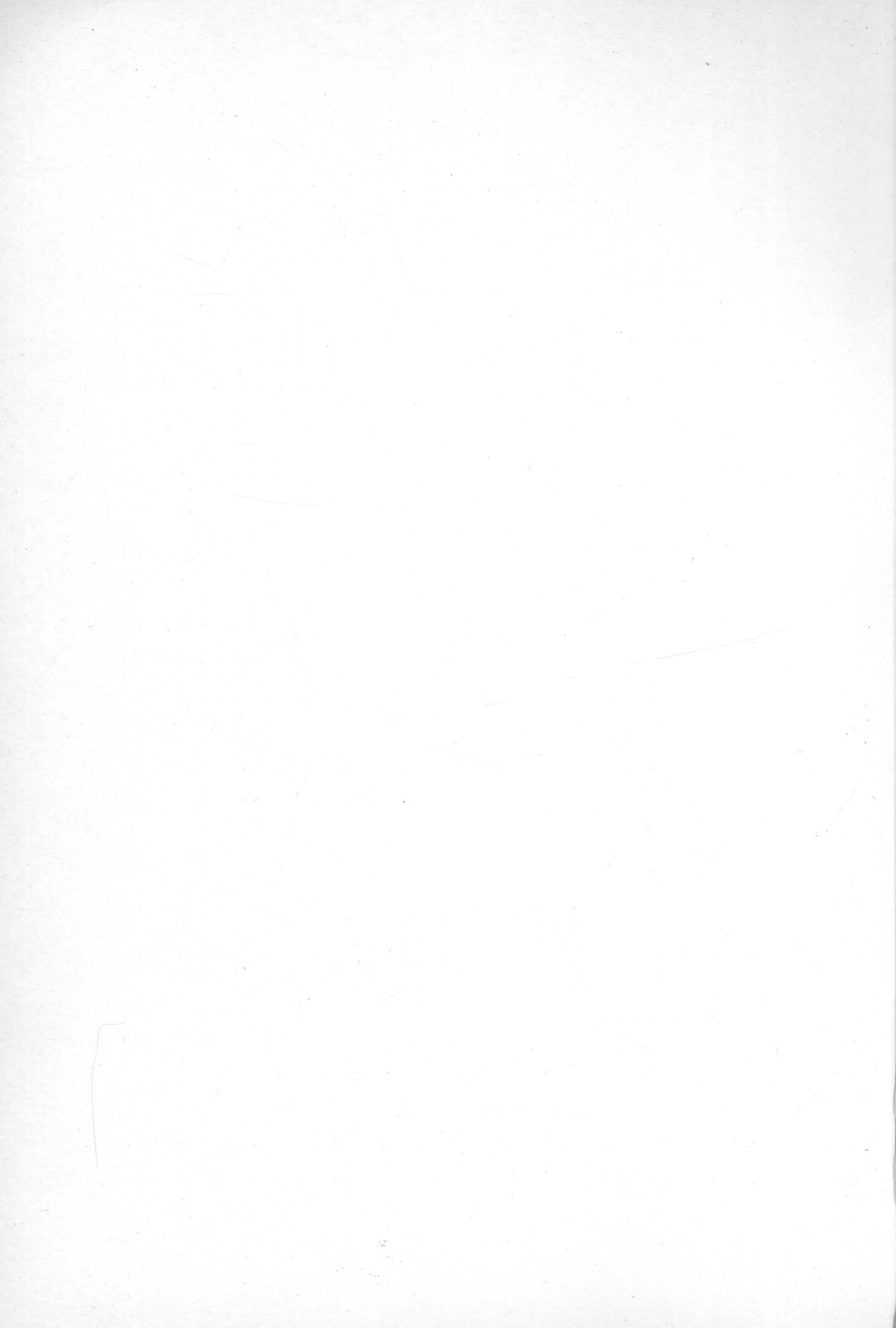


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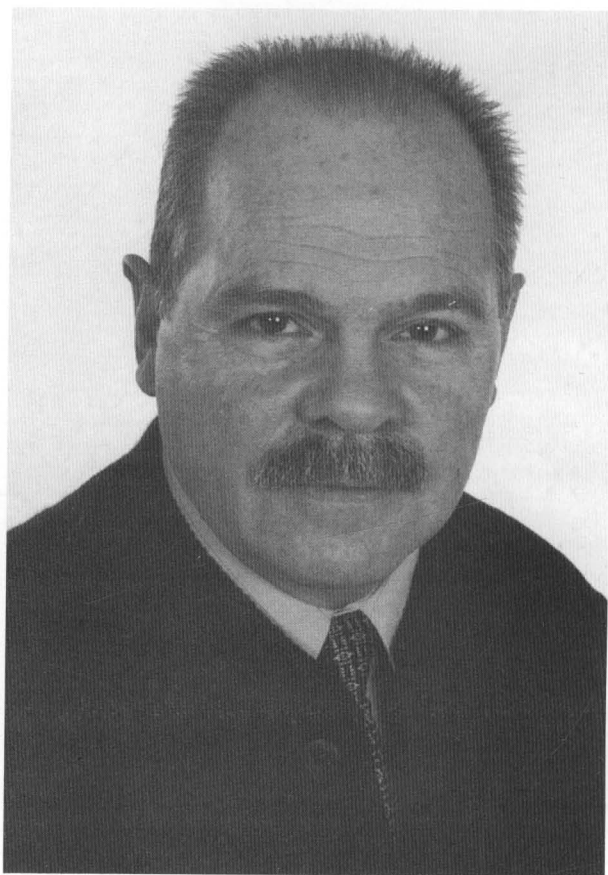




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Adres Redakcji:

Katedra Glottodydaktyki i Translatoryki UAM
ul. 28 Czerwca 1956 r. nr 198
61-485 POZNAŃ, Poland
tel. (+48-61) 831 12 19, tel./fax (+48-61) 831 12 48

e-mail: iprok@amu.edu.pl

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VOCABULARY IN LSP: A CASE STUDY OF PHRASES AND COLLOCATIONS

ABDULLAH KHUWAILEH
Jordan University of Science and Technology

Background

In Jordan, English has attained a higher status and it is the second language spoken most widely after Arabic. In universities, English is inevitable in all scientific faculties and departments and in JUST, it is the language of instruction of all scientific subjects. These conditions have resulted in offering two ESP courses which are compulsory to all students in JUST. Ever since the establishment of JUST in 1986, it has been noticed that vocabulary is a major issue in our ESP courses. Consequently, word-formation exercises have been taught and vocabulary tests were conducted. The vocabulary materials and tests carried out in JUST have revealed a number of weaknesses in this area. Deceptive phrases and collocations are a case in point which have started to pose communicational problems for our learners who cannot survive in their subject departments without the good mastery of English vocabulary including phrases and collocations. Therefore, the findings of this paper are significant to both ESP and EFL Arab learners for two reasons. First, most Jordanian and Middle Eastern university professors or teachers are graduates of English abroad (e.g., USA, UK, etc.) and therefore they use deceptive phrases and collocations in lecturing, while their learners are not aware of the precise meaning of these words. Second, most Arab countries have similar English curricula, usually co-ordinated by the Arab League and consequently Arab learners of English have had similar linguistic problems.

Literature

In language learning, vocabulary is a major element which poses problems to ESP/EFL learners. It is a significant element because without a good repertoire of vocabulary, learners cannot master their foreign language and therefore their communication with others can be interrupted. Leech (1985:4) argues that words play a central role in language use because they link grammar with language products. For example, on the sentence level, a speaker of any language needs to think first of the grammatical rules and then of words needed in order to be able to

produce a spoken or written sentence. Moreover, Ulijn (1995:132) argues that „The lexical or vocabulary knowledge of the reader has an important effect on how the reader copes with text”.

The problematic side of vocabulary results from its changing nature which can be due to the changing nature of language in general and to the scientific, industrial and technological advances. Ulijn (1995:101-3) notes that vocabulary is dynamic because language is very dynamic and therefore there seems to be a constant increase in our lexical reservoir.

In ESP in particular and in the early days of ESP (e.g., 1960s and 1970s), vocabulary was a neglected area and some ESP practitioners and thinkers went further by excluding ESP teachers from teaching vocabulary. Higgins (1967:32) notes that it is not the job of the English teacher to teach vocabulary because it consumes too much time. But early in 1980s, ESP thinkers started to realise the importance of vocabulary (McCarthy 1984:12 and Widdowson 1983:93). Robinson (1990:71) argues that: „Vocabulary is a key issue in ESP and some courses are based exclusively on it”.

Moreover, Swales (1985:214) reckons that: „Until we find ways of ensuring the collaboration of learners, practitioners and specialised lexicographers and lexicologists in the experiment and trailing of new and more effective ways of coping with the vocabulary problems, I do not think ESP can really be said to have come of age”.

Obviously, the quotations reveal the significance of vocabulary in ESP. Nevertheless, within the concept of vocabulary, the issue of phrases and/or collocations seems to be a problem in ESP. This area of vocabulary is described by Meara (1980:221) as a neglected research topic because the acquisition of this area could be difficult to investigate. The same point was echoed by Carter (1987:187).

Palmer (1979:75-9) indicates that collocations and phrases are a problematic area for both native speakers and learners of English. In addition, Robinson (1980:71) states that these expressions should be taught and dealt with in ESP: „It is not single words which are always difficult, but phrases, so that common combinations of words should be taught, not just the individual items of a discipline”.

A collocation is defined by Kane (1983:722) as: „Simply a group of words making a small unit of meaning within the larger framework of a clause or a sentence”.

Besides, phrases are considered important for writers of English (ibid 1983:722) as they have grammatical and meaningful functions. Collocations are also important since they make the spoken and the written language stimulating and interesting (ibid: 414-18).

Nonetheless, the acquisition of this kind of vocabulary is not as simple to EFL/ESP learners as it might be to native speakers of English. Crystal (1987:105)

notes that: „Collocations...provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages...The more fixed a collocation is, the more we think of it as an ‘idiom’ – a pattern to be learned as a whole, and not as the ‘sum of its parts’ ”.

Flavell (1995:148) argues that: A major difficulty from the user’s perspective is that idioms do not mean what the individual words in them would lead you to expect. This is particularly problematic for a non-native speaker. Is a given phrase to be interpreted literally or is it a metaphor or an idiom? In the last two cases, which of the various potential figurative meanings is the one accepted by common use. These are real problems for non-natives.

As early as 1940s, Bally (1944:155), quoted in Vinay and Darbelnet (1995: 157) states that the acquisition of phrases and collocations is not simple, but at the same time, it is important because they form a relationship of grammatical interdependence. Bally (ibid) also argues that „These combinations can be interconnected and cover the whole sentence, the subject and the predicate combining to form a new syntagmatic unit”.

At this stage of this overview, it seems that two points are worth mentioning. First, phrases and collocations in general are important in English Language since they are used heavily on the one hand, and because they express exactly and interestingly what the speaker and the writer want to say on the other hand. Second, in 1990s, it cannot be claimed that phrases and collocations are excluded from LSP/ESP because it is difficult to separate colloquial English from formal English (see the rationale below). The separation between these varieties seems to be as difficult as the separation between North American English and British English. Both varieties are used satisfactorily nowadays and listeners and readers of English would not be worried about the switching from one variety into another. Thomas (1990: 89) argues that the line between formal English into informal/colloquial English is not at all clear and many words considered colloquial by some people would be considered formal by others. It follows from this argument that collocations and phrases are worth investigating in ELT in general, and in LSP/ESP in particular because they can pose problems to learners of English.

Rationale

We believe that this study can be justified and significant for a number of reasons. First, the above literature overview shows that vocabulary in ESP is crucial and worth studying in general; and phrases and collocations are a neglected area in ESP in particular. Second, through our preliminary classroom observations, it seems that our learners find a considerable difficulty in perceiving or producing the phrases and collocations in question. As mentioned above, Arab learners of English are similar in their educational and linguistic background because in most cases, the Arab League co-ordinates school curricula among Arab countries. Third, a number of structured interviews were conducted with four JUST subject

professors (scientific teachers) who revealed that they sometimes used these phrases and collocations which were misunderstood by their learners and consequently miscommunicated. The purpose of these interviews was to fuel and give ground to our hypothesis which resulted from our classroom observations, as mentioned above.

Methodology

The sample of this investigation consisted of eighty ESP adult learners who were chosen randomly and who had already finished their first year at JUST and four professors. At the time of data collection, they were all involved in taking the second ESP compulsory course. Accordingly, the learners were in their post-intermediate level of English. The phrases and collocations chosen to serve the objective of this study were ten, chosen in co-ordination with the subject teachers who revealed the phrases or collocations frequently used in their everyday lecturing. The methods followed were based on three stages. Firstly, individual items/words were taught. Their individual meanings and entries were explained and taught thoroughly through context. We chose to teach them contextualised because we believe that contextual clues enable learners to guess or conquer unknown vocabulary.

Secondly, the phrases and collocations, collocated to form new different meanings, were contextualised and underlined in sentences. All the subjects were instructed to work out the meanings of the underlined parts and to give their meanings in English and Arabic. We avoided giving them multiple choices with answers because we wanted them to state freely and spontaneously what they thought of their meanings. Experience has revealed that our learners think that they know the meanings of this category of phrases, but they really do not know them properly. Therefore closed choices were avoided to reveal their images and thoughts of what they have thought (Cohen and Manion 1980:105). Thirdly, the learners' responses were graded out of ten by two specialists, and their frequencies were calculated and tabulated. Where possible, we suggested the reasons of misunderstanding or miscommunication raised by the learners. Finally, we interviewed ten learners to reveal the reasons behind their inaccurate guessing.

Results

In this section, we will discuss the responses of the learners to show the way under which they perceive this kind of vocabulary on the basis of their context. Where possible, their perception will be attributed to the conditions which made them put the meanings listed. In general, the learners' level of performance was not satisfactory if we relate the meanings they gave to the meanings given in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary. This is shown by the inaccurate meanings perceived

and given, and the low average of their performance (3.9 out of ten). In addition, the application of the chi squared test has shown that the results were statistically significant (0.000) which implies that the learners' responses are associated and representative. For example, regarding the phrase 'a piece of cake', twenty seven learners misunderstood it and suggested 'a gift or a present' as the intended meaning in the context of sentence one.

A plausible explanation for this response is probably due to the literal understanding and the literal translation of that phrase. This phenomenon is not in line with the good methods of vocabulary teaching and learning (Helti 1989: 288). It seems that our learners think first in Arabic and then translate into English which made them understand 'a piece of cake' as a reward (that can be eaten) of conducting the experiment. Kaur (1993:53) notes that a learner of EFL tends to use, though unconsciously, features of his native language. This point could be in line with our justification stated above. Moreover, five learners suggested: 'a small part of something' as the right meaning. They probably suggested the word „small” because they related it to the word „piece” in the phrase „a piece of cake”. This also could be due to the literal understanding of the phrase in question as the learners put what it implied literally. On the other hand, more than half the learners (forty eight) gave the right meaning: 'easy/very easy'. Their right responses can be explained by the right and proper use of contextual clues given in first sentence. For example, the phrase „successfully conducted” seems the reasons behind the learners' right guesses. This comes in agreement with what vocabulary thinkers believe as context is extremely important in deciding meanings of words (Dubin 1989:248). In addition, Hornby (1982) indicates in his introduction that „A word in isolation is a dead word. It comes to life when it occurs in a sentence”.

As far as the second sentence is concerned, the majority of learners (fifty one) failed to give the right meaning of 'do the sights'. Besides, the second meaning given by twelve learners is not accurate too. These results could be due to the failure of making the proper use of context. In other words, the contextual clues given in this sentence (e.g., in all the three laboratories) were used wrongly. Even the word 'do' seems to have been understood as a verb to indicate the action of experimenting. An appropriate explanation for this understanding might be related to the combination of 'do' and 'sight'. Maybe the learners are not familiar with this combination, but they are familiar with combinations like: „have a look, watch”, etc. Only fifteen learners (less than 20%) managed to figure out the right meaning. Either these learners have a high command of English or they successfully manage to use the contextual clues.

Considering the phrase: 'run in', only thirty learners managed to guess its meaning properly. Perhaps these learners made a good use of: 'should not exceed 50 kilometre'. While this is the case with these thirty learners, other fifty learners failed to work out the right meaning which is also probably due to their failure of

using the context. For example, twenty one understood the phrase in question as: 'driving very fast'. This wrong guess in this particular context might be explained by the connotation of the meaning of the word: 'run' alone without its combination with the preposition 'in'. That is to say, the learners could have compared 'run' with 'walk' or 'hurry' and then they found 'run' as a verb which indicates speed. Other learners (twenty nine) who gave the meaning: 'to enter into a place while driving' could have been deceived by two factors. First, they probably translated the preposition 'in' literally and, accordingly, they thought that the action of driving took place in a narrow space (e.g., a garage or a narrow avenue). They could have been deceived by the adverbs: 'properly' and 'carefully' and, consequently, they predicted that the action of driving took place in a narrow place too.

Regarding the collocation 'a short cut', the learners performance came satisfactory as fifty two of them reported the right meaning: 'easier or short way/road'. Their right guessing is possibly attributed to the frequent use of the collocation 'short cut'. In most languages, there are always words which are used frequently; and, simultaneously, other words are rarely used or have a very low percentage of occurrence. The collocation 'short cut' represents the former group of words. Unfortunately, more than twenty five learners gave vague and wrong guessing. This could be due to the multiple meanings of the word 'cut'. For example, in the Oxford Dictionary (1992:104), there are two entries for the word 'cut' with about 10 meanings for each. The Meaning number eleven indicates: 'block or obstruct'. This might justify the learners' wrong list of guessing (e.g., fault: one learner, closed end: seven and a narrow road: eighteen). As for the phrase 'look up', more than half of the respondents (forty eight) managed to guess its meaning as 'respect, admire or proud of'. Perhaps the contextual clue: 'plenty of money' was interpreted by the learners as a positive element and, accordingly, they figured the above mentioned meanings. Although the other meanings (deal with, wish to be like and is equal to) are not as good as 'respect' or 'admire', they also have an element of reality in the sense that 'respect' or 'admire' imply these given meanings. For example, if we admire somebody, we may like to be like him/her. On the other hand, seventeen learners seemed to be confused about the differentiation between 'look up' and 'look for' and eight learners mixed up 'look up' with 'look after'. This seems to imply that our learners have a shaky background on phrasal verbs. For example, when the verb takes a number of prepositions (e.g., look up, look at, look for, look after etc.), the learners find it difficult to avoid confusion of these categories (see also Khuwaileh's arguments on classroom confusion (1995b)).

Considering the collocation: 'back seat driver', one may obviously notice that the learners took its meaning literally. This is shown by the following meanings: 'no need for extra/spare drivers: fourteen learners, the back seat is empty (vacant):

fifteen and keep sitting on your seat'. sixteen. The meanings given by the learners in d and e (a strange person, help, interfere, give too much advice) might be acceptable in the context given. In addition, thirty five learners reported other acceptable meanings because they probably were helped by: 'No, thank you, we are capable of bringing...'.
The meanings of the collocation: 'the tip of the iceberg' reported by the learners were fairly good in the sense that more than half the learners (forty six) stated that the collocation meant: 'the beginning of the problem' which is the right meaning intended. Only thirteen learners reported 'the peak or the result of something' as the right meanings and twenty one of them reported: 'the beginning of the truth (white truth) as the appropriate meaning. Although these guessing are quite right, the collocation in question may sometimes imply some elements of these two meanings. For example, 'the beginning of the truth' can imply 'the beginning of the problem'. Whereas the truth may be positive to some people, it may be negative to other people and, consequently, it can indicate the beginning of the problem. Moreover, 'the peak or the result of something' may also, in a certain context', reveal the beginning of the problem. In short, the acceptable performance of our learners could be attributed to the frequent use of this collocation in the Jordan Times, a Jordanian Daily Newspapers published in English and available at JUST library, as three of the interviewed students revealed. It follows from this observation that there seems to be a correlation between reading newspapers in English and the improvement of learners' vocabulary proficiency. Besides, the contextual clue: 'just' implies that something could happen soon. This means that our learners could have been helped by this clue. Nevertheless, the learners reported completely unsatisfactory meanings for the phrase 'pass out'. Except a very small minority (eight) who gave right meanings (faint/fall down), all the learners reported vague and inappropriate meanings. This implies that our learners had an unclear picture of the phrase 'pass out' on the one hand, and they mixed it up with 'pass by' (e.g., walk quickly: six learners, leave out forty seven, lost ten, etc.) on the other hand. An appropriate explanation for this finding could be due to the rare use of 'pass out' and the frequent use of 'pass by' in everyday English at JUST since a considerable number of native speaker of English (e.g., British, American, etc.) are employed by JUST. Another plausible justification for the learners' confusion is probably the learners' lapse of attention of the preposition 'in' in the context given in sentence eight. That is to say, the grammar, collocation and meaning of 'pass out' plus 'in' would not result in the meaning: 'walk quickly' or 'avoid' since the action of passing must take place in crowded places, not outside these places.

The phrase 'put away' was obviously understood literally by more than half the learners (forty one) who reported 'push, get rid of, vomit, throw, empty his stomach' as the right meanings. These similar meanings are inaccurate in the

sense that they are opposite the intended meaning in the context of sentence 9. However, a considerable number of learners (thirt nine) succeeded in making use of the contextual clues: 'would be surprised...' and, therefore, gave an accurate meaning.

The final phrase 'at the double' shows the learners' confusion in working out the right meaning. Obviously literal translation or understanding is probably behind this confusion. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that this understanding took various dimensions. For example, whereas four learners thought that it meant: 'the professor wants to talk to you about two subjects, other six learners thought 'the professor wants to talk to you twice and seventeen of them thought it meant 'in pairs' or 'at 2:00 p.m.'. On top of that, seventeen learners went too far from the right meaning by reporting 'both of you' as the intended meaning, and nineteen learners thought it meant 'just the professor and you/private. Only sixteen of them reported the right meanings 'quickly, at the moment or without delay' which could be due to their high command of English. Interviewing randomly five of these learners showed that they studied in Jordanian private schools before joining JUST. This may indicate implicitly that public schools might not be as good as private ones. Obviously, the inaccurate meanings given above can be explained by the difficulty of working out the meaning of the word 'double'. In other words, the learners made some wrong generalisations about the meaning of the word 'double' and accordingly, they associated the words 'twice, twice as much' etc., with the meanings reported.

Implications

As stated above, the central objective of this paper was to gauge our learners' ability in decoding certain collocations or phrases and to explain the reasons behind the learners' wrong guessing. It has been noticed that our learners seem to be shaky and awkward in guessing the meanings of this category of vocabulary. Their misunderstanding and confusion seem to be due to a number of reasons like: the literal translation of these words into Arabic, the multiplicity of meanings of certain English words, the learners' failure to use the contextual clues, the over-generalisation of meanings, the unfamiliarity with certain combination of words and the prepositions which sometimes change the meanings of words.

Because the paper has shown that it is difficult to separate colloquial English from formal English and because collocations and phrases are used a lot in everyday English by the professors of JUST, it is highly likely that the main losers would be the learners. This is because this category of vocabulary is not taught and, simultaneously, used in everyday English on the one hand, and ESP learners are left helpless to work out their meanings on the other hand. This may entail the inclusion of frequent words and phrases of English in the vocabulary syllabus perhaps not only at JUST, but also in other ESP situations. Moreover, to attain

this objective, the techniques of paraphrasing (e.g., simplification) can be helpful in this area. Another important implication could be the individual differences among learners shown in this study. The point is that syllabus designers need to take this point into account by offering two syllabi. One for those who have a high command of English and another for those who do not. Placement tests may be also used to categorise the two groups. Otherwise the whole purpose of teaching and learning might be lost. Finally, much research is needed to cover as many frequently used collocations and phrases as we can both in Jordan and in other Arab ESP situations as the Arab World is a good consumer and importer of ESP (Swales 1985).

Notes

1. All professors of science at JUST are graduates from U.K., U.S.A. or Canada for the following reasons. First, Doctoral Programmes are not offered in Jordan and in most other Arab countries. Second, because of the high standards of JUST recruitment regulations, graduates from countries other than U.S.A., U.K. or Canada are not appointed at JUST. These considerations and the fact that English is the medium of instruction at JUST bring about the use of English phrases and collocations in question simply because scientific professors at JUST must have spent at least four and even more years in these English speaking countries.

2. Fortunately, these single words (e.g., tip, piece, pass, etc.) were originally contextualised in our reading texts taught regularly at JUST English Language Unit, but we put some emphasis on them to ensure the learners' proper understanding of these words. However, these words were attached to other words to make up phrases and collocations which were contextualised in different sentences giving different meanings.

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