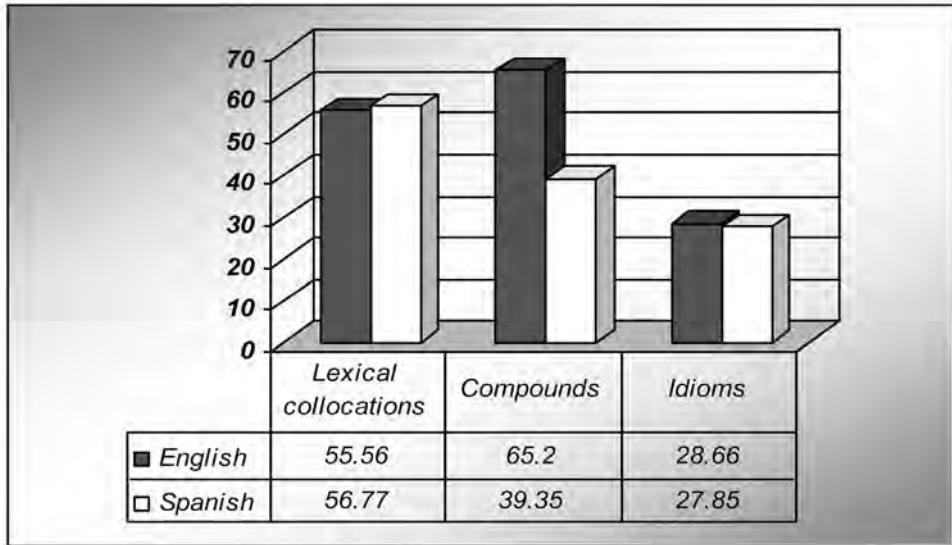


Figure 1. Presence of MWL units in the practice section.

Regarding the proficiency level of the TBs, the practice of MWL units increases in the intermediate and advanced TBs; however, in the case of the advanced SpaTBs it almost doubles the percentage of MWL units included in the beginning and intermediate SpaTBs (see Figure 2). Focusing on the (implicit and explicit) practice of lexical collocations, intermediate and advanced TBs were found to have a higher percentage of this type of combination than the beginning TBs (see Figure 3). A significant difference between the EngTBs and the SpaTBs lies in the fact that in the analyzed SpaTBs lexical collocations are not taught explicitly, whereas 83.3% of the EngTBs provide an explicit focus on this combination. In addition, among the EngTBs that teach collocations explicitly, 70% employ the term ‘collocation’, 20% identify these co-occurrences as ‘words that go together’ and 10% use the word ‘expression’. In 28.5% of the TBs where the term ‘collocation’ is used, there can be found lexical collocations, one-word compounds (*healthcare, painkiller*), grammatical collocations (*on business*), and idioms (*fight tooth and nail*).

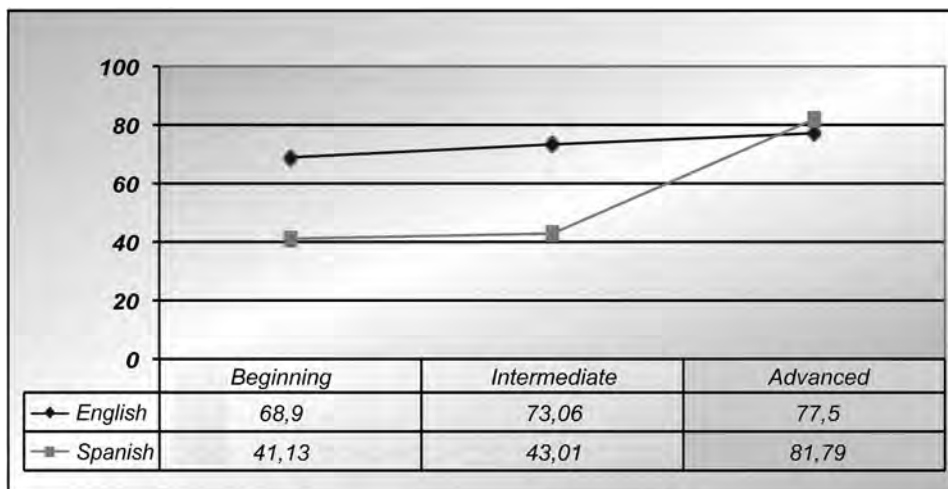


Figure 2. Practice of MWL units at different proficiency levels.

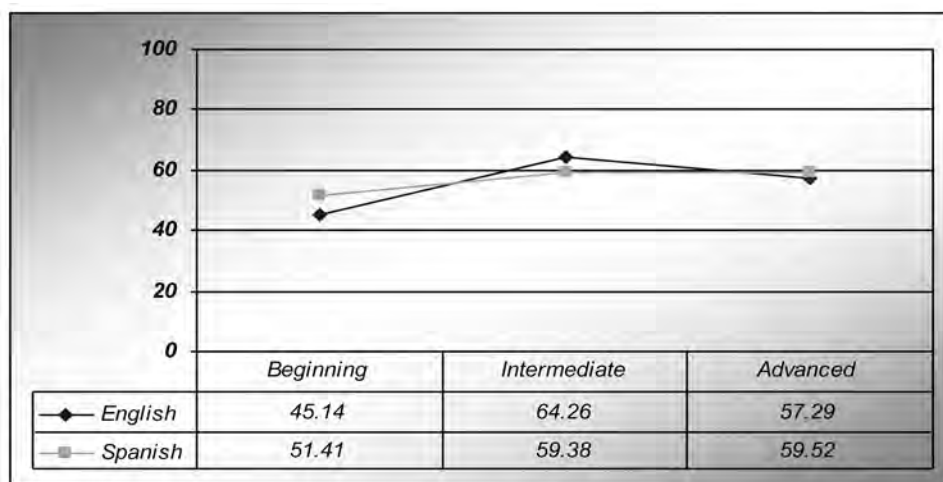


Figure 3. (Explicit and implicit) practice of lexical collocations.

In the practice of MWL units, closed exercises are the most frequent type followed by a discrete presence of open activities. Communicative activities remain absent in both sets of TBs (see Figure 4).

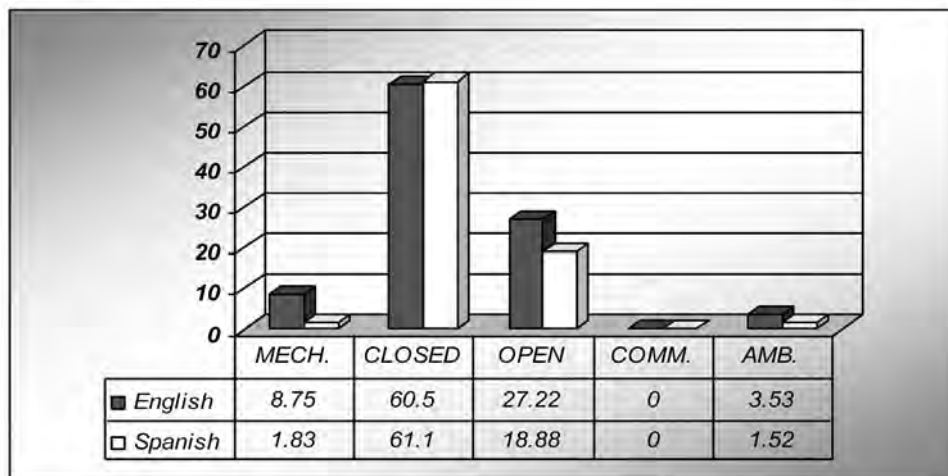


Figure 4. Practice of MWL units: Typology.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the analysis of the 24 textbooks under scrutiny indicate that vocabulary selection criteria appeared in only two of the textbooks. It is possible that the textbook writers have used the principle of free selection for the vocabulary taught in the other textbooks, without giving any consideration to factors such as idiomaticity, frequency, usefulness, etc.

With respect to the practice of MWL units, the higher percentage of compounds in the EngTBs compared to that found in the SpaTBs shows the propensity that English as a Germanic language has for forming compound words. In contrast, Spanish as a Romance language resorts to word compounding to a much lesser extent. It makes use of affixation as illustrated by the following examples: *gallina-gallinero/hen-henhouse* (Renner and Fernández-Domínguez 2011: 3).

The much higher number of MWL units in advanced SpaTBs could have been motivated by the traditional belief that advanced level learners are more suitable for the teaching of MWL units. Nonetheless, that belief lacks scientific support since none of the studies reviewed in Section 3 provides evidence in that respect, at least for idioms and compounds. Likewise, in the case of explicit and implicit practice of lexical collocations in EngTBs and SpaTBs, the results reveal that the textbook authors show a significant preference for these combinations at more advanced levels. The origin of this tendency has to be found again in the popular tradition among L2 teaching materials developers that more advanced learners are better prepared to acquire them since lexical collocations entail learning difficulties due to their combinatory restrictions. As stated in Section 3, there is no consensus among researchers on the proficiency level to start including them.

In addition, in those EngTBs where lexical collocations are taught explicitly, employing the term ‘lexical collocation’ as an umbrella one could also reflect the confusion over this concept in the literature as the multiple attempts to define it evince. Furthermore, in this study the non-explicit teaching of lexical collocations in the SpaTBs, as opposed to EngTBs where lexical collocations are explicitly taught in 83.3% of the books, may be traced back to the fact that the authors of the SpaTBs have taken no notice of the studies (cf. Gitsaki 1996; Koike 2001; Laufer and Girsai 2008) that advice the explicit teaching of L2 lexical collocations, especially those that are different in the learners’ L1 and L2.

Concerning the typology of exercises/activities, the overuse of closed exercises and the discrete presence of open activities could have been originated by the following: (a) a quite specific definition of communicative activity in this study, and/or (b) from a methodological perspective, the communicative approaches from the mid 90s tend to emphasize form whereas earlier communicative approaches focus on meaning. Thus, it is quite probable that the scrutinized TBs mirror this focus on form as their publication dates range from 1999-2009. A similar outcome was obtained in a recent study conducted by Brown, D. (2011) who, after researching the vocabulary activities in nine currently available general English textbooks at three proficiency levels, found out that form received by far the most attention in the textbooks across the different levels followed at quite a distance by activities that focused on constraints on use, associations, and collocations.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Judging from the results of the analysis, there is ground to state that the treatment given to MWL units in the EngTBs and the SpaTBs lacks systematicity and scientific rigor apart from being rather traditional.

The vocabulary selection criteria are not made explicit in most of the textbooks under scrutiny, which leads us to believe that the vocabulary selection is unsystematic and devoid of scientific rigor. This absence of systematicity is addressed by Sanaoui (1996: 194-195) who concludes that “lexical instruction is not conceived, planned, and organized in and for itself but is rather a by-product of curriculum planning organized around other aspects of language”. The unsystematicity that pervades vocabulary teaching can also be observed in the explicit practice of lexical collocations in the EngTBs as a diversity of multi-word expressions are classified under the term ‘lexical collocation’.

A traditional approach to the teaching of MWL units in the analyzed EngTBs and SpaTBs is deficient for the following reasons. First, the reviewed literature on lexical collocations (cf. Castillo Carballo 2001; Higuera 2004, 2007) is not unanimous in suggesting the suitability of including a larger presence of these units in more advanced TBs, as students from different proficiency levels tend to experience learning difficulties when trying to cope with these units. However, the analyzed textbooks follow the established practice, that is, advanced level students are better equipped to comprehend and produce these complex expressions.

Second, tradition is also present in the non-explicit teaching of lexical collocations in the SpaTBs. Research from the last two decades (cf. Bahns and Eldaw 1993; Gitsaki 1996; Laufer and Girsai 2008) that advises their explicit introduction and practice has been ignored in the SpaTBs. Finally, there is an overuse of closed exercises together with a total absence of communicative activities which seems to have been induced by a traditional approach to L2 vocabulary teaching.

From a pedagogical point of view, the results lead to the call for textbook authors to make vocabulary selection criteria explicit in order to avoid a random selection of the MWL units to be taught. Likewise, MWL units, at least what concerns lexical collocations, should be provided with the same amount of emphasis from the beginning level since prior research (Castillo Carballo 2001; Higuera 2004, 2007) does not indicate the appropriateness of reducing the learning of these combinations or enhancing it at advanced levels. Furthermore, in the case of the SpaTBs lexical collocations should be introduced and practiced explicitly, with a specific focus on those that differ in the student's L1 and the target language. Lastly, the inclusion of communicative activities and a greater number of open exercises are desirable in order to avoid a traditional approach that places its emphasis first and foremost on form.

## NOTES

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1. Except in the case of the combinations noun+prep.+noun and verb+prep.+noun.
2. This typology appears in a previous work by Abello-Contesse and López-Jiménez (2010).
3. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002: 257), in a communicative act between two or more people an information gap constitutes "a situation where information is known by only some of those present. In communicative language teaching it is said that in order to promote real communication between students, there must be an information gap between them, or between them and their teacher. Without such a gap the classroom activities and exercises will be mechanical and artificial".

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