DISSERTATION

Analysis of phraseological content in English teaching: materials and teachers’ attitudes

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we try to find out if phraseology, and more specifically, idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae play an important role in the teaching of English as foreign language in the Region of Murcia. In order to determine if they do, we have conducted a two-folded study consisting of both, an analysis of two English textbooks widely used in high schools in order to ascertain the phraseological content they provide and a questionnaire addressed to experienced English teachers who also work in Murcia so as to know more about their ideas and attitudes towards the teaching of these phraseological units. Finally, results indicate that, although phraseology is present in books and most teachers are aware of its existence and relevance, it might not be tackled efficiently due to important reasons such as the lack of a phraseological minimum in which educators can base their teaching, the need of specific training for the teachers to adapt this content to their students and the absence of proper materials that foster phraseological learning. Therefore, we can conclude that further research is needed with the purpose of reaching the objectives requested by the official legislation currently in force.

Key words: didactics on phraseology, idioms, collocations, social routine formulae, collocations.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo, intentamos averiguar si la fraseología y, más particularmente, los modismos, las colocaciones, los proverbios y las fórmulas rutinarias sociales juegan un papel importante en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en la Región de Murcia. Para ello, hemos llevado a cabo un estudio doble compuesto por el análisis de dos libros de texto ampliamente utilizados en los centros docentes, con el fin de determinar el contenido fraseológico que estos ofrecen y, por otro lado, hemos realizado el análisis de unos cuestionarios dirigidos a profesionales de la enseñanza de este idioma que ejercen su profesión en Murcia, con el propósito de descubrir sus opiniones y puntos de vista en cuanto a la enseñanza de unidades fraseológicas en la lengua extranjera. Finalmente, los resultados indican que, a pesar de que la fraseología se encuentra presente en los libros de texto y la mayoría de educadores son conscientes de su existencia e importancia, no es un área que se enseñe de forma efectiva debido a la inexistencia de un mínimo fraseológico en el que puedan basarse los profesores, a la necesidad de un entrenamiento específico de dichos docentes para adaptar este contenido a sus alumnos y a la ausencia de materiales adecuados
que fomenten el aprendizaje fraseológico. Por lo tanto, concluimos que este campo necesita de nuevas investigaciones para lograr los objetivos propuestos por la legislación actualmente vigente.

**Palabras clave:** Didáctica de la fraseología, modismos, colocaciones, fórmulas rutinarias sociales, proverbios.
1. INTRODUCTION

Phraseology has always been and continues being a pending subject. Although in the latest years a significant number of studies have been published about the topic, it is worth doing more research on it mainly because didactics on Phraseology has not been tackled in classrooms in the same way as other areas such as general lexicon or grammar. Likewise, we consider phraseology an interesting issue to focus on because scholars claim that it is a cornerstone within the lexicon of any language. As Mel’cuk (1998:24) states ‘People speak in set phrases, rather than in separate words in any language’ (cited in FernándezPrieto, 2004). Therefore, knowing a word implies to know the syntagmatic combinations or words that go together with it (make bed, but do homework). These prefabricated units are considered extremely difficult by non-native speakers, since they are conventional ways of expression. In Spanish, we “damos un paseo” or “abrimos el grifo” but in English we ‘take a walk’ or ‘turn on the tap’. In the same way, Spanish and English have different social interaction formulae or diverse expressions with metaphorical or figurative meanings that are interesting to compare and contrast.

In spite of the studies conducted up to the present time, this field needs improving and that is the third and main reason why we have set ourselves the goal of doing our bit and undertake some research about it. This investigation entails the analysis of two EFL textbooks and the examination of questionnaires directly addressed to find out the attitudes English teachers have toward the teaching of phraseological units.

This paper is structured as follows: first of all, the concept of phraseological unit and the different categories of phrasemes are defined. Then, we present what we know about didactics on phraseological content and we analyze the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia (BORM) and the Common European Framework (CEFR) in search of a phraseological minimum as a basis for teachers to follow in their job. Next, we expose our research questions and the material and method applied in our study. Following that, we explain and discuss the results obtained and, finally, we offer our concluding remarks.
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As this work deals with Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching, we have divided its theoretical background into three clearly-defined sections: the definition and classification of phraseological units, some research regarding the use of phraseological units with didactic purposes and the phraseological minimum established by the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia (BORM) and the Common European Framework (CEFR) for secondary compulsory education and Bachillerato (not compulsory education).

2.1 Definition and classification of phraseological units (Corpas Pastor, 1996)

Although there are several well-known authors who deal with Phraseology such as Coseriu (1977), Zuluaga (1980), Casares (1992), Ruiz Gurillo (1997), Cowie (1998) or Gläser (1998), for our purposes, we will use Corpas Pastor’s (1996: 20) outstanding definition of phraseological units. This author defines them as multiword lexical units composed by at least two graphical words (and a whole sentence as its upper limit), which are further characterized by a high frequency of cooccurrence of their components and by various degrees of institutionalization, such as formal frozenness, inner fixation and semantic specialization or opacity.

The classification of phraseological units we have followed in this paper is also the one provided by Corpas Pastor (1996: 50) for being originally conceived for both English and Spanish languages. As one of the occasional strategies for teaching vocabulary is the use of the L1, we think that, for students at these levels, it is much better to think and identify broad categories such as those offered by Corpas as well as categories that can be applied to both languages with the purpose of making acquisition easier for them. Corpas considers two criteria to classify phraseological units: utterance and fixation.

Following the utterance criterion, phraseological units are grouped in complete or incomplete utterances, defining ‘utterance’ as minimum communication units caused due to a speech-act that normally corresponds to a simple or compound sentence.

Regarding fixation, Corpas highlights three fixation mechanisms: norm fixation (the particular grammar of a language forces a group of words to combine in a certain way to achieve a particular meaning); system fixation (the language accepts some word combinations that are out of the norm and that are memorized as lexical units) and speech fixation (the oral transmission of certain expressions over time ends in fixation).
Both criteria are the base for establishing the phraseological unit classification in the three well-known spheres proposed by Corpas Pastor:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UTTERANCE</th>
<th>TYPE OF FIXATION</th>
<th>SPHERE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Norm</td>
<td>I (Collocations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System</td>
<td>II (Idioms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>III (Phraseological Utterances)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to space limitations, in this paper we will just analyze the spheres in a general way, without paying careful attention to the sub-classifications that emerge from each one of them.

**Sphere I** comprises *Collocations (Colocaciones)*. They are norm-fixed units that are not considered speech-acts or utterances. They are combinations of words that present some restrictions established by common usage. In Corpas’s words: “propiedad de las lenguas por la que los hablantes tienden a producir ciertas combinaciones de palabras entre una gran cantidad de combinaciones teóricamente posibles” (Corpas Pastor, 1996: 66).

**Sphere II** includes *Idioms (Locuciones o Modismos)*. According to Casares (1992 [1950]: 170), they are stable combinations of two or more terms that function as a unique sentence element and whose meaning is not deduced from the sum of its single words. Corpas Pastor refines that definition: “Las locuciones son unidades fraseológicas del sistema de la lengua con los siguientes rasgos distintivos: fijación interna, unidad de significado y fijación externa pasemática. Estas unidades no constituyen enunciados completos y, generalmente, funcionan como elementos oracionales.” (Corpas Pastor, 1996: 88).

Finally, **Sphere III** embraces phraseological utterances (Enunciados Fraseológicos). Among them, we can find quotes, proverbs, specific-value utterances and social routine formulae, but we are just going to focus on *Proverbs* (utterances that constitute a complete text by themselves and that express a basic truth or practical precept) and *Social Routine Formulae* (utterances that need to be inserted in a specific context to make sense and that are commonly used to show the subjectivity of the speaker in his/her speech), for being considered the ones most commonly used at an everyday level. Both of them are, therefore, complete utterances, speech-acts and units that present internal and external fixation.
In order to present the information in a more visual level and taking into account the utterance and fixation criteria, we can sum up the theory narrated above with the following diagram by Corpas Pastor (1996:52):

![Diagram](image)

From a more practical point of view, we can also apply a third criterion, the idiomatic nature, together with the utterance and fixation criteria previously explained:

![Diagram](image)

Phrasal verbs should be added to this phraseological unit classification, as they are incomplete utterances which are considered idiomatic to a greater or lesser extent. They would be located in the same position as idioms, but due to our space limitation, they will not be included in this paper.

### 2.2 Didactics on Phraseological Content

Phraseodidactics is the applied field of Phraseology. It allows teachers and specialists to locate Didactics on Phraseology in the core of their research with the purpose of giving this subject a specific place within Phraseology.

Although phraseology has been considered ‘the often neglected field in first and second language teaching’ (Foreword: XVI, cited in González Rey, 2012:71), in 1932, Arthur James Worall already highlighted the great importance of this issue in the preamble of his book *English idioms for foreign students*:
Too many students learn <<book-English>>; too few learn to use the current phrases which are common in our daily speech [...] the sources from which the student may draw phrases in common use, frequently colloquial in character, are extremely limited. [...] the foreign student who wishes to speak English fluently will need to have them at his fingers’ ends (cited in González Rey, 2012:69).

Nowadays, the teaching of vocabulary has become essential in L2 teaching and learning, particularly in the latest years. Current research shows that phraseology is one of the key components of language due to its high and spontaneous occurrence in daily conversation. The complete lexicon of English is enormous. According to Hill (2001:48), ‘the mental lexicon on any individual is huge, consisting as it does of a vast repertoire of learned phrases of varying degrees of fixedness’. Such prefabs or fixed expressions are usually considered quite difficult for L2 learners owing to two main reasons: their cultural backgrounds and their conventionality, normally significantly different from the learners’ mother tongue. However, it is undeniable they are primary to achieve a good command of the language, and ultimately, a proper communicative competence.

Undoubtedly, we can state that language is not something isolated, but a social and cultural tool; therefore, the phraseological competence of a speaker depends to a great extent on the cultural knowledge of the linguistic system he/she is involved in (Castillo Carballo, 2002). Hence, the situational context really matters while learning and it is the one that asks for specific utterances and expressions that fit particular situations. Moreover, that context may vary regarding traditions and conventions from one language to another, so what in a community is an act of courtesy or politeness may result offensive to a different population. In this way, intercultural learning is also promoted through these units.

These special features of languages and people should be explained and analyzed by L2 learners so that they are able to think differently and immerse themselves into the foreign language’s environment. As Castillo Carballo (2002) defends, teachers must never forget that cultural knowledge and Phraseology have to interrelate so that the students can become proper users in the foreign language, since it can be stated that a non-native speaker comes to master the target language when he/she can encode and decode a significant number of phraseological units properly.

As phraseology constitutes an immense field, teachers struggle to determine which phraseological units are adequate to each level they are in charge of. Consequently, we find two different streams regarding this issue: firstly, those who are for teaching phraseology at all ages and levels (Fernández Prieto, 2004:352) and, on the contrary, those who think that it
should be addressed to intermediate and advanced levels only (Ruiz Gurillo, 2000 (cited in Fernández Prieto: 2004)). We will deal with this issue more in depth at the results and discussion section together with some questionnaires addressed to English teachers.

Obviously, the teacher’s role becomes more complicated and involves a greater effort when deciding to include phraseological content in their everyday teaching, since they should also cope with historical, social and ethnographic teaching, but this proposal is said to ensure success. In Peter Skehan’s words: ‘the role of instruction is not necessarily therefore in the clarity or in the explanation it provides, but rather in the way it channels attention and brings into awareness what otherwise would have been missed’ (cited in Lewin: 2001).

2.2.1 Teaching and Learning of specific phraseological units: idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae

The importance of phraseological knowledge in L2 competence is beyond dispute. It enables learners to speak more fluently, makes their speech more understandable and helps them write or sound more native-like (Pawley and Syder, 1983; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Wray, 2002 (cited in Fan, 2008)).

However, L2 learners are not very used to phraseology because teachers do not usually make them aware of its relevance within vocabulary learning. They deal with this branch of lexicography without paying too much attention to its particular and unique features, and keep using classical vocabulary teaching techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, mother tongue translation and definition. As regards phraseological units, these are techniques that despite being perfectly useful are not always enough to reach successful acquisition. Consequently, students stay halfway between the input received and the final production they should be able to elicit. After some days, they will probably not remember the meaning of the words, or even worse, they will not be able to use those new words in their proper contexts for ignoring their suitable collocates and usage. As Siyanova and Schmitt (2008) propose ‘teachers should make fundamental changes in their vocabulary teaching pedagogies by focusing on phrasal elements rather than individual words (cited in Balci and Çakir, 2012) and they also should avoid mechanical vocabulary learning, since memorizing new vocabulary word by word without any kind of interaction does little to enrich students’ vocabulary (Acat, 2008 (cited in Balci and Çakir, 2012)).

Therefore, a new perspective is needed to let phrasemes reach the importance they really have in second language learning. Firstly, students should notice the existence of the
different categories they are going to be exposed to. They should be warned about collocations, proverbs, idioms and social routine formulae and their main characteristics in order to be able to recognize them and start using them progressively. So as to fulfill these goals and reach acquisition, Ruiz Gurillo (2000:262) suggests the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), since ‘este método deja de lado el aprendizaje memorístico de palabras y expresiones y pretende alcanzar la competencia comunicativa de los alumnos a través de la integración textual de todos los aspectos lingüísticos’ (cited in Martín Aizpuru, 2010). Thus, in foreign language classes, in addition to the grammatical component, other competences and skills ought to play an essential role, for instance, the interactive competence, which intends students to produce true communication among speakers.

Once these strategies are highlighted and put into practice, miscommunication and misunderstanding are likely to decrease among learners of English. Probably, this will also help to avoid further frustration on the reader/listener and it will encourage him/her to continue reading and communicating orally. Continuous exposure to real English will raise opportunities for encountering the same kind of expressions once and again and further practice and rehearsal on them will lead to final acquisition.

Although the four phraseological categories we are tackling in this piece of paper share some of their features, we have considered interesting to stress some aspects related to their comprehension and acquisition in order to raise specific awareness about some specific points we consider important.

Starting with proverbs, we would like to stress Wolfgang Mieder’s words (2004): ‘Proverbs should be used in teaching as didactic tools because of their content of educational wisdom since they belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers; they are indeed very effective devices to communicate wisdom, truth, morals, traditional views and knowledge about human nature and the world at large’ (cited in Hanzén, 2007).

With respect to their comprehension, the development of language competence is ongoing from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood (Nippold et al., 2001 (cited in Hanzén: 2007)). Studies on proverb comprehension have shown that in comparison with other types of figurative language (metaphors, similes…), proverbs are on the whole more difficult to comprehend (Nippold et al., 2000 (cited in Hanzén, 2007)). In fact, as most figurative language,
they are not rule-fixed, so they must be learnt through exposure, repetition and daily occurrence.

Temple and Honeck (1999) discuss figurative comprehension of proverbs and explain that ‘it involves problem solving, entailing understanding and integration of the proverb topic, discourse context, figurative meaning and speakers’ pragmatic points’ (cited in Hanzén, 2007).

Therefore, dealing with proverbs is a way through which students can immerse themselves into the way of life of the foreign community, seeking for both the topic and the proverb to finally link them together and reach cultural understanding. It is the proverbs that are in use today that ought to be taught (Mieder, 2004 (cited in Hanzén, 2007)), since these are the ones students are likely to come across and need to internalize. The person who does not acquire competence in using proverbs will be limited in conversation, will have difficulty comprehending a wide variety of printed matter, radio, television, songs, etc., and will not understand proverb parodies which presuppose a familiarity with a stock proverb (Litovkina, 2000 (cited in Hanzén, 2007)).

Moving on to social routine formulae, we share Lana Rings’ view (1994):

‘Language strings are interpreted and used differently by people in different situations or subcultures. Human beings, although may be speaking the same language, do not necessarily interpret that language in the same way and can misunderstand each other. When people attempt to speak or understand a foreign language, miscommunication becomes much more feasible.’

These are structures that cannot be studied from grammar but that are extremely important for corresponding to certain necessities a speaker may have in particular situations (Forment Fernández, 1997 (cited in Martín Aizpuru, 2010)). They also facilitate the quick processing of language so that speakers can devote more time to plan longer discourse units and care about social aspects in communication (Corpas Pastor, 1997 (cited in Martín Aizpuru, 2010)). Finally, as they are ways of behaviors that have been accepted by a particular community and reflect certain socio-cultural values, their knowledge provides students with relevant cultural parameters that are worth bearing in mind in communication.

Penadés Martínez (2001) and Alvarado Ortega (2005) hold that these formulae must be inserted from the very beginning of the teaching-learning process, since from level A1, students are considered social beings, and therefore, they are active participants in social interactions (cited in Martín Aizpuru, 2010).
Social routine formulae are used, for instance, to greet somebody, to say goodbye, to show gratitude, to offer condolences, to congratulate, to welcome somebody, to introduce somebody, etc. As we can see, these are common situations we can encounter very easily and which we should manage to perform properly in our foreign language. Thus, this teaching must be active, cultural and context-addressed. As García Muruais (1997) states ‘learners have to take in meanings, connotations and contexts of phraseological units and be able to put them into practice in their daily conversations’ (cited in Martín Aizpuru, 2010).

As far as **collocations** are concerned, we can refer to what, one day, Krasher pointed out: ‘acquisition crucially depends on the quantity and quality of input’ (cited in Hill, 2001). What does this quote have to do with collocations? It is simple. Collocation exposure to L2 is essential to acquisition. Teachers should create the needs for using new collocational knowledge in the classroom. Wray (2002) observed that ‘the more often a string is needed, the more likely it is to be stored in prefabricated form to save processing effort, and once it is so stored, the more likely it is to be the preferred choice when that message needs to be expressed’ (cited in Fan, 2009).

Most students cannot use English outside the classroom in real life situations in spite of having studied it for years because they have serious problems to find proper collocates of words mostly because of the differences between English and Spanish. As Lewin (2001) supports ‘knowing a noun allows students to name a concept, but this is a long way from being able to talk about the concept.’ Thus, a learner who makes a collocation mistake when trying to talk about something provides the ideal opportunity to expand and organize the learner’s lexicon in an efficient way. Teachers should not just correct the mistake, but give some extra collocations as well. However, we do not have to wait until noticing a mistake for teaching collocations in context. When focusing on daily reading we can go beyond the traditional question of: ‘Are there any words you don’t know or need to clarify?’ and highlight collocations and particular expressions that may result useful for the students’ communicative competence.

We should also bear in mind that students already know a lot of ‘simple’ words, but they are unable to use them because they have not noticed their common collocations, so, following Lewin (2001), we think that time spent on half-known language is more likely to encourage input to become intake than time spent on completely new input.’ Very often the
pedagogic challenge is not to focus on the brand new, but instead to make accessible the relatively new’ (Skehan (cited in Lewin, 2001)).

For this reason, the activities proposed should be communicative and authentic, focusing on everyday events that generate repeated collocational use. It is only through continuous encounters and use in communicative activities that receptive knowledge of collocations will turn into productive knowledge and learners may gradually gain confidence in L2 collocational use.

Last but not least, we should comment on **idioms**. As mentioned above, an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements. Idioms can be either figurative or literal; for example: ‘one can kick a bucket and not die, pull someone’s leg and not be joking and spend their money on something that costs an arm and a leg keeping their extremities safe.’ These reasons lead second language learners to encounter so many difficulties using English idioms that they often prefer to avoid them altogether (Irujo, 1986).

However, avoiding idioms is not the solution since students will meet them in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio, broadcasts, television programmes, movies, newspapers, etc. Although some authors as Nippold (1991) affirm that the acquisition of idioms is a never-ending challenge and that ‘there is no clear point in human development when it can be said that idioms have been mastered’ (cited in Cooper, 1999), some studies have been carried out (Cooper, 1999 and Irujo, 1986) so as to find out what is the best way to learn them and try to overcome that ‘idiomphobia’ that seems to remain in students’ learning.

Cooper conducted a study in 1999 in which he examined different strategies L2 students used to guess the meaning of some unknown idioms. One strategy that was repeatedly and successfully observed was guessing meanings through context, so Cooper reached the conclusion that ‘although context cannot guarantee the correct interpretation of an idiom, it does help (cited in Zyzik, 2010).

Boers et al. (2000) also proposed Conceptual Metaphors (CM) as an organizing principle for Didactics. Through some metaphors such as MORAL IS UP or MORAL IS CLEAN, some idioms could be taught in different blocks or categories: *take the high road, do the dirty on someone*, etc (cited in Skoufaki, 2008).
Likewise, Irujo conducted a study (1986) to determine whether advanced learners of English used their knowledge of their mother tongue (Spanish) to understand and produce L2 expressions. The results showed that English idioms identical to their Spanish equivalents were the easiest to comprehend and produce (positive transfer from Spanish). Similar idioms were understood almost as well are identical ones, but in the production tests, interference from Spanish was prevalent (negative transfer). The idioms that were different in the two languages were the hardest for the participants to comprehend and produce. In general, participants comprehended and produced most easily and correctly the idioms that were frequently used in everyday speech, had simple vocabulary and structure, and were metaphorically transparent in that their literal meanings were closely related to their figurative meanings (cited in Cooper, 1999).

Irujo (1986) defends the fact that activities for teaching comprehension of idioms should provide students with skills in guessing meaning from context and in dealing with figurative speech. She encourages teachers to guide learners to discover whether there is an equivalent idiom in their first language and, if so, whether the two idioms are identical, similar or different. She proposes activities that compare literal and figurative meanings and provide a link from the literal words to the non-literal meaning: matching pictures showing literal and idiomatic meanings of an idiom, drawing or acting out literal meanings, playing idiom charades, making up stories or dialogues in which the literal use of an idiom creates a misunderstanding or a humorous situation, presenting short plays containing idioms or role-playing situations that lead themselves to the production of idioms.

As we can see, there is a great variety of options that can be used to learn and internalize idioms at the same time L2 learners spend a good time and use real and authentic language.

In short words, as Fernández Prieto states (2004): ‘Although the teaching of phraseology is presented as a great challenge, as professionals, we must take the bull by the horns and pull it off in the end’.

2.3. The Phraseological Minimum.

In order to know what phraseological contents are needed in the levels we teach (ESO and Bachillerato), we need to base on a precise and established minimum previously studied and analyzed. We have relied upon two important documents: the well-known Common
European Framework and the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia for the purposes of our study.

The Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching, established by the Council of Europe, entered the official syllabi of most European countries in the late 20th century. It entails that languages have a communicative function and should be learnt with the purpose of reaching communicative goals.

The Common European Framework or CEFR (2001) affirms that ‘for the realization of communicative intentions, users/learners bring to bear their general capacities together with a more specifically language-related communicative competence’. Communicative competence includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

As far as these sociocultural competences are concerned, the CEFR (pp.110, 111,120) highlights the relevance of fixed expressions and does expressly mention the four categories we are dealing with in this paper: ‘direct exponents of language functions’ such as greetings, e.g. *How do you do? Good morning!*, etc; phrasal idioms, often: semantically opaque or frozen metaphors, e.g. *He kicked the bucket* (i.e. he died)/ *It’s a long shot* (i.e unlikely to succeed); fixed collocations, consisting of words regularly used together, e.g. to *make a speech/mistake* and expressions of folk wisdom such as proverbs (*A stitch in time saves nine*). However, this phraseological competence seems not to be stressed until level C1 in which ‘un buen dominio de expresiones idiomáticas” is required, and level C2, which implies “buen dominio de un repertorio léxico muy amplio, que incluye expresiones idiomáticas y coloquiales’ (cited in Strohschen, in press).

Spanish laws and regulations (Ley Orgánica) already enacted in 2002 (art. 21) that Secondary and Bachillerato students must ‘desarrollar la competencia comunicativa para comprender y expresarse en una o más lenguas extranjeras de manera apropiada, a fin de facilitar el acceso a otras culturas’ (cited in Criado & Sánchez, 2009). However, Cerezo (2007) conducted a study with students of first year of Bachillerato and proved that language teachers’ action in the classroom is not predominantly communicative in nature, since grammatical and repetitive structural activities are the most frequent ones, while the communicative or interactive activities are, on the whole, scarce (cited in Criado & Sánchez, 2009).
In 2009, Criado and Sánchez carried out a study to verify up to what point ELT textbooks used in Spain educational settings comply with the official regulations prescribed, which fully advocate the Communicative Language Teaching Method. The analysis conducted led to positive results since, as a whole, six of the seven textbooks analyzed adapted quite well to the expectations regarding CLT.

Our aim now is to confirm whether English textbooks in the Region of Murcia provide students with the proper phraseological input within that Communicative Approach to let students reach successful communication.

However, after a careful reading of the section ‘Foreign Language’ in the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia (BORM), we confirm that there is not any Phraseological Minimum or significant criteria established for the different educational levels.

Which are, then, the objectives pursued by the BORM (2006) for Secondary and Upper Secondary Education?

Starting with Secondary Education, we can see four main objectives directly related to communicative goals in which phraseology should play an essential role (objectives 1, 2, 6, 9). Objectives 1 and 2 stress the importance of being able to understand general and specific information in diverse communicative situations as well as being able to manage and interact orally in daily common situations within classrooms but also out of school. Likewise, objective 6 highlights the importance of transferring the knowledge of the mother tongue to the learning of the foreign language in order to reach autonomy and self-reflection, and, finally, objective 9 makes reference to the importance of valuing the foreign language as a means of communication and understanding among people of different cultures and origins.

Similarly, concerning Upper Secondary or Bachillerato, we also find the relevance of making the students express themselves and interact as well as making them understand general and specific information elicited in common communicative contexts (objectives 1 and 2). The objectives 6, 8 and 9 are interrelated; they have to do with the knowledge of the social and cultural features of the foreign language in order to understand and interpret different cultures, to manage the language in particular communicative situations and as an essential means of communication and international understanding.

As we can see, there are not any direct references to phraseological content in these objectives. Therefore, once these general goals have been highlighted, our main aim is to
examine two different English textbooks, one of each level (Secondary Education and Bachillerato) to verify up if they cope with phraseological units as an important part of the Communicative Approach they are supposed to follow.

3. AIMS

The aim of this essay is to investigate whether and how phraseological units are used as part of EFL teaching in different high schools of the Region of Murcia. The investigation concerns the occurrence of idioms, collocations, social routine formulae and proverbs in English textbooks and the attitudes twenty-four English teachers show towards using them in their teaching. Our research questions are:

1. Do English textbooks in the Region of Murcia provide students with the required phraseological input to let students reach the requested objectives?

In order to answer this question, we are going to determine the phraseological content of two English textbooks widely used in the Region focusing our attention on the number of phraseological units they contain, the focus of the activities in which they are inserted and the skills in which they are practiced. Therefore, we need to respond to four main assumptions related to the following aspects:

1. What type of phraseological units (idioms, proverbs, social routine formulae and collocations) are contained in the books?

We truly expect to find examples of the four categories involved in this study, since the four of them are necessary to fulfill the objectives requested by the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia.

2. How many phraseological units of each category do the books offer?

We expect both books will provide students with a higher amount of collocations and social routine formulae than that of proverbs and idioms, since these categories are most commonly used in the daily speech.

3. What type of activity they appear in? (Linguistic or communicative)
As these two books are supposed to have a communicative nature, they must be intended to employ a communicative training, therefore, we expect that most phraseological units appear in communicative activities.

4. **Is there any balance in the use of phraseological content in the different skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing)?**

We expect to find a balance of phrasemes in the four skills above mentioned since they all have great importance in the communicative function of a language and because the communicative approach does not favor any skills over the others.

After answering these questions for each manual, we will finish our analysis commenting on the existing differences, if any, between both books regarding phraseological content and the level of learning of the students.

2. **Are teachers concerned about the importance of phraseology in ESL teaching? How do they deal with it in classrooms?**

So as to give an answer to this question, we are going to explain the results of a questionnaire addressed to forty teachers that work in the Region.

4. **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

The aim mentioned above is two-folded and the investigation is divided in two related surveys: an examination of textbooks and a questionnaire to English teachers. We are focusing our attention on four particular phraseological units: idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae. The method used is descriptive and it combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches.

4.1 **Examination of Textbooks**

The primary material in this investigation consists of two textbooks that are used for teaching English in Secondary and Upper Secondary Education in the Region of Murcia, Spain. We chose two different stages of learning in order to see if we could find significant differences regarding phraseological content. They have been randomly chosen as samples of the most frequently used English textbooks in the Region and, therefore, they do not represent all the textbooks that are available for teaching English at these said levels. The textbooks selected are:


As we can observe, there is a difference of three levels between them, what could be seen as a strong reason for encountering significant dissimilarities in our analysis.

Our purpose is, then, to analyze the phraseological content in these two textbooks belonging to 3rd year of Secondary Education and 1st year of Upper Secondary Education in order to find out if it is appropriate to these particular levels.

As both textbooks are quite similar in structure and methodology, we have designed a unique analysis chart to carry out our study. This chart involves each one of the four concerning categories of the phraseological units we are focusing on (idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae), making a total of one chart per unit and nine charts per book, as each book contains nine units:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDIOMS</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^1)</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^1)</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^1)</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^1)</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other(^2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 In this section, we will include any other activity whose focus is other than communicative or linguistic. Most of them are some cultural mini-exercises whose principal goal is the transmission of worldwide cultural knowledge.

2 In this section, we will include any other activities that do not directly work on any of the four skills. Most of them are those mechanical drills, filling the gaps, closes and typically English exercises that work on improving the linguistic competence from a more theoretical point of view.
The aim of these charts is to collect the quantitative results of the study in order to reach objective and numerical data that can respond to our first research question.

The search for these four categories of phraseological units is carried out with the help of close reading: a careful scrutiny of the text with the intention to detect idioms, proverbs, collocations and social routine formulae. This close reading includes every part of the text: headlines, captions, instructions, exercises, pictures, audio CD and readings. However, the survey has not included other material connected with the textbooks such as the workbook, grammar appendixes or any other extra material, mainly due to time and space limits but also for being considered simply occasional elements by most teachers.

Sometimes, the distinctions and limitations between collocations and idioms are not very clear and, for that reason, when we come across a confusing or ambiguous expression, we determine it as an idiom or a collocation with the help of *The Oxford Collocation Dictionary* (electronic version) and the Idiom section of the *The Free Dictionary* (www.http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/).

As mentioned above, the analysis was carried out by close reading. Every time we came across a phraseological unit, we followed the same procedure: mark it in a particular colour and fill in our chart including it in its corresponding sections: type of phraseological unit, main focus and skill, each one divided, at the same time, into several subsections to increase the precision and accuracy of the study. At the end of each unit, we counted the total items we had pointed out and the total items for each subsection and we obtained the results for that unit. In order to accomplish the global results, we just had to add up all the final items of each unit.

As these four categories of phraseological units we are analyzing can be considered a more or less wide field depending on the author and the classification we base on, we would like to narrow the scope as much as possible for our purposes. As we intend to transmit these kinds of structures from a didactic point of view, we do not consider necessary to make deeper and more rigorous distinctions in our analysis. For these reasons, when talking about these phrasemes in our research, we are including:

- Idioms: verbal idioms and similes.
- Proverbs: morals and wisdom sayings.

- Social Routine Formulae: oral and written formulae of courtesy and expressive speech formulae.


Once both textbooks are examined, the phraseological content found is compared to the requirements established by the Common European Framework and, more specifically, to the objectives of the Official Gazette of the Region of Murcia (BORM) to verify up if they comply with the common basis for each stage of learning.

4.2. Questionnaire to English Teachers

In order to find out if idioms, proverbs, collocations and social routine formulae are part of the EFL teaching in the Region of Murcia, we created a questionnaire (Appendix 1) that was delivered and/or sent by e-mail to forty English teachers at ten different high schools in the Region. The schools were chosen randomly, as were the teachers.

At the very beginning, the questionnaire contains a brief explanation of the different categories of phraseological units we are dealing with in order to make sure the respondents know exactly the issue we are working on to avoid any kind of problems or doubts in their answers. Then, it shows two introductory questions that cope with professional details of the interviewees, and, finally, the readers are asked to respond eleven short questions about the proper concern of our study. These last questions are different in form: some are unstructured open-ended questions, others are multiple-choice questions and some others are, to some extent, a mixture of both of them (See Appendix 1).

We chose to elaborate a written questionnaire because we wanted to integrate both, a quantitative and a qualitative approach. The quantitative approach, in our view, is very interesting due to its reliability as it is objective, deductive, generalisable and numerical. On the other hand, due to the unstructured open-ended questions, some answers also show subjective and personal reasons behind several attitudes and may ‘catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour which are hallmarks of qualitative data’ (Cohen et al., 2005:255 (cited in Hanzén, 2007)).
The aim of this questionnaire was to discover if educators use these phraseological units in their teaching, if they consider English textbooks provide students with enough phraseological content, which categories they consider useful to teach, at what levels they think phraseology should be implemented and if they believe extra practice is needed on some categories.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the two surveys are presented in two different sections. In 5.1, the results from the examination of the textbooks are accounted for in detail, and in 5.2, the results from the questionnaires are presented and analyzed.

5.1 Examination of Textbooks

5.1.1 Examination of English Alive! 3

*English Alive! 3* by Oxford University Press is a widely used book in the Region of in Murcia. All the units are structured in the same form: Vocabulary-Reading-Grammar-Vocabulary-Listening-Grammar consolidation-Reading-Writing-Practical English. The speaking sections varies depending on the unit and they appear on their own or together with some other skills (e.g. Speaking and Reading). It also includes a cultural reading or a song in each unit and a Starter Unit at the beginning of the book with the purpose of revising some essential elements from past years.

This book does not contain specific exercises devoted to the systematic teaching of phraseological units. Nevertheless, we can find how, indirectly, it includes some specific collocation exercises such as the ones in Unit 3 (page 28) to find *make/do* collocates, or, the *Phrase Bank* included in every Practical English section, in which we can observe how some social routine formulae are stressed.

Collecting the global results, we obtain the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLOCATIONS</th>
<th>IDIOMS</th>
<th>PROVERBS</th>
<th>ROUTINE FORMULAE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can observe, differences among categories are huge. The number of collocations is far bigger than the remaining three. It is quite normal since the possibility of collocates of a particular word can be more variable than, for example, the one of idioms
which usually has a higher degree of fixedness. Proverbs, on the other hand, are totally nonexistent.

Regarding the focus of the phraseological units in the different activities, we obtain the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINGUISTIC</th>
<th>COMMUNICATIVE</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>493</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results show that we have a higher amount of phrasemes in communicative activities than in the linguistic ones, something that could mean that *English Alive! 3* may follow a communicative training as far as phraseological content is concerned.

As for the number of phraseological units that are worked on specific skills, we find:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WRITING</th>
<th>READING</th>
<th>LISTENING</th>
<th>SPEAKING</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>156</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, although we find phraseological units in writing, reading, listening and speaking, the number of phrasemes present in mainly linguistic accuracy exercises is still predominant over the ones of the four principal skills of the language.

Now, it is time to focus our attention on each particular type of phraseological unit so as to see which focus they follow in the book and in which skill they are predominant:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDIOMS</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Communicative 6</td>
<td>Writing 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 11</td>
<td>Reading 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0</td>
<td>Listening 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COLLOCATIONS</td>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>Communicative 584</td>
<td>Writing 133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 416</td>
<td>Reading 291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 24</td>
<td>Listening 124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROVERBS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Communicative 0</td>
<td>Writing 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 0</td>
<td>Reading 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0</td>
<td>Listening 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL ROUTINE FORMULAE</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Communicative 54</td>
<td>Writing 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 21</td>
<td>Reading 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0</td>
<td>Listening 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surprisingly, idioms only appear in two units (1, 8) and most of them in unit 8 within exercises related to a reading comprehension activity (My heart was beating like a drum, My
legs were like jelly, It was as dark as night, The cake was as hard as a rock). Thus, their main focus is more linguistic than communicative, since they are studied taking into account linguistic features and not a particular communicative intention. The communicative idioms we observed were found in communicative readings that, this time, have a defined communicative purpose to transmit. Regarding skills, we just came across idioms in reading texts, one in a listening exercise and the remaining eleven, as we have already mentioned, in linguistic activities.

We can affirm that collocations are present in all sections, being predominant over their analogous categories (91.8%). The focus of the activities in which they are inserted is mainly communicative, although it is closely followed by the linguistic one. Concerning the four skills, we can see that there is, to some extent, a balance between them, although the speaking area seems to be more reluctant to the use of this type of phraseme than the three remaining. There is a significant number of collocations present in mechanical exercises not belonging to any particular skill (38.8%). Some specific examples contained in Unit 1 are: first impressions (adjective-noun), eye contact (noun-noun), speak to (verb-preposition), interested in (adjective+ preposition), do homework (verb+noun).

Social Routine Formulae, on the other hand, basically appear in communicative activities (e.g. oral conversation: Hi, my name is.../ Pleased to meet you/ Thanks; written conventions: Dear Sir/Madam, I’m looking forward to hearing from you, Yours faithfully (Unit 7). With respect to the skills in which they are most commonly practiced, we are really surprised by the results: although there is a linear balance among writing, reading, listening, we did not find any social routine formulae at all in any speaking activities, something that really called our attention and made us reflect on the true usefulness of these type of phraseological units.

As commented above, we did not find any proverb at all in this textbook.

5.1.2 Examination of Bridges 1 for Bachillerato

Bridges 1 by Burlington is also a well-known English teaching book in Murcia. As in the previous example, it follows the same pattern in all its units: Vocabulary-Reading-Grammar-Vocabulary-Writing-Listening-Looking Back and a cultural section every three units called: A bridge to: History/Literature/Geography.
If we have a look at the book, at first sight, we can see how, unlike *English Alive! 3*, it devotes some specific exercises at the teaching of particular phraseological units. For instance, in every unit, we find an activity presenting two or three idioms and another one called *Bridge to Everyday Language* in which we encounter most social routine formulae. Regarding collocations, we have just found a couple of exercises (Unit 3 and 5) intended to focus our attention on some fixed noun-noun and verb-noun collocations. It is also important to mention that the terms ‘collocation’ and ‘idiom’ appear in the book as new terms for students to be aware of. Finally, as for proverbs, they are virtually nonexistent and, therefore, they are not given particular attention either in this book.

If we collect the global results of the survey, this time we obtain the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLOCATIONS</th>
<th>IDIOMS</th>
<th>PROVERBS</th>
<th>ROUTINE FORMULAE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.386</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, the figures are quite similar to the previous book. Again, collocations are the category most widely used, followed by social routine formulae. The number of idioms has increased significantly with respect to the one contained in *English Alive! 3* and, in this case, we find, at least, two proverbs.

As far as the main focus of the activities is concerned, we obtained the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINGUISTIC</th>
<th>COMMUNICATIVE</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>817</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see how, unlike the previous example, although the number of phraseological unit occurrences in exercises of communicative nature is quite significant, the phrasemes in linguistic activities are still predominant over the ones following a communicative approach; this may lead to the conclusion that this textbook is less communicative as far as phraseology is concerned.

Finally, with respect to the skills in which the phraseological content is tackled, we obtain the following figures:
Similarly to *English Alive! 3*, *Bridges I* devotes a great amount of phraseological units to other activities different from the ones belonging to the practice of the four skills of language. However, this time the difference is even more impressive (49%). Virtually half of phraseological units present in the textbook are located in linguistic or non-communicative focus activities.

Now, once again, it is time to focus our attention on each particular type of phraseological unit so as to see which focus they follow in the book and in what skill they are predominant:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDIOMS</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Communicative 9 Writing 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 33 Reading 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0 Listening 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</td>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td>FOCUS</td>
<td>SKILL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLOCATIONS</td>
<td>1.386</td>
<td>Communicative 591 Writing 169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 763 Reading 281</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 32 Listening 167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 693</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</td>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td>FOCUS</td>
<td>SKILL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROVERBS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communicative 0 Writing 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 2 Reading 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0 Listening 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT</td>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td>FOCUS</td>
<td>SKILL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL ROUTINE FORMULAE</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Communicative 65 Writing 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic 19 Reading 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 0 Listening 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Starting with idioms, we can observe that they mostly appear in linguistic activities (78.6%), mainly in those exercises devoted to input-idiom teaching which do not work, at the
same time, on any particular skill. Some examples are: to have a heart of gold, to be a bad egg (Unit 1); to travel light (Unit 2); to throw in the towel, to be on the ball (Unit 3); to be in deep water (Unit 4), etc. The remaining items (21.4%) incidentally appear in communicative activities, being predominant those taking part of reading texts. For instance: to lose one’s temper, in the eyes of, bring to light a problem, take things to heart, etc. (Units 1-4)

As far as collocations are concerned, we can see them in every section and they appear in all their forms: noun-noun (average height, first-aid kit, Units 1,2), verb-noun (spend time, make friends; Unit 1), adjective-noun (free time, bad temper; Unit 1), verb-preposition (worry about, think of; Units 1,6), adjective- preposition (different from, good at; Units 1,8), preposition-noun (on time, in bold; Units 1, 4). Although there is a bigger amount of collocations in linguistic activities, we can affirm that the differences with respect to the communicative ones are not very significant (just 12.5%). Regarding skills, we can observe that there is more or less a balance between the four of them, being speaking the one containing the smallest amount of collocations and being the section ‘other’ (drills, cultural activities, linguistic-based exercises) the category containing the most part of them (50%).

As for proverbs, we just found two of them (‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ and ‘No news is good news’) and both were located in linguistic activities and were wrongly considered idioms, when, in fact, they are more proverb or saying-like. In addition to this, they were not integrated in any particular skill.

With respect to social routine formulae, they are mostly situated in communicative exercises (77.4%) and they keep, to some extent, a balance among the four skills of the language, being reading the skill in which they appear the least (8.3%). We found repeated occurrences concerning greeting, welcoming, courtesy, farewell and apologizing formulae such as ‘Welcome to”, ‘Good morning/evening’, ‘Thank you’, ‘You are welcome’, ‘What’s up?’, ‘Excuse me’, ‘I’m really sorry’.

5.1.3 Comparison between textbooks regarding students’ learning levels

Ideally, we expected to find significant differences with respect these two books. There is a difference of three levels between them, thus, one (Bridges I), in principle, should be far higher in phraseological content than the other (English Alive 3), since they are supposed to follow a gradual process.
We are going to compare the results obtained for each category in the previous subsections with the purpose of highlighting the dissimilarities among them:

### ENGLISH ALIVE! 3

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<thead>
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<th>SKILL</th>
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</tr>
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### BRIDGES I

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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can observe, we find a higher number of idioms in first year of Bachillerato than in third year of compulsory education. In *Bridges I*, as commented before, we saw there were specific and systematic exercises devoted to these phraseological units for the students to come into contact with them. However, these items were made reference basically from a linguistic point of view and not used or practiced in communicative or real situations in which students may learn how to make use of them. As far as *English Alive 3* is concerned, we see that the number of idioms is reduced and that this phraseological category is not devoted special attention. As explained above, we just found idioms in two specific units (1, 8). It is in this unit 8 where idioms, or more specifically, similes, were efficiently worked from a source text. However, two units, from our point of view, it is not enough to let students reach a good phraseological competence. We strongly believe that students must be exposed to idioms from the very beginning of their learning process. Maybe, these idioms can be increased in complexity and opacity while passing levels but learners, without a doubt, have to be immersed in a context of constant idiom occurrences in order to familiarize with them and start integrating them in their own speech.

Moving on to the next section, we find these two charts for collocations:
Regarding this category, we can see at first sight that the difference in number between these two books of different levels is not too high. However, what seems to be worth mentioning is the different focus of the activities in which collocations are inserted and the dissimilar use of these phrasemes regarding the different skills. Bridges I, as we already know, is a book for first year of Bachillerato. At this level students are supposed to have a greater competence in the four skills of the language, however, we can see through the results of the table that most collocations appear in linguistic activities and although they also occur within the four skills, there is a significant difference between the mechanical and other linguistic activities and the four communicative competences. On the other hand, we have English Alive 3. Despite belonging to a lower level and offering, therefore, more basic concepts, this book shows more collocations within a communicative focus and with a higher rate of use in the four main competences, being still predominant the occurrences in mechanical drills, cultural activities or other not communicative-oriented exercises.

It is also important to mention that Bridges I mentions the notion ‘collocation’ as something new for the learners and tries to make them conscious of their occurrence and importance, nevertheless, they are tackled always from a purely linguistic point of view and without opportunities for students to do some research or to learn more collocates by themselves. English Alive 3, in spite of devoting a couple of exercises to the teaching of collocations, does not explain what a collocation is, and the occurrences it contains are mostly incidental or occasional.

Results for proverbs are not very encouraging:
As these figures reveal, none of these two books consider proverbs an important part of the teaching of the English language. *Bridges I* inserts two of them incidentally in the idiom-teaching exercises but they are not explained at all. *English Alive 3*, for its part, does not include any proverb or make any reference to this category. Therefore, at the moment, proverbs seem not to be given even a relative importance.

Finally, concerning social routine formulae:

We obtain very similar results for these two books. Both of them offer most of their social routine formulae in communicative exercises and quite spread over the four skills, although it is for us strange to mention that *English Alive 3* does not contain any routine formulae in speaking activities, what may be considered their fundamental function in communication.

The results of this investigation show that, in general, phraseology is part of the EFL teaching in the Region of Murcia. However, most of the categories we are dealing with seem to take up a small part of the teaching and of the textbooks, especially proverbs.
As mentioned in the theoretical background, the Common European Framework does not specifically mention phraseology as such until advanced levels: ‘buen dominio de expresiones idiomáticas’ regarding level C1 and ‘buen dominio de un repertorio léxico muy amplio, que incluye expresiones idiomáticas y coloquiales’ addressed to level C2 (MCERL, 109). This makes us wonder what phraseological content should be implemented in order to make students reach the competences the CEFR requests at these levels.

Obviously, the teaching of a language is a process and, from our point of view, students cannot ignore phraseological units and, suddenly, when dealing with level C1 and C2 reach a great phraseological competence as if by magic. They need to be in contact with these kinds of structures from the very beginning in order to master them naturally at advanced levels.

After analyzing these two books, aimed at levels B1.1 and B1.2, we think that none of them offer a thoughtful and precise methodology to fulfill the general objectives for ESO and Bachillerato we exposed above. They do not offer students enough and adequate phraseological content as regards most categories and they do not follow a linear approach that ensures a gradual learning, as their appearance is mostly incidental and not goal-oriented. The constant contact, repetition and exposure to these phraseological units is, without a doubt, essential from the beginning of the students’ learning in order to enlarge their repertoire progressively. Thus, so as to adapt and reach the objectives proposed by the BORM, and eventually, by the CEFR, we do think it is the educator who plays the most important role in this teaching proceeding. Consequently, and summarized in Lewin’s words (2001): ‘The teacher main responsibility is response-ability’.

That is the reason why we found very interesting to ask English teachers about their opinions and approaches with regard to phraseology.

5.2. Questionnaire- The use of phraseological units (idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae) as part of EFL teaching

The questionnaire (See Appendix 1) was delivered and/or sent by e-mail to forty English teachers at ten different high schools in the Region of Murcia. However, only twenty-four teachers have answered the survey. The respondents have been teaching English during a period that ranges from five to twenty-eight years, being predominant those with more than twenty years of experience (16 out of 24). Hereinafter, we are going to comment and show the results we obtained from the answers of these experienced teachers.
Regarding the levels the teachers are in charge of, we find that most of them teach both, ESO and Bachillerato students, followed by those who just focus their attention on secondary compulsory education (ESO):

![Number of teachers per level](image)

Among the materials most widely used by these teachers, we can see there are four books that stand out from the others. These are: *Bridges for Bachillerato* (by Burlington), *English Alive* by Oxford University Press (OUP), *Switch* by OUP and *Build up* by Burlington; these last samples are devoted to ESO students.

When we asked about the use of extra material in order to focus on phraseology and on the categories we are dealing with in our study, we obtained the following results:

![Use of extra material](image)

The majority of teachers (91.7 %) affirm that they have noticed enough phraseological units in the teaching materials they use, mainly social routine formulae (63.6 %), collocations (63.6%) and idioms (50%). Only 8.3 % states not to have noticed any because ‘the book does not offer these kind of structures’ (50%) or because ‘they think phraseology is an aspect to be studied at higher levels’ (50%).
When coping with the importance of these phrasemes as part of EFL teaching, we find different opinions. Most teachers are in favour of teaching these kind of structures, as we can observe in the following graphic:

Their arguments are varied. In general, they claim that all of them are needed for effective communication in order to be capable of understanding others and be understood, to enlarge vocabulary, to access the foreign culture and to manage, in short, real English conversations.

However, a small minority is still reluctant to teach phraseological units at secondary and upper secondary education:

They think that these expressions are not the most important ones of the English language and that they should be taught when students have a higher command of the language.
With respect to the methodology used when handling phraseological units, these English teachers mainly compare it with the Spanish equivalent, some explain it in detail to make students understand the concepts, some others discuss cultural and metaphorical issues concerning the items and just a few work with a theme around them. It is important to mention that respondents were able to mark more than one answer, therefore, we must say that most of them use several strategies so as to face these kinds of structures.

Moving on to the next question that dealt with teaching phraseology on purpose, we found out that 50% of teachers do it by means of role-plays, videos, letters, songs, books, research tasks, etc. but the remaining 50% do not usually do it because they think that the contents of textbooks have greater importance, because they lack time or because they think their students are at too low levels to integrate phraseology in their learning.

Respondents, when asked about the need for students of extra practice on phrasemes apart from the one offered by textbooks in order to develop a proper phraseological competence, think as follows:

**FOR EXTRA PRACTICE**

**AGAINST EXTRA PRACTICE**
We can observe that many of them are for extra practice on phraseological units, mainly because they believe that textbooks must not be the only way to teach a language and they consider these structures necessary to have a good command of productive and receptive competences. However, there is also a significant number of teachers that strongly hold the view that textbooks offer enough and adequate contents for students to be taught, and therefore, there is not any need to add any further material in the students’ learning process.

In case of adding extra practice, respondents bet on a combination between a communicative approach (role-plays, simulations, task-based teaching, debates, discussions…) and defined activities such as filling the gaps, closes, drills, matchings, etc.

Concerning the level in which phraseology should be implemented, we have already seen in some arguments that some teachers are reluctant to include them at low levels. This graphic shows more accurate results:

![Graph showing the level of phraseology implementation at any level and intermediate/advanced levels](chart.png)
As we can observe, most teachers are for teaching phraseological units at any level. They strongly believe that phraseology is a part of language as important as any other and that it can be adapted and increased in difficulty according to each level. In general, collocations and social routine formulae are the phrasemes most important to be taught in these educators’ opinions. There is, on the other hand, a significant number of teachers that defend the idea that phrasemes are not of great importance in low levels, since students need to mature to be able to understand the socio-cultural aspects of a language. We found a comment that really called our attention from one of the respondents. It claimed that, as teachers, they do not have any other choice but to delay the teaching of phraseological units until higher levels because he/she considered that early years in high school are totally wasted when it comes to teach proper English.

Once respondents were told about which category of phraseological units students should learn more, we took into account the answers assigned to their first option in relation to the level of importance they considered appropriate.

Most teachers bet on social routine formulae as the most important phraseological units to be taught at secondary and upper secondary education. An important number of respondents are close behind supporting that all of them are important to the same extent, some others are for collocations as first option and just a small percentage think that none of them is totally necessary at these levels.

At the end of our questionnaire, we added a final question so as to know if participants had any extra suggestion or comment about our topic. 58.3% of respondents decided not to make any comments but 41.7% preferred to show their own ideas. Most of them support the teaching of phraseological units as an important aspect of the teaching of vocabulary. They affirm that they are present in real English and the good command of these structures make,
without a doubt, the difference in the use of the English language. There was a petition for the integration of the bilingual section from primary education in order to expand the input and natural occurrence of these phrasemes in everyday situations.

On the whole, the results from the questionnaire show a positive attitude towards using idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae, and also that many of the participating teachers use these phrasemes, or at least, some of them in their teaching. However, many consider other issues more important to teach or think phrasemes are not an essential part of the English language as grammar or general vocabulary can be.

Some teachers also comment that these phraseological units, especially idioms or proverbs, are used as time-fillers or when times allows, as extra activities, something not very common in secondary or upper secondary education because, as we all know, curricula are too long and teachers normally lack time. Actually, the rate of non-respondents (16 out of 40 teachers) might indicate that the interest in phraseological units and in using them is not that positive.

The issue of when it is the best moment to implement phraseology in the teaching of a language is a controversial subject. As we proved previously in the results of the questionnaires, most teachers support the idea of teaching idioms, collocations, social routine formulae in their teaching at any level, although some of them seem to be more reluctant to the teaching of proverbs, mainly for being considered too high-leveled or not very frequent in day-to-day communication. Contrary to what important authors such as Ruiz Gurillo (cited in Fernández Prieto, 2004) and some of the teachers interviewed, who maintain the idea that phraseological units should be addressed to intermediate and advanced students only, we are of the view that all phraseological units are equally important and must be taught gradually. Nevertheless, we also agree with Penadés (1999:23) about the fact that teachers struggle to select the adequate phrasemes to present their students in each level due to the lack of up-to-date teaching materials concerning this subject (cited in Fernández Prieto, 2004).

In short words, although most teachers claim to deal with phraseological units in their teaching, we found out that many of them contradict themselves in different answers of the questionnaire, what makes us think that they have scarcely stopped to think about phraseology as a relevant branch of vocabulary in their secondary and bachillerato lessons. In addition to this, despite the fact that textbooks seem to start highlighting some categories in order to make students, and also some teachers, aware of the relevance and occurrence of these items,
we do think that the there is still a long way to go in order to truly reach the objectives requested.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In our research, we have noticed that the phraseology contained in some of the English textbooks used in the Region of Murcia is too scarce, or at least, not always addressed at aiming the requested goals (BORM and CEFR). On a more positive note, we have observed that there is a tendency to the phraseological implementation in the English teaching, although within a non-homogeneous approach. In some books, particular categories are explicitly stressed, but in some others, the phraseological unit occurrences are absolutely incidental. With regard to the attitude of the English teachers towards the teaching of this phraseological content, we found controversy. Most of them seem to be for the teaching of idioms, collocations and social routine formulae as important items in order to reach a good competence in the language; just a few are for proverbs, for being considered high-leveled or not very common in daily speech. However, in general, they defend the idea that, although phraseology is a relevant part of the language, grammar and general vocabulary have a greater importance for students at the levels they teach (ESO and Bachillerato, mainly) and, as they usually lack time due to the high amount of contents contained in curricula, they feel unable to devote their limited hours to what they considered minor aspects.

Unfortunately, this is the main problem. Phraseology and Phraseodidactics have always been considered minor branches of vocabulary and there is an extended vision that supports this point of view. We do support the opposite view, since the use of phraseology in real communication is continuous and extremely important in the command of a language.

In order to make society aware of the relevance of our subject of study, we do believe that, certainly, further research on didactics on Phraseology and Phraseodidactics is needed. A phraseological minimum, more complete textbooks and harder training for the teachers on phraseological issues need to be implemented in current pedagogical approaches. In this way, students will be able to achieve the objectives required and teachers will not hesitate and struggle when facing phraseology in classrooms.
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APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE ADDRESSED TO ENGLISH TEACHERS

QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT THE USE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS (IDIOMS, COLLOCATIONS, PROVERBS AND SOCIAL ROUTINE FORMULAE) AS PART OF EFL TEACHING

According to Corpas Pastor’s (1996: 20), we can define phraseological units as multiword lexical units composed by at least two graphical words (and a whole sentence as its upper limit), which are further characterized by a high frequency of cooccurrence of its components and by various degrees of institutionalization, such as formal frozenness, inner fixation and semantic specialization or opacity.

Among them, we can find **Collocations**, combinations of words that present some restrictions established by common usage (make bed, do a favour); **Idioms**, stable combinations of two or more terms that function as a unique sentence element and whose meaning is not deduced from the sum of its single words (pull sb’s leg); **Proverbs**, utterances that constitute a complete text by themselves and that express a basic truth or practical precept (Actions speak louder than words) and **Social Routine Formulae**, utterances that need to be inserted in a specific context to make sense (I beg your pardon).

Please, answer the ten questions with your own words or, when it comes to multiple choices, by making your choice red or circled. Thank you for your valuable help!

- How long have you been teaching English?
- Which level/s are you teaching at the moment?

1. What teaching material do you use when it comes to textbook/s? Give the title of the textbook/s you are using right now.

2. Do you use extra material to focus on certain aspects such as, for example, phraseology? (idiom/collocation dictionaries or particular books related to phraseological units?)

3. Have you noticed any phraseological unit (idioms, collocations, proverbs and social routine formulae) in the teaching material you use?
   - If YES, what have you noticed?
4. Do you consider idioms, collocations, proverbs and routine formulae an important part of the EFL teaching? (Tick the option you agree with and explain why).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>PROVERBS</th>
<th>SOCIAL ROUTINE FORMULAE</th>
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<tr>
<td>If YES- explain why:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If NO- explain why not:</td>
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5. How do you deal with a proverb/idiom/collocation/social routine formula that you find in the textbook? Choose one or more by making them red or bold.

- I explain it
- I compare it to the Spanish equivalent
- I discuss metaphorical use (regarding idioms and proverbs)
- I discuss cultural issues concerning the phraseological unit
- I work with a theme around the phraseological unit
- I do not deal with it
- I have not noticed any and, therefore, I do not deal with it

6. Have you ever taught phraseology on purpose? I mean, have you ever prepared any activity or task for your students with the aim of making them come into contact with these types of structures?

- If YES- what task and which category:
7. Do you think students need extra practice apart from the one offered in the textbook to develop a proper phraseological competence?

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<th>IDIOMS</th>
<th>COLLOCATIONS</th>
<th>PROVERBS</th>
<th>SOCIAL ROUTINE FORMULAE</th>
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<td>If NO- explain why not:</td>
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8. In case you wanted to add extra practice on idioms, collocations, social routine formulae and proverbs in your teaching, how would you do it?

- Through a communicative approach: eg. Role plays, simulations, task-based teaching, debates, discussions, etc.

- By means of defined activities such as filling the gaps, clozes, matchings, drills, etc.?

- Using a combination of both

9. Do you think that phraseology (collocations, idioms, proverbs and social routine formulae) should be treated from the very beginning of the English learning process or do you think it should be implemented once the students have a certain command of the language? (Tick the option you agree with and explain why).
10. In your opinion, about which type/category of phraseological unit should students learn more? Put them in order of importance:

✓ Collocations (e.g whole truth)
✓ Idioms (e.g throw the towel)
✓ Proverbs (e.g An apple a day keeps the doctor away)
✓ Social Routine Formulae (e.g What’s up?)
✓ None of them: the students get enough practice
✓ All of them: the students definitely need more practice in each type

11. Do you have any comment or extra suggestion on this subject of phraseological units as part of EFL teaching?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!