

Teaching Spanish somatic idioms to Romanian students: theoretical and methodological considerations

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Abstract

This article aims to provide the necessary tools for teaching Spanish phraseological units to Romanian native speaker learners, applying the postulates of contrastive analysis, corpus linguistics and Phraseodidactics. Aware of the impossibility to cover an exhaustive range of semantic fields, we focus on verbal somatic idioms. Our purpose is to gather theoretical and methodological considerations that will provide more precise keys for designing didactic materials, which promote the acquisition of phraseological competence. We believe it is necessary to gradually integrate phraseological units in the learning/teaching process, not only for those who have already mastered a language, but also for those who start studying a foreign language.

Keywords: *phraseological units, contrastive phraseology, somatic idioms, Spanish as a Foreign Language.*

Introduction

We strongly believe that “learning a foreign language, as well as the social and cultural integration of a foreigner in the host linguistic community, also goes through phraseological integration, that is, the incorporation of the phraseological units into their discourse”¹ (Timofeeva, 2013, p. 323). Therefore, the students must be guided throughout the complex path towards the target language, facilitating the understanding and production of phraseological units (hereinafter PUs), so that their speech resembles (in communicative terms) a native speaker’s production. In addition, behind the idiomatic expressions lies an important cultural background and “the strong connection between phraseology and cultural component entails an

¹ El aprendizaje de una LE, así como la integración social y cultural de un extranjero en la comunidad lingüística de acogida, pasa también por la integración fraseológica, es decir, la incorporación de las UF a su discurso.

expansion of sociocultural knowledge of the student, that is linked to the time and the circumstances of the use of language”² (Mendizábal, 2016, p. 6).

Each segment of reality or experience finds a place in the idiomatic lexicon. García-Page (2008) identifies numerous semantical fields: professions, colors, musical instruments, culinary art and gastronomy, flora and agricultural products, animals, minerals and precious stones, household objects, clothing, climatology, astrology and natural phenomena, anthroponyms and gentilics, world of sports and bullfighting, sailing and transportation, religion, arts, monetary system, weapons, linguistic units, etc.

In this paper, we focus on those phraseological units which include a part of the body in their structure, the so-called “somatic phrases” or “somatic idioms” which are, according to Čermák (2000), those that spark the greatest interest. Somatic or corporal set expressions reflect the perception that any human being entails of the universe, regardless of a specific cultural or linguistic world. It is, in fact, a linguistic pattern and “apparently, in all the languages of the world there is a structuring of our experience directly linked to the human or animal body and the way in which it interacts with the environment”³ (Nénkova, 2006, p. 109). Moreover, the choice of this onomasiological field responds to other factors: the words designing the body are among the first ones that are taught and learned in a foreign language class and they do not usually pose any translations difficulties.

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Teachers have been the firsts to identify the need to introduce this authentic, motivating and integrating component into the Spanish as a Foreign Language (hereinafter S/FL) classroom. Somehow, they went ahead in their quest with studies of a more theoretical nature. González Rey (2012, p. 67) affirms that “the origin of the Phraseodidactics is located in the glotto-didactic or didactic of languages, where teachers express the first sign of interest towards the most vivid part of the language they teach.”⁴ Likewise, when creating and testing materials for foreign students, teachers have been able to ascertain that teaching phraseology

² La fuerte conexión entre fraseología y componente cultural supone para el estudiante de ELE una ampliación del conocimiento sociocultural que va unido a la época y circunstancias de uso de la lengua.

³ Al parecer, en todas las lenguas del mundo existe una estructuración de nuestra experiencia directamente vinculada al cuerpo humano o animal y a la manera en que se interactúa con el entorno.

⁴ El origen de la Fraseodidáctica se sitúa en la glotodidáctica o didáctica de las lenguas, en donde emergen las primeras manifestaciones de interés de docentes de lenguas extranjeras por la parte más viva de la lengua que enseñan.

means much more than presenting a series of multi-verbal expressions: we are dealing with a content that serves to teach an entire language.

In our view, some techniques and approaches appear as obsolete, such as memory lists without providing contexts or other restrictions of use or any information that configures the syntactic structure or encourages a correct pragmatic use. Likewise, an exhaustive presentation of expressions generated by support verbs (*estar, dar, poner, hacer, meter*) is counterproductive. Phraseology is not acquired as a(n) (ir)regular verb conjugation table, but rather involves complex processes that go beyond formal, strictly linguistic aspects. “The information is not randomly stored in our memory, nor is it arranged alphabetically, but rather by establishing relationships with prior data. Our way of thinking is determined by two fundamental processes: associating and classifying.”⁵ (Leal Riol, 2011, p. 246)

In our specific case of somatic idioms, we strongly agree with Diamante Colado (2003) and Moreno Pereiro (2006) who apply cognitive postulates to the teaching of these set expressions, following the experiential theories of Lakoff and Johnson (1980): the basis of our thinking is bodily and we (as speakers) categorize reality through basic metaphors which represent the explanatory foundation of a multitude of expressions. The phraseological units are, from the cognitive semantics standpoint, the linguistic reflection of the corporeal character of the mind.

Another important aspect is the balance between reflective and productive skills and the integration of functional and cultural content that must be taken into account, encouraging interaction in the classroom. Our teaching experience matches López Vázquez’s conclusions (2011): after analyzing the presence of the idiomatic component in numerous Spanish textbooks, she considers that

*We also have to draw attention to the fact that these textbooks focus on receptive phraseological competence, that is, the ability of learners to decipher and recognize these units, but neglect the ability to produce them, since there are very few cases of exercises in which learners must reuse expressions.*⁶ (López Vázquez, 2011, p. 540)

⁵ La información no se almacena en la memoria aleatoria ni aisladamente, tampoco se ordena alfabéticamente, sino estableciendo relaciones con la información ya existente. Nuestra forma de pensar está determinada por dos procesos fundamentales: asociar y clasificar.

⁶ También tenemos que llamar la atención sobre el hecho de que estos manuales se centran en la competencia fraseológica receptiva, es decir, en la habilidad de los aprendientes para descifrar y reconocer estas unidades, pero desatienden la habilidad para producirlos, ya que son muy escasos los casos de ejercicios en los cuales los aprendientes deben reutilizar las expresiones.

Hence, we are in favor of the didactic concept of action-oriented methodology, we defend the student's central position in the teaching/learning process and we consider "learning by doing" a fundamental principle in this endeavour.

We also want to highlight the amount of phraseological input inserted in the teaching materials. We assume that at certain times the number of exponents might be slightly higher than the natural production of a native speaker and we agree with Serradilla Castaño (2014) that

*Fortunately for Spanish learners, we do not usually introduce so many idioms in a row in our usual language, but it is no less true that we use them regularly in spoken and written language, so it won't be difficult to find real materials for our students when leaning Spanish phraseology.*⁷ (Serradilla Castaño, 2014, p. 83)

Ultimately, we strive to avoid overwhelming our students with endless idiomatic expressions, which use seem strained in real life. However, our teaching experience confirms that a suitable contextualization fosters a high number of idiomatic elements that learners do not perceive as excessive.

Both curricular documents which guide us in the teaching/learning process of Spanish as a Foreign Language (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment – 2001 and Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes – 2006) assign the study of phraseology to C1/C2 levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, we are strong supporters of an earlier introduction of the set expressions. Julià Luna and Ortiz Rodríguez (2012) designed methodological proposals focused on the gastronomic lexicon, covering the complete curricular itinerary (levels A1-C2⁸).

A teaching proposal has been created for each level, and the PUs are integrated as part of the learning process consisting of tasks reflecting different linguistic skills and connected to essential factors in the learning of idioms of any language (the meaning, the use, and the metaphor behind). It is an integrative and transversal method. (Julià Luna & Ortiz Rodríguez, 2012, p. 12)

⁷ Afortunadamente para los aprendientes de ELE, no solemos introducir tantas locuciones seguidas en nuestra lengua habitual pero no es menos cierto que recurrimos a ellas con asiduidad en la lengua hablada y escrita por lo que no será difícil encontrar materiales reales con los que enfrentar a nuestros estudiantes a la fraseología del español.

⁸ Para cada uno de los niveles se ha creado una propuesta docente en la que las UFS se integran como parte del aprendizaje en tareas de distintas destrezas lingüísticas y en relación a factores esenciales en el aprendizaje de fraseologismos de cualquier lengua (el significado, el uso y la motivación de las formaciones). Se trata de un método integrador y transversal.

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Likewise, they suggest a series of criteria to take into account when introducing the phraseological component in the classroom, among which we highlight the relationship with the sociolinguistic context, the frequency of use, the onomasiological organization or the link between the origin or cognitive schema and meaning. In a later work (2013), they focus on somatic idioms and, from the cognitive semantics standpoint, they present a transversal and progressive proposal for the recognition, understanding and reproduction of a series of phraseological units. They highlight the importance of the presence of the idiomatic expressions from the initial stages of learning a language (A1) to the end of it (C2).

Finally, we consider that the materials and the activities designed should meet the requirements expressed by modern approaches such as “post-method” (Brown, 2002) or “eclectic method” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Based on three fundamental organizational principles (particularity, practicability and possibility), teachers must take into account several other aspects, for instance: maximizing learning opportunities, facilitating negotiated interaction, developing intuitive learning, promoting language awareness, contextualizing the input, ensuring social relevance.

Teaching phraseology (levels A1-A2)

For the initial levels, our purpose is to promote linguistic awareness and help learners to develop the association process established between the units, not only at the phonetic, morphosyntactic or discursive level, but also at the non-linguistic level: visual stimuli, cultural knowledge, etc. Therefore, we propose to expand the learners’ mental lexicon towards the phraseological universe, conceived as an associative network of words structured and organized in interconnected networks, in constant movement and expansion (Aitchison, 1987).

The phraseological component should be introduced in a very subtle way, taking advantage of authentic or credible “samples”. Needless to say, intermediary activities are essential, since we do not build a whole didactic unit around a series of phraseological units, but integrate the idiomatic segments in a natural way.

Likewise, we have noticed that in modern materials the learner's mother tongue is banished. Although as a methodological principle we support the total immersion in the Spanish as a Foreign Language classroom, Romanian students constantly demand the equivalence of the PUs in their mother tongue, which gives them security. For this reason, despite the “bad press” that traditional method techniques receive, we consider necessary to respect the long educational tradition of our students.

When referring to translation as a verbal technique for conveying the meaning of a PU, Leal Riol (2011) considers that the target language should be used if the student's level of communicative competence allows it, but "translation can save a lot of time and, in addition, we gain precision and accuracy as long as the phraseological unit refers to the same extralinguistic reality and its meaning is shared in both languages."⁹ (Leal Riol, 2011, p. 242)

Unlike Julià Luna and Ortiz Rodríguez (2012), we consider establishing a high number of PUs per level to be an unattainable goal and quantifying the input proves itself impossible to reach.

*(...) each level would not exceed the presentation of 200 PUs and at the end of the learning process the student would be able to recognize 1,200 PUs. This is obviously a guideline number since we do not believe that language learning is really quantifiable. However, the progressive presentation of a certain number of PUs would allow the apprentice to become familiar with this type of structures, their use and characteristics.*¹⁰ (Julià Luna & Ortiz Rodríguez, 2012, p. 14)

As a final consideration, contextualization plays a fundamental role as it guarantees optimal results in the learning process from the beginner levels.

Somatic idioms (A1-A2): *no abrir la boca, no tener dos dedos de frente, tener la cabeza sobre los hombros, estar mal de la cabeza, peinar canas, hablar por los codos, tener un corazón de oro, ser el ojito derecho, tener los pies en el suelo, no tener ni pies ni cabeza, no tener dos dedos de frente, tomar el pelo, costar un ojo de la cara, etc.*

Communicative content: physical and personality traits description; conversation about daily routine; conversations about prices; objects descriptions, etc.

Objectives: enhance phraseological competence through contextualized somatic idioms; reinforce somatic idioms by activating the image of the somatic lexeme; encourage cognitive reflection on the nature of PUs (with or without correlation in Romanian); reflect on the search for idiomatic equivalences; provide cultural content (television programs, comics, music and film) as a motivating

⁹ La traducción puede ahorrar mucho tiempo y, además, ganamos precisión y exactitud siempre que la unidad fraseológica se refiera a la misma realidad extralingüística y su significado sea compartido en los dos idiomas.

¹⁰ Cada uno de los niveles no superaría la presentación de 200 UFS y al final del aprendizaje de la lengua el estudiante llegaría a poder reconocer 1.200 UFS. Se trata, evidentemente, de una cifra orientativa puesto que no creemos que el aprendizaje lingüístico sea realmente cuantificable. No obstante, la presentación progresiva de cierto número de UFS permitiría que el aprendiz se familiarizara con este tipo de formaciones, su uso y sus características.

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support for practicing somatic set expressions; promote multilingual competence and mediator competence; encourage learners' autonomy and the use of lexicographical sources, etc.

Teaching phraseology (levels B1-B2)

Compared to previous levels, the (upper)intermediate levels offer the learners more linguistic resources in order to carry out complex tasks. Hence, the phraseological component takes on more prominence and, on occasions, can represent the backbone of didactic proposals. At these levels, it is possible to integrate a higher input of phraseological units and take advantage of “realia” - samples and objects from real life used in classroom instruction. A foreign student should be able to understand (and subsequently properly produce) a somatic idiom that Spanish native speakers would freely express. Nevertheless, considering the vast community of Spanish speakers and the huge number of diatopic variables, it is essential to carry out a previous selection.

We agree with Aguilar Ruiz (2011) in her strive to answer the challenging question “what phraseology to teach”, of the very high number of diatopic variants.

We must emphasize here that what is truly important for the student is to correctly learn the proposed phraseological units, paying special attention to the pragmatic aspects so as to be able to apply them in adequate situations, and, above all, avoiding possible interference with their mother tongue.¹¹ (Aguilar Ruiz, 2011, p. 3)

In this respect, and from our teaching and research experience, we propose to exclusively select idioms belonging to the variety of standard Spanish spoken in Spain. Therefore, we discard all those archaic, dialectal or disused expressions whose meaning is unknown by all native speakers. We also exclude vulgar and slang lexemes such as *culo*, *coño*, *cojón*, etc., despite them generating a high number of somatic idioms and having an active use in nowadays Spanish. We consider that the presence of these somatic idioms is not justified in materials for the initial and intermediate level curriculum, since learners do not yet master the speech registers (educated norm, formal, informal register, etc.). Therefore, these vulgar elements carry the risk of pragmatic errors in future productions.

¹¹ Hemos de hacer hincapié aquí en que lo verdaderamente importante para el alumno es aprender correctamente las UFS propuestas, prestando especial atención a los aspectos pragmáticos para poder aplicarlas en situaciones adecuadas, y evitando, ante todo, posibles interferencias con su lengua materna.

In terms of techniques and practical activities, we continue to take advantage of visual resources, brainstorming, activating previous lexical knowledge and encouraging reflection and self-learning strategies. We are convinced that motivation is an essential factor and one of the teacher's fundamental tasks is to fulfill students' interest, since they are the true protagonists of their learning process. In this sense, we agree with Kaufmann's perspective:

In the most effective classrooms, it is not the language that is studied, but some other subject of interest to the students. In studying another subject, the learners absorb the language, and are less self-conscious about their own language difficulties in their enthusiasm to communicate about something of interest to them. After the learners are exposed to a sufficient amount of interesting content by listening and reading in the language, they gradually become aware of the need for correct structure and word use. Then they are motivated to work on these aspects of the language. It is best if the learners ask for help as they need it, rather than having to respond to the timetable of the teacher. The teacher is able to correct the students privately or on written content and to offer relevant grammatical explanations as required. The classroom can be a useful learning environment if it is used in a flexible way which puts the learner and not the teacher in control. (Kaufmann, 2003, p. 97)

For this reason, the activities must be playful, dynamic and fun, to encourage students' creativity. Therefore, they must be designed to last in their affective memory on the long term. The selected readings must have a wider extension and represent authentic texts, sometimes manipulated according to the phraseological objectives pursued. Many activities start from the fundamental premise that we can understand the main topic using our experience and knowledge of the concrete. The basic meanings serve us, therefore, to obtain the rest of the meanings through metaphoric and metonymic relationships, an extremely useful concept for understanding many somatic idioms.

Somatic idioms (B1-B2): *ser un bocazas, quemarse las cejas, empinar el codo, arrimar el hombro, no dar pie con bola, tener la mosca detrás de la oreja, poner pies en polvorosa, quedarse con los ojos a cuadros, echar una mano, darse con un canto en los dientes, morderse la lengua, clavar un puñal por la espalda, jugarse el cuello, poner toda la carne en el asador, etc.*

Communicative content: write a report; explain an event; tell a story; narrate experiences; express plans and projects; debate on cultural traditions and clashes; create advertising campaigns, etc.

Objectives: identify phraseological input in real contexts, carry out the process of decoding and provide suitable contexts to reuse UFs effectively; reflect on connotative and denotative meaning; expand lexical competence through

idioms ascribed to numerous communicative functions: “feelings” (happiness, satisfaction, frustration, anger, etc.), “communicative actions” (express menace, complaint, denial), “everyday realities” (work, studies, money, fortune, etc.).

Conclusions

In this paper, we outlined a series of theoretical and methodological guidelines for designing teaching materials whose aim is to improve the phraseological competence of Romanians who learn Spanish as a Foreign Language (levels A1-B2) and several requirements for the materials to be effective. We were motivated by the fact that, despite the growing number of Spanish-Romanian contrastive phraseological studies that we have witnessed in recent years, we still lack large-scale didactic and applied works or relevant developments in the publishing market.

Despite the guidelines of the fundamental curricular documents in the teaching of S/FL, we consider that the integration of the language component must be carried out from the first stages of learning, with a gradual subsequent integration. Therefore, a careful selection of the phraseological input is necessary, taking into account numerous factors: the students’ needs, the integration of the FUs within the functional contents, the degree of difficulty (lexical and morphosyntactic, etc.). We consider that “less is more”, that is, it is better to carry out a careful selection, according to students' interest, than to overwhelm them with an amount of unnecessary input. The presence of a motivated metaphor, the total equivalence of somatic idioms or a similar actantial structure eases the insertion of the expression at a lower level (A1-A2), while the opacity, the idiosyncratic cultural background or the morphosyntactic and semantic complexity assign a PU to higher levels (B1-B2 and beyond).

As researchers and teachers, we must take account of our students’ needs and quests in order to design materials and activities that bring them a little closer to the target language. The acquisition of phraseological competence represents a fundamental part of their global communicative competence.

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