Idiomatic competence in the engineering and architecture classroom. A case study.

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Abstract

The importance of understanding phraseology when learning a second language (L2) is widely accepted. However, the acquisition of L2 technical phraseology has hardly been studied yet. In this paper, the degree of L2 competence that a ESP group (English for Specific Purposes) of learners show when using idioms is explored. To this end, we have designed a questionnaire containing eight common English idioms for students to interpret. The students are first asked to specify the correct meanings of the idioms in L2 and likewise their possible cross-linguistic correspondence in L1. With this method, we aim to cover the following points: (1) determine the students' idiomatic knowledge of English (2) analyse their cross-linguistic ability to identify adequate counterparts in L1 (Spanish) and (3) use this activity as a springboard to train students into the practice of technical phraseology and hence to improve vocabulary learning. Preliminary results point out the usefulness of applying an adequate and sequential approach to introduce the learning of specific phraseology in the technical field. Our study will also reveal and be further completed by establishing ways to optimise the practice of technical phraseology in and out of the classroom.

Keywords: Technical phraseology. ESP vocabulary. L2 idiomatic competence. Architectural repertoire.

Título: «Competencia idiomática en el aula de ingeniería y arquitectura. Un estudio de caso».

Resumen

Se acepta de manera muy extendida la importancia de entender la fraseología cuando se aprende un segundo idioma (L2). Sin embargo, la adquisición de la fraseología técnica L2 apenas se ha estudiado todavía. En este trabajo se estudia el grado de competencia L2 de un grupo de estudiantes de IFE (Inglés para Fines Específicos) al usar expresiones idiomáticas. Con este fin, hemos diseñado un cuestionario que contiene ocho expresiones idiomáticas comunes en inglés para que los estudiantes las interpreten. En primer lugar, se pide a los estudiantes que especifiquen los significados correctos de las expresiones en L2 y, del mismo modo, su posible correspondencia lingüística en L1. Con este método, pretendemos cubrir los siguientes puntos: (1) determinar el conocimiento idiomático del inglés de los estudiantes (2) analizar su capacidad lingüística cruzada para identificar correspondencias adecuadas en L1 (principalmente español) y (3) utilizar esta actividad como trampolín para entrenar a los estudiantes en la práctica de la fraseología técnica y, por lo tanto, para mejorar el aprendizaje del vocabulario. Los resultados preliminares señalan la utilidad de aplicar un enfoque adecuado y secuencial para introducir el aprendizaje de una fraseología específica en el campo técnico. Nuestro estudio también revelará y se completará estableciendo formas de optimizar la práctica de la fraseología técnica dentro y fuera del aula.

Palabras clave: Fraseología técnica. Vocabulario IFE. Competencia idiomática L2. Vocabulario arquitectónico.

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Titre : « Compétence linguistique chez les étudiants en ingénierie et architecture. Une étude de cas ».

Résumé

Il est communément admis qu'il faut maîtriser la phraséologie quand on apprend une deuxième langue (L2). Toutefois, l'apprentissage de la phraséologie d'une langue spécialisée L2 fait rarement l'objet d'une étude. Cet article se penche sur le degré de compétence d'un groupe d'étudiants d'AOS (anglais sur objectifs spécifiques) dans le maniement des expressions idiomatiques. Nous avons, à cette fin, réalisé un questionnaire qui contient huit expressions idiomatiques courantes en anglais pour que les étudiants les interprètent. En premier lieu, il est demandé aux étudiants qu'ils donnent le sens exact des expressions en L2 et, en deuxième lieu, la correspondance linguistique en L1. Cette méthode aidant, nous cherchons à préciser les aspects suivants : (1) déterminer la connaissance linguistique de l'anglais chez les étudiants, (2) analyser leur capacité linguistique à l'heure de croiser et identifier les équivalences en L1 (principalement en espagnol) et (3) utiliser cette activité en guise d'entraînement à la pratique phraséologique technique et, partant, parfaire l'apprentissage du vocabulaire. Les résultats préliminaires montrent l'utilité d'appliquer une approche appropriée et séquentielle dans l'introduction à l'apprentissage d'une phraséologie spécifique dans le domaine technique. Cette étude sera complétée par d'autres modalités d'optimisation de la pratique phraséologique à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur d'une salle de classe.

Mots-clés : Phraséologie technique. Vocabulaire AOS. Compétence linguistique L2. Vocabulaire de l'architecture.

INTRODUCTION

A major challenge that ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learners have to face is learning their specialized vocabulary; therefore, an effective vocabulary approach can greatly help students (Chung and Nation 2003; Lowe 2009; Webb and Nation 2017; Xhaferi 2010). In a non-specific context, Xuehong and Godfroid 2019 claim that frequency, usefulness, and difficulty would be main aspects to consider for vocabulary planning. However, the way words and expressions are presented is not a minor concern because it involves language pattern and structure. As Sinclair argued, words tend to appear in the company of other words and some words prefer the company of certain words. Sinclair (1991: 109-110) has scientifically proved that most part of a language is governed by the idiom principle, rather than by the open choice principle. He claims that: "a language user has available […] a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices" (Sinclair 1991: 110). This means that it makes sense to study vocabulary from a phraseological stance rather than as isolated words. As has been noted: "Words should not be taught as isolated items" (Xhaferi 2010: 253).

For an ESP context, influential research highlights the role of a previous need of analysis in curriculum design (Hutchinson and Waters 1987, Dudley-Evans and St John 1998, Flowerdew 2013). The curriculum design job entails an adequate selection of materials, which in turn involves an appropriate vocabulary choice. In this digital era, a great deal of the specific language that LSP students need to use can be found on specialized websites that cover different subject matters. In the architecture context, the texts contained in architectural studios sites or in renowned architects' portals could serve as an example. Nevertheless, to engage in the acquisition and retention of their specialized terminology, students need an effective and purposeful methodology to guide them in their learning process. The main aim of this paper is doublefold: (1) to facilitate vocabulary learning in a group of ESP architecture students from UPM (Technical University of Madrid) (2) to increase students' communicative competence (spoken and written) through the use of technical phraseology (combination of words or collocations). The pro-

posed methodology operates in a sequential way by examining first the idiomatic competence of students both in L2 and L1. The participants were volunteers that had achieved level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference and that were enrolled in the subject of English Communication. Firstly, the participants attended an on-site 2-hour workshop focused on the use of general and technical phraseology and they also were given online access to its content. Secondly, they were asked to complete an online activity encompassing two multiple-choice questions about eight common English idioms and their meaning (L2) as well as giving possible Spanish equivalent of the posed idioms (L1).

As a final step, students were asked to submit a 300-word essay on any architectural topic of their choice and include at least ten related architectural phrasal units. They were given 10 days to produce this task. Ultimately, students' writing performance would prove the suitability of this approach for vocabulary learning. The conclusions of this study endorse the benefits of a sequentially presented phraseological approach, not only to facilitate vocabulary learning but also to increase students' general communicative competence. In the essays submitted, we found that students' texts had gained more cohesion and more idiomatic fluency after completing this activity.

1. SCIENTIFIC RATIONALE

The lexical repertoire that LSP students have to acquire, rather than unlimited, should be selected according to their needs. For example, they have to be able to *talk* and *write* about architectural topics to other foreign colleagues successfully. Thus, presenting them with the most common lexical repertoire they need to handle and by showing ways to interpret/make sense of their meaning (by association, analogy or linking) are adequate ways to increase their motivation and performance. In this respect, the study of phraseology (multi-word combinations) allows us to focus on lexical composition and lexical structure, an essential part of LSP practice. As Boers and Lindstromberg put it: "Successful L2 learning is to a very great extent a matter of understanding and remembering collocational tendencies and prefabricated multi-word expressions" (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008: 7). This approach has been fruitfully put to practice in general language contexts (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008; Boers *et al.* 2006). However, although there are phraseological studies on the ESP area that are worth mentioning (Pinna 2007; Crawford Camiciottoli 2007; Hyland 2008; Cortes 2004) there are few studies with this approach accomplished in the technical fields of engineering and architecture. This point is relevant, since, as Hyland states, phraseology (lexical bundles) is a large discipline because each community of users have their own "sensitivity" (Hyland 2008: 5). Below we will explain the two main phraseological points that were sequentially programmed in the experimental work developed in the present paper.

1.1 Idioms

We can define idioms as sets of fixed phrases. If we consider the English idiom: "To rain cats and dogs", we can see that its meaning is figurative, non-literal and metaphoric. It represents an image metaphor, since it encapsulates a mental projection of these pets falling down from the clouds. Although it can be argued that idioms have lost their metaphoric value and are frozen metaphors, the referents that they evoke are to a certain extent present in their meaning, which could be part of its illocutionary force. Their sequential word order cannot be altered either, since it would not be right to say, "To rain dogs and cats". To sum up, we can say that idioms embody a cognitive process that involves:

a) A mental image
b) An association of words
c) A non-literal meaning

Equally, we can find idioms that originally could have been experientially based and then become widely accepted by a community of speakers with a specific meaning. They consist of word clusters that occur together. Buckingham argues in favour of establishing connections between L1 and L2 idioms in order to analyse and compare their conceptual bases (Buckingham, 2006: 36). This operation means classifying idioms according to their source domain. Thus, the English idiom *to be silver-tongued* would find an equivalent in the Spanish "*tener un pico de oro*", both sharing the meaning of being an eloquent and persuasive person, which is a valuable quality, and hence encapsulated in the source domain of precious or semi-precious metals. However, this type of L1 and L2 connections is not always possible to establish because cross-linguistic correspondence is limited due to socio-cultural differences. The English idiom "a red letter day", for example, has no clear idiomatic correspondence in Spanish, and similarly the Spanish "cambiar de tercio" and "entrar al trapo" have no clear equivalent in English**.**

1.2 Phrases

According to Chen and Baker, phraseology is usually used to refer to "various types of multiword units" (Chen and Baker 2010: 30). In the present study, we understand by phrase the combination of two or more words that are relatively fixed and may form a meaning block. These units may be part of a bigger sentence or a clause. Phrases do not have to be figurative, but:

a) They are not isolated or individual words; they consist of two or more words that become associated because of their use. They can be defined as a combination of words that frequently co-occur together. Some authors, like Sinclair, speak of lexical attraction (Sinclair 1991). We can verify this through corpus analysis, by quantifying the number of times they appear together. Phrases can form "lexical bundles" (Biber, Conrad and Leech 2002: 443) and their length may vary from two words to more. They are also known as "collocates" or "collocations".
b) They can be considered as units of meaning because their meaning cannot be interpreted from each individual component.
c) They can evoke mental images, although this is not always the case.

How are sentences and phrases different? A phrase, unlike a complete sentence, does not have a subject and a verb. Phrases are usually part of a complete sentence. According to their composition, we can find noun phrases, verbal phrases, infinitive, gerund, participial or prepositional phrases. In technical discourse, understood as technical language in use, the most common phrases represent lexical expressions that are repeated many times in different genres and form part of the technical repertoire that is used by the members of a specific discourse community. Students who learn technical language need to get familiar with these sets of expressions, which in turn will be useful to learn the specific vocabulary. Therefore, we aim to focus on expressions, often binary, though not necessarily so, that tend to appear together. In technical English, it is very common to find noun phrases consisting of noun+noun combination. Let us consider some collocations related to the architectural term *beam* taken from a research articles corpus that were found repeated without change for at least 5 times:

beam cross-section
beam flange
beam profile
beam structure
beam to column joints
beam-column

Table 1. Some collocations of *beam*

Because of statistical repetition, we can say that certain clusters show a tendency to appear together. In the above examples, those combinations pertaining to construction are recurrent. Around "beam", the different clusters represent new shades of meaning. Some of them refer to a part or an element *(beam flange, beam-column, beam to column joints*), whereas others imply engineering calculations (*beam-cross-section; beam profile, beam structure*).

In the following examples drawn from the same source as above, "earthquake" is the focal part combining with different collocations. Some of them intensify the meaning of "earthquake" (*earthquake risk, earthquake event, earthquake shaking, earthquake damage*) and some others add relevant meaning to calculate an earthquake's intensity to prevent it or to deal with its results (*earthquake strengthening, earthquake excitations, earthquake resistance, earthquake inspections, earthquake loads*).

earthquake strengthening
earthquake excitations
earthquake shaking
earthquake resistance
earthquake inspections
earthquake risk
earthquake damage
earthquake event
earthquake loads
earthquake recovery
earthquake-resistant
earthquake response
earthquake ground

Table 2. Collocations of *earthquake*

Finally, the following combinations of "collapse" give us an idea of different types of collapse specifically found in architectural construction:

floor collapse
partial collapse
roof collapse
building collapse

Table 3. Architectural combinations of *collapse*

Some combinations are more fixed than others. Thus, the ones that follow: "consistency factor" (meaning a laboratory measure), "construction joint" (referred to surfaces between concrete slabs), "fly ash" (meaning a cementitious material), or "water-cement ratio" (a mathematical rate) work as blocks of meaning because the meaning of the separate words does not entail the right meaning of the phrase and words cannot be inserted between them. Therefore, they are to a certain extent idiomatic.

2. METHODOLOGY

The learning approach that we present in this paper largely relies on a sequential plan having two distinct stages to be accomplished in and outside the classroom. The first stage was conducted in the classroom with 30 students who volunteered to follow this activity. Students attended a two-hour on-site workshop on phraseology focused on and L1 and L2 idioms and on technical phrases (collocations). After this, they were asked to complete individually an online and anonymous multiple-choice questionnaire on eight common English idioms. The questionnaire was handed out in order to examine the students' actual competence in L2 and L1 idioms and was conducted through *Survey Monkey*. The activity consisted of three parts. In the first one, students had to choose the right idiom from three different choices. For example: *Once in a green moon; Once in a blue moon; Twice in a white moon*. The purpose of this question was to highlight the importance of the right configuration of idioms. The second part of the activity consisted of choosing the correct meaning of the idiom out of three alternatives: "frequently; never; very rarely". This question served to emphasize that idioms usually have a unitary meaning since they designate a given referent. For the last part, students had to give an equivalent idiom in Spanish. Whereas the first two questions were directed to examine L2 competence, the last one aimed at L1 ability. The idioms included in the questionnaire were the following: "Once in a blue moon", "Red letter day"; "Silver tongued"; "A bad hair day"; "A shot in the arm"; "A sight for sore eyes"; "A skeleton in the closet" and "An arm and a leg". The criteria for this selection responded to their use and frequency in everyday language. Despite two of the English idioms posed do not have a clear equivalent in Spanish: "A red letter day" and "A shot in the arm", students had been previously explained in the workshop that cross-linguistic non-equivalence is possible due to socio-cultural distinctions. In such cases they were told to provide "I don't know" as an answer. All in all, the first stage was conceived as focused on students' receptive skills and as a diagnostic measurement.

In the second stage, which emphasised productive skills, the students were asked to submit an essay on any architectural topic using at least ten common architectural collocations. To perform this task, they were encouraged to look for phrases instead of individual works when reading or learning vocabulary and underline them. They had ten days to prepare this activity outside the classroom and, although it was designed on an individual basis, they could prepare it in groups. Given that these lexical combinations can be frequently found in online texts and also in diagrams or drawings, the following procedure was recommended:

1. On the internet, you can "google" the word you are interested in and add an asterisk, either in front of the word, or after it (e.g. *building/building*), to get a display list with the most frequent combinations predicted on the web. Thus, if you look for collocates with "building", you get the combination: "building material". Due to its frequent use, we can establish that "construction material" is not used so much. If you type "sprawl*", you get "urban sprawl", an important problem in urban planning. In the case of "roof*", you get "roof types", "roof tiles", "roof repair", "roof garden", among others.

2. Another possible way consists of "googling" the concept you are seeking, let us assume for example "types of concrete". If you click on "Images", you get many different illustrations, graphs and diagrams with lots of examples of common technical collocations, such as the example shown in figure 1:

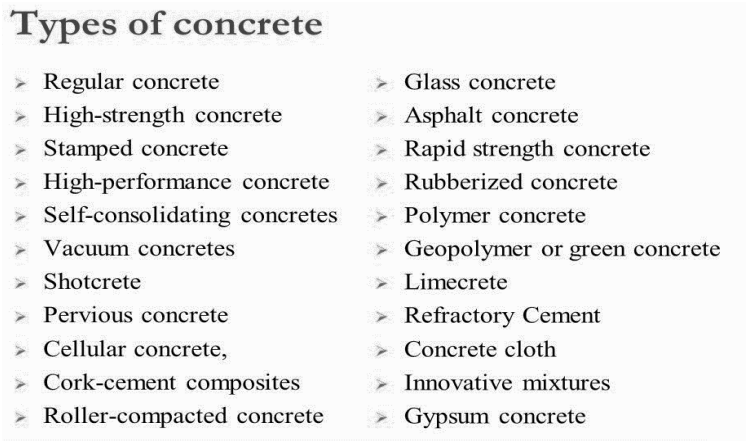


Figure 1. Collocations of *concrete* found as an image

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we are going to analyse the general results corresponding to the questionnaire, shown in figure 2. As to L2 competence, the results of both multiple choice questions reveal that whereas most students (64%) accurately understood the idiom's word order as well as their meanings (questions 1 and 2), there is also a considerable proportion (36%) of those who did not know or gave incorrect answers. Despite that, this outcome could be expected from students who have achieved a high intermediate knowledge of English (B2 level). Yet, it is also significant to point out that specific results may rise and fall depending on the idiom.

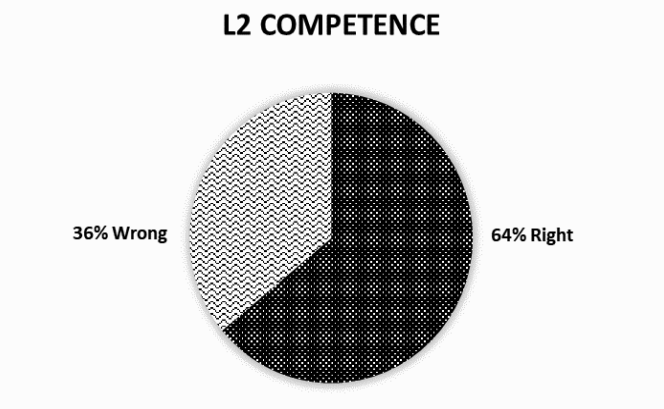


Figure 2. Results of L2 multiple choice questions

The last part of the questionnaire asking for an equivalent idiom in L2 (Spanish) shows a slightly different outcome having a 10% less correct answers (54%) than in L2 competence, as represented in figure 3. Likewise, when borderline versions were given (definition or paraphrasing translation) they were considered "fuzzy". It is significant to observe that 23% of the replies took this direction. To establish a precise equivalence in Spanish, we have used the *Reverso* Context (a

bilingual contextual dictionary), the Word reference *Collins* that includes multi-word phrases and expressions, and the *Free Dictionary's Idioms dictionary*.

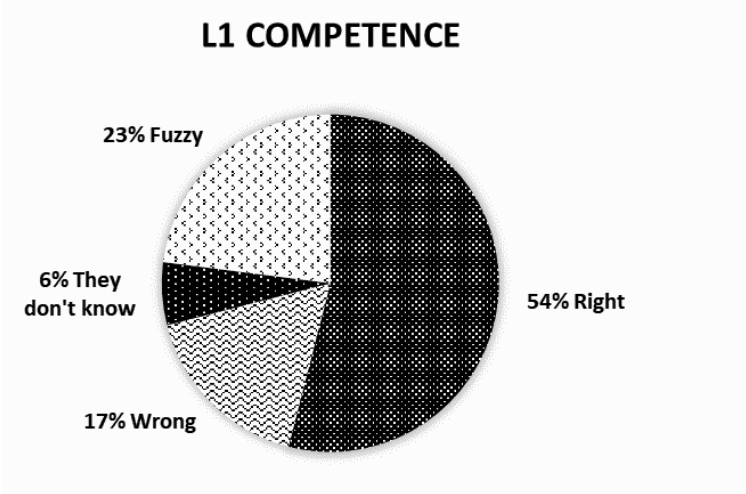
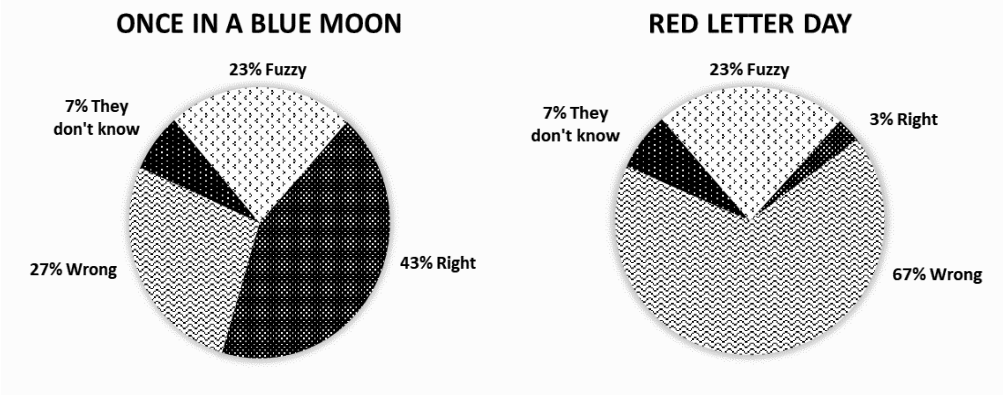


Figure 3. Results of cross- linguistic equivalence

Certainly, as Kovacs explains in 2016, it is not easy to translate idioms cross-linguistically, as there is a tendency to give a wrong equivalent, or a paraphrase translation. In the idioms posed, the results confirm that ratios of correctness vary according to the idiom. For example, figures 4 and 5 describe the results of the idioms "Once in a blue moon" and "A red letter day", the former with the equivalent in Spanish: "De Pascuas a Ramos" and the latter with no clear equivalence found. In such a case, the students preferred to give an incorrect answer or to paraphrase the translation (67% and 23% respectively). Only 3% admitted that they could not find a counterpart and 7% that they did not know. It is noteworthy to point out that even when the idiom had equivalence as in figure 4, the rate of fuzzy answers is rather high (23%). We hypothesise that this may reflect a gap in translating skills and in the knowledge of L1 idioms.



Figures 4 and 5. Details of L1 students' competence

Next we will discuss the results of the second stage concerning the use of architectural common phrases in students' essays. In each essay, students had to use at least 10 frequent architectural lexical combinations that were related to the titles of the submitted essays. We found that in contrast to their idiomatic competence in L2, and especially in L1, the students' use of technical lexical combinations was rather satisfactory. Their use of architectural collocations in technical essays is fluent and contextual. Although this is an initial and limited study, this point may suggest that the specific focus on architectural phraseology, motivates students to use technical lexical

combinations and that this approach can serve as an effective tool to increase vocabulary confidence in LSP learners. Figure 6 includes the collocations used in an essay on different perspectives of architecture. The students have used contextually and coherently in their essay various terms around the word architecture.

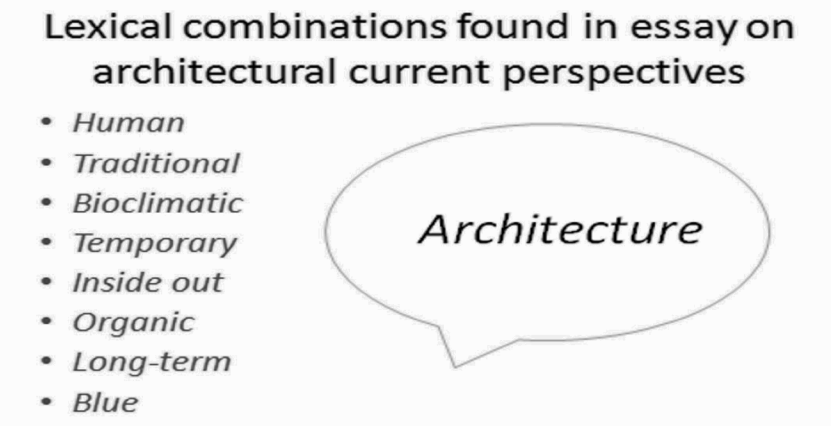


Figure 6. Students' use of lexical combinations

Figure 7 shows collocational extracts from different students' essays pertaining to the domains of architectural elements and urban planning. These examples are adequate to the subject matter and are used in an accurate way considering their context and their co-text.

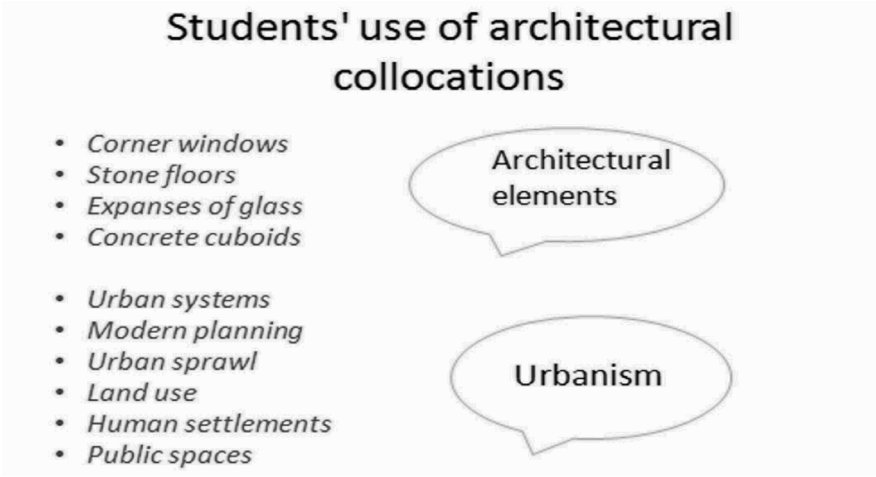


Figure 7. Architectural collocations used by students

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have addressed the issue of learning chunks of words in a technical English environment and we have explored a sequential approach by taking idioms as a springboard to explicitly present technical phraseology. We have also investigated the effectiveness of this approach by analysing the students' needs and the students' production skills reflected in their submitted essays. A questionnaire was handed out to determine general idiomatic L2 and L1 students' competence and, though its outcome was lower than expected, the students successfully produced contextual and coherent pieces of architectural phrases in their essays. Although more work is necessary to corroborate this finding, we may be in the right direction, especially in writing skills. We agree with Boers et al. when they affirm: "mastery of formulaic sequences can help learners come across as fluent L2 speakers" (Boers *et al*. 2006: 247). After all, rather than isolated, words mutually interact by forming relationships and "associative patterns" (Biber, Conrad and Reppen 2000: 6-7). This phenomenon is extended both to general and technical discourse.

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APPENDIX
Questionnaire

Look at these idioms and (1) Choose the correct ones (2) point out their right meaning and (3) write equivalents for them in Spanish:

a) *Once in a green moon; Once in a blue moon; Twice in a white moon*
   Meaning: frequently; never, very rarely.
b) *Blue letter day; Black letter day; Red letter day*
   Meaning: A strange day; a happy day; a sad day.
c) *Silver tongued; Golden tongued; Diamond tongued*
   Meaning: Persuasive person; rich person; talkative person.
d) *A bad hair day; A good hair day; A wrong hair day*
   Meaning: A day on which everything seems to go wrong; an excellent day; a day to go to the hairdressers.
e) *A shot in the arm; A bang in the arm; A touch in the arm*
   Meaning: To give an elbow; to give a boost or encouragement; to give a nudge.
f) *A sight for sore eyes; A sight for good eyes; A sight for black eyes*
   Meaning: An unexpected and welcome sight; a pain in the eyes; a terrible sight.

g) *A skeleton in the closet (or cupboard); A skeleton in the wardrobe; A skeleton in the kitchen*
Meaning: A school skeleton; a horror picture; something shameful to hide.

h) *An arm and a leg. A knee and a shoulder; An eye and an ear*
Meaning: Very painful; very expensive; very flexible.

