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EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AROUND THE LEXICAL APPROACH IN THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS OF LEXICAL COMPETENCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES

CONSIDERACIONES EPISTEMOLÓGICAS ALREDEDOR DEL ENFOQUE LEXICAL EN EL PROCESO DE ENSEÑANZA Y APRENDIZAJE DE LA COMPETENCIA LEXICAL EN LAS LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

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RESUMEN

The objective of the article is to examine some assumptions about the applicability of the Lexical Approach in the didactics of SFL for the improvement of the teaching-learning process of the lexical competence from the didactic treatment to the FUS. The literature review allows to determine marked limitations in the behavior of lexical teaching in foreign languages. The research is based on the hermeneutical-dialectical approach, which allowed the observation, comprehension and interpretation to deepen in the qualitative and complex essence of the process mentioned. The historical-logical methods and the analysis-synthesis were used for the characterization of the historical tendencies of the process, as well as interviews, surveys to the teachers of the discipline SFL in the Language Center at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Universidad de Oriente, and the observation to classes to diagnose the current situation of the treatment to the lexical component.

Keywords:

Lexical Approach, teaching-learning process, lexical competence, foreign languages, phraseological units.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del artículo es examinar algunas consideraciones sobre la aplicabilidad del Enfoque Léxico en la didáctica del español como lengua extranjera (ELE), para el perfeccionamiento del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la competencia léxica a partir del tratamiento didáctico a las UF. La revisión bibliográfica permitió determinar limitaciones marcadas en el comportamiento de la enseñanza del léxico en lenguas extranjeras. La investigación se sustenta en el enfoque hermenéutico-dialéctico, el cual permitió la observación, comprensión e interpretación para profundizar en las cualidades y esencia compleja del mencionado proceso. El método histórico-lógico y el de análisis-síntesis fueron utilizados para la caracterización de tendencias históricas del proceso. Igualmente, las entrevistas, encuestas a profesores de la disciplina de ELE en el Centro de Idiomas de la Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras en la Universidad de Oriente, y la observación a clases fueron útiles para diagnosticar el estado actual del tratamiento al componente léxico.

Palabras claves:

Enfoque Léxico, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, competencia léxica, lenguas extranjeras, unidades fraseológicas.

INTRODUCTION

According to the current communicative conception of the teaching of foreign languages (FL), awareness on lexical aspects is crucial for the achievement of efficient communicative practice, while the comprehension and mastery of lexicon make it possible for the language user to recognize the meaning and adequate sense of the lexical units. The lexical knowledge or mental lexicon is understood as the set of lexical units available for the speaker to use according to his needs, is part of the linguistic competence and is the basis for the development of communication skills and abilities in the teaching of foreign languages. The approach of Baralo (2006), is adopted when differentiating the concept of lexicon, which is cognitive, dynamic and process-driven, from the concept of "lexicon", synonymous with "vocabulary" and understood as a simple list of words, or as an organization of semantic fields. To the purpose of Didactics broader concepts for the terms lexicon are used, referring to the lexical flow of a language known by the speaker and updated in communicative practice, and that of the lexical unit defined as the basis of lexical learning and the conceptual unit with which Cognitive Linguistics operates, since they are units of memoristic treatment according to Psycholinguistics, essential from the pragmatic and discursive point of view.

The results of numerous publications confirm the need to deepen in the epistemological analysis on the teaching-learning process of the lexicon in PL Didactics (Lewis, 1993, 1997, 2000; Baralo, 2006; Agüero, 2016; Higuera, 2017; Jiménez & Sánchez, 2017; Molina, Atiénzar & Aguilera, 2018; Villavicencio & Tardo, 2018). Consequently, the development of lexical competence as a transversal sub-competence is fundamental, since it contains codified information corresponding to the word form (phonetic, phonological, orthographic, orthoepic, morphological), their syntactic function (category and function), their real or figurative meaning (semantic), as well as their variation (sociolinguistics) and their intentional and communicative value (pragmatics) (Baralo, 2006).

Due to the contrast of terms and definitions of this competence, the divergence of criteria as to its components and dimensions is revealed. Lahuerta & Pujol (1996), point out that lexical competence is the ability to relate forms to meanings and use them properly, and the place where the knowledge of that competence resides is called "mental lexicon" which would be the organization or structure of the lexical deposit.

Thus, the systematization of the notion of lexical competence can be defined as the scope of vocabulary and the degree of general lexical mastery that the speaker

possesses and uses in his or her oral or written lexical performance, i.e., his or her linguistic production. From a didactic approach, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (Council of Europe, 2002), regards lexical competence within the linguistic competence that includes lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic knowledge. It is conditioned by the knowledge of the speaker's world related to his/her culture, mother tongue and general competences. It allows recognizing the polysemy or semantic richness of a lexical unit, conferring it the appropriate meaning and sense, according to the context of use, taking into account lexical knowledge in the target language. Thus, it defines it as **"the knowledge of the vocabulary of a language and the capacity to use it, and it is composed of lexical elements and grammatical elements"** (Council of Europe, 2002, p. 108). Therefore, the interrelation of the aspects that integrate it with other components of linguistic competence, turn it into a transversal competence in which lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic elements are intertwined.

Nevertheless, the definitions provided are still insufficient for the foundation of a coherent logic of theoretical-didactic systematization of the teaching-learning process of lexical competence in foreign languages, taking into account its epistemological and methodological reconstruction from the didactic treatment to the phraseological units (FU). The analysis of the literature reviewed corroborates that this type of composite lexical units are considered the most adequate to develop the didactic process of lexical competence in FL, since they facilitate the construction of networks of meanings, which favors their learning and recovery in the mental lexicon (Lewis, 1993).

The term phraseological units is assumed in its broadest sense, to encompass locutions, routine formulas, place-ments and pareties (proverbs, sayings, idioms) that form combinations of frequently used words updated in the discourse, directly linked to the culture of a community, as part of its linguistic knowledge. They are related to the conversational variant of the language, to which they confer diverse shades and significant values. They show internal fixation and unity of meaning; that is to say, they present semantic-syntactic stability, they are equivalent to the simple lexeme or to the syntagm, they can belong to several category types and they perform diverse syntactic functions.

Although the phraseological component is essential in the teaching of foreign languages, its treatment is a troublesome aspect due to its formal and semantic characteristics (high degree of fixation and *linguageticity*) and the absence of clear references about the types of FU that must

be worked on in the different levels of education (Navarro, 2004). A key factor that hinders the teaching-learning process of the FSU is both the level of decoding of the phraseological meaning and the level of linguistic production, in which the student has to use this type of lexical unit appropriately in correspondence with the concrete communicative situations. Teaching moves away from the didactic process close to its functionality in communicative interaction, given its productivity and high frequency, as a basic vocabulary. Consequently, didactic actions reveal the use of inconsistent procedures, strategies and methods, which limits the improvement of the lexical competence of foreign-language learners (Villavicencio & Tardo, 2018). Therefore, in recent years, theoretical research has contributed to the development of new methodological approaches that favor the learning of the lexical component in foreign languages.

DEVELOPMENT

Taking into account the relevance of the process under analysis, empirical research applied data collection instruments such as interviews and surveys to teachers of the discipline Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) in the Language Center of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, and observation of classes during the academic year 2017-2018. The purpose was to diagnose level of knowledge and mastery of the lexical teaching methodology and, in particular, the lexical approach in the teaching-learning process. The sample was made up of seven teachers of this discipline, who have specialized in the teaching of Spanish to non-Spanish-speaking students who are immersed in the Cuban linguistic and cultural milieu due to academic, work or family reasons for a period of approximately three to nine months. This selection responds to the fact that the researchers have professional experience as teachers in this context.

Six of the teachers interviewed hold a Master's degree in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language; four have the teaching category of Assistant Professor and four have a Bachelor's degree in Education in the specialty of Spanish and Literature. The professional experience in the discipline of Spanish as a Foreign Language show an average of 17 years.

The interview was conducted in group to the seven teachers in a methodological meeting developed by the group. The analysis of the results of the applied interview corroborated that 100% have a global knowledge as far as the theoretical-methodological approaches of the teaching of the lexicon are concerned. However, only 42.85% evidenced the use of pertinent didactic methods and

procedures for the didactic planning of the lexicon in the dynamics of the class, but from a traditionalist treatment.

According to the criteria of the total number of interviewees, the teaching-learning process of the lexicon is characterized by the preeminence of a structuralist approach that pays little attention to the meaning and sense of the lexical units. There is a limited deepening on epistemological perspectives and theoretical-methodological approaches to develop the process, which leads to the use of didactic methods, strategies and procedures that emphasize more on grammatical functions, as compared to the lexical domain in the student's training process, in accordance with the development of communicative competence in FL teaching.

A high percentage of interviewees (80%) agree that they present contextualized activities that favor the application of learning techniques based on semantic associative networks, in order to help increase student's lexical knowledge. However, they indicate that they systematize very little the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of the lexical units at the different levels of language proficiency, since they emphasize recognition activities, that is, from form to meaning, and neglect those of production, that is, from meaning to form. Consequently, the methodology used is insufficient in regards to the development of strategies for self-learning of the lexicon, which make possible the achievement of an efficient communicative action by the student, by ignoring the epistemological and psychopedagogical foundations that sustain the didactics of the lexicon in foreign languages.

On the basis of this problem, an insufficient didactic treatment of the phraseological units (FU) in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language is revealed, which limits the development of lexical competence in the student. Consequently, the elements mentioned become the contextual framework in which the lexical teaching-learning process is developed in SFL, which state the urgent need to transform this process, starting from the adoption of more viable approaches and procedures with the purpose of achieving better results in lexical didactics.

In this sense, the need to deepen in the main linguistic conceptions, epistemological and methodological approaches about the mentioned process in FL is revealed. Following this, some assumptions are offered about the applicability of the Lexical Approach in the didactics of foreign languages, the appearance of which promotes the interest of professionals in this field, by the didactic process of the phraseological units as content that allows expanding the lexical competence. The didactic actions proposed in the most frequently cited bibliographies on

the lexical approach with a view to improving the teaching-learning process of the lexicon (Travalia, 2006; Vidiella, 2012; Agüero, 2016; Higuera, 2017; Jiménez & Sánchez, 2017) still lack an adequate didactic-methodological articulation of the lexical contents, which at present hinders the development of lexical competence in the non-Spanish-speaking student.

The analysis of historical trends that have marked the behavior of lexical teaching methodology in foreign languages is based on the review of relevant theoretical sources to synthesize the theoretical-methodological peculiarities of the teaching-learning process of lexical competence, taking into account the main linguistic conceptions, epistemological and methodological approaches on the referred process. Thus, the study of the evolution of this process allows to determine the following stages:

- **First stage:** Emphasis on a reductionist-structuralist approach to the learning of FSU at the expense of the development of lexical competence (first decades of the twentieth century - late 1960s).
- **Second stage:** Predominance of the communicative approach, in which the relevance of a functional didactics of the FSU oriented to the development of lexical competence (1970-present) is noticed.
- **Third stage:** Deepening in a lexical approach with the re-evaluation on the FSU from a contextualized learning that enhances the development of lexical competence (1990-present).

The evolution of the linguistic sciences from the emergence of Pragmatics, Speech Ethnography, Text Linguistics, Semiotics, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, among others, reveals the analysis of aspects related to the meaning and social use of language from an interdisciplinary perspective, so that language is interpreted as a symbolic system oriented towards communication and social interaction between individuals in a given community. Thus, the development of the paradigm of communicative linguistics or of communication begins when the limitations of the generativist paradigm for the teaching of the foreign language are demonstrated- This starts from the need to emphasize a communicative dimension that incorporates the contextual factors in which communicative acts are carried out, taking into account a more semantic, social and communicative approach. From the 1970s onwards, the theoretical approaches of the pragmatic and discursive paradigm became relevant, which gave rise to the communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages, by conceiving language as communication and considering discourse (text) as an object of teaching and learning. This paradigm moves away from the structuralist paradigm and its traditional emphasis on grammatical

and formal aspects, by adopting a functional point of view on the study of language.

The notional-functional approach proposed by Wilkins (1972), explains the notional categories (concepts such as time, frequency, sequence, quantity, among others, of a semantic-grammatical nature) and the functional categories (related to the pragmatic component of the language, the speaker's intentions and the communicative functions, such as introducing oneself, asking questions, asking for information, among others) that a user needs when learning a language in order to understand and express him/herself. In relation to these communicative meanings, the lexical contents are selected according to the context of interaction where the language is practiced; attending primarily to the communicative needs of the learner, hence the emphasis on the semantic and communicative dimension. The consolidation of communicative language teaching within the framework of a notional-functional approach has allowed for *"the conception of language as an instrument for the elaboration of meaning and of the classroom as a learning environment based on interaction"*. (Salazar, 2009) Therefore, it paves the way for a change in the conception of lexical teaching, in which it acquires importance as an ability to develop communicative competence, coined by Hymes (1972).

The implementation of the communicative approach supposes an advance in the teaching of LE before the limitations of the notional-functional approach, since it considers the learning of the lexicon of unconscious and automatic form, by means of the diverse communicative functions in the practice and simulation of real situations in authentic texts, for the progressive development of the communicative competence. Its greatest advantage lies in the emphasis on the contextualized meaning of the lexical units according to the communicative needs of the students.

As an option within the evolution of the communicative approach, the task-based approach arises in the eighties of the last century, and it bases its principles in the communicative approach, and makes contributions that promote the development of the communicative competence of the students by means of the real use of the language. Its implementation restates the fundamentals of discourse analysis on the importance of context in the interpretation of communicative acts.

The procedures used for this purpose consist of the execution of sequences of communicative tasks. The lexical, grammatical and socio-cultural contents related to a certain thematic area are planned in order to facilitate the completion of the final task, which is the core of the

didactic unit. The tasks focused on learning the lexicon are integrated into this process as enabling tasks, designed to provide the students with the necessary lexical background and to enable them to carry out the final task. In this way, the treatment of a thematic area supposes greater attention to the lexical component.

The benefits of this approach are evidenced in the organization and fixation of the lexical contents according to the communicative needs of the students, as a result of a favorable process of negotiation with them, more or less open. One of its basic principles is the analysis of needs as the starting point of instruction and understood as the set of procedures used to obtain information about the needs, expectations and preferences of the students, taking into account the learning styles, with the purpose of elaborating a programming centred on the student. Task-based language teaching is embedded in the cognitivist and constructivist paradigm, and thus coincides with the guidelines of the action-oriented approach advocated by the Council of Europe (2002), in which the task is defined as *“any intentional action that an individual considers necessary to achieve a concrete result in terms of solving a problem, fulfilling an obligation or achieving an objective”* (p. 10)

During the nineties, although some of the foundations of the previous period are still being used, a change in the methodology applied to promote the teaching of the lexicon arose: the renowned British linguist Michael Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000) claimed the role of the didactics of the lexicon with the contribution of the Lexical Approach in his work *The Lexical Approach. The State of ELT and a Way Forward* (1993). The nuclear axis of this method is the lexical component, which state the direct and explicit teaching of lexical sequences or co-occurrences of words, that is, groups of words (multi-wordchunks or chunk “pre-fabricated block of words”) in the authentic input through the segmentation also called chunking as a frequent activity in the teaching-learning process. This promotes syntagmatic organization and allows for verbal fluency and naturalness in communication, instead of analyzing word by word, from autonomous learning by the student (Vidiella, 2012; Agüero, 2016; Higuera, 2017; Jiménez & Sánchez, 2017).

This is a strategic approach aimed at strengthening the autonomy of the student from beginning levels, focusing the incidental learning of phraseological units through the input provided by reading and listening authentic texts, since the meaning is not necessarily deduced from the division of the parts that compose them, but from the whole in a communicative context. For this reason, it eases the storage of this type of complex lexical unit as a single unit

in the lexicon and its recovery in production, so that its processing is holistic, i.e., it favors knowledge based on memory, applied to codify and decode it; furthermore, *“it reduces effort while increasing fluency and liberating the cognitive processing of going word by word”* (Sánchez, 2011)

Although the lexical approach promotes the use of pre-designed blocks of words to teach both the vocabulary of a language and its grammatical rules indirectly, it is to be noted that the learner should not analyze these blocks from the point of view of grammar, but memorize them without paying attention to their syntactic constitution (Travalia, 2006). It is about learning the combination of interrelated lexical units through grammatical structures. Thus, the concept of the grammaticalized lexicon is adopted, which disdains the application of the dichotomy between lexicon and grammar from the notion of lexical competence in the field of didactics of foreign languages; as opposed to traditional teaching, in which the learning of grammar prevailed, as the main axis, and the lexicon as the secondary aspect.

Following Nattinger's (1980), proposal to replace the concept of isolated words by multi-word lexical phenomena, until then associated to the background and not to grammar and its structures (Agüero, 2016), the concept of lexical placement in the teaching of foreign languages was introduced. This causes the gradual interest of many linguists and professionals in this field, due to the didactic process of this type of phraseological unit as content that allows to extend the lexical competence. The notion of context is privileged from an explicit work of the lexicon based on mental processing by the student in which attention is paid not only to the form and meaning of the words, but also to the use and restrictions of each lexical unit, in combination with its implicit learning.

In synthesis, the epistemological contributions of the object of analysis, are founded as follows priority of the teaching of the lexicon; attention to the recognition and memorization of lexical segments; value of the syntagmatic organization (context and co-text); and accent in the importance of the incidental learning and in an explanatory way of the lexicon (Vidiella, 2012).

During this stage there is research production characterized by gaps in the teaching of lexicon and highlighting the relevance of integrating and prioritizing the idiomatic dimension in the learning of FL, which is why a change of focus is developed in the didactics of the phraseological component, stated since the 80's from the interest in the close conjunction of Phraseology and Didactics of Languages by teachers and scholars (González, 2012).

This favors the consolidation in the 1990s of the Didactics of Phraseology or Phraseodidactics, whose rise as a discipline at an international level coincides approximately with the publication of the CEFR in 2001. The dynamics of phraseological units in the teaching of foreign languages and the development of didactic strategies of explicit and implicit learning of the lexicon from new theoretical and practical orientations, which account for the complex cognitive process that underlies such learning, give a leading place to the analysis of the UFS from the applicability of the lexical approach in foreign languages.

Thus, the treatment of the phraseological component as content to improve lexical competence in foreign language students has been explained from multiple perspectives by the authors in the field of Didactics of phraseology (Navarro, 2004; Baralo, 2006; Vidiella, 2012; Villavicencio & Tardo, 2018). The bibliographical study has allowed us to consider the epistemological and praxiological validity of these references, which show the need for greater consolidation of the didactics of phraseology; however, there is still a demand for an adequate didactic conception that integrates the treatment of phraseological units, with a logic of theoretical-didactic systematization of the teaching-learning process of lexical competence.

The analysis of the historical trajectory makes it possible to reveal as main tendencies, the transits from limited theoretical-methodological conceptions that prevail in a lexical didactics based on a traditional approach of the language, characterized by the repetition and memorization of decontextualized lists of the UFS, towards an interpretation based on semantic relations that does not allow to specify in a coherent way a didactic logic of the comprehension and interpretation of the phraseological units, so that the development of the lexical competence is promoted. Likewise, from a dynamic centred on the formal aspect of the UFS in which a limited orientation to the contextualization of the phraseological meaning predominates, to a dynamic based on methods with a communicative approach that guarantees the comprehension of the phraseological units in accordance with the real use of the language and the learning strategies, but far from the development of the lexical competence that is not relevant for the production of the FU in foreign languages.

Likewise, from a didactic systematization with emphasis on the functional aspect of the phraseological units in which the treatment of the pragmatic dimension is still insufficient, to a didactics of phraseology that still demands a dynamic oriented both to the comprehension and to the production of the phraseological units according to the contextual interpretation in the constructive process of the lexical competence, as integrating didactic logic.

This implies the need to deepen in the didactic peculiarities of the teaching-learning process of the lexical competence in foreign languages, specifically, in the discipline of SFL in the context of the Universidad de Oriente, in function of revisiting the dynamics of FU for the development of communicative competence in the non-Spanish speaking student, before the constant improvement of the training process in foreign languages as one of the challenges of Higher Education.

CONCLUSIONS

The assessment of the trend analysis made it possible to determine marked limitations in the historical evolution of the process studied to up to the current stage of development, which allows a deeper understanding of its essence. Methods and procedures far removed from the didactics of phraseology are still used, which affects the insufficient development of this competence in the student. The epistemological changes in the process of its formation and development point to the search of new approaches, methods and procedures in the phraseodidactics in LE for a more effective result. Therefore, it is necessary to deepen in new didactic relations of this process that favor the improvement of the dynamics of the phraseological units.

In spite of the revaluation of lexical teaching according to the epistemological advances of the lexical approach for the didactics of foreign languages, it is still necessary to connote a system of theoretical relations that articulates a dynamic of the phraseological units. Therefore, a greater level of systematization of the process of construction of the lexical competence to which foreign languages must contribute in the formative process, according to the development of communicative competence, is required.

In short, the work of the SFL teacher must transcend the disciplinary domain of Linguistics Applied to the didactics of foreign languages to enter the systematic study and implementation of new methodological approaches, with the aim of improving the teaching-learning process of lexical competence, in particular, about the presuppositions of the lexical approach. It is necessary to adopt a more updated perspective that takes into account the reinterpretation and extension of the epistemological and praxiological foundations that have been established in the teaching of the FU from the didactics of phraseology and the cited approach.

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