

Improving EFL Learners' Use of English Vocabulary in Sentence Writing Through Framenet

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Abstract: This paper sought to investigate if learners can grow out of the difficulties in use of English vocabulary in sentence writing by engaging in Framenet practice activity. 91 first-year students from the two sentence writing classes, one treated as the experimental group (EG) and the other as the control group (CG), at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study, whose findings substantiated the benefits of Framenet practice to foster learners' writing motivation and enhance their use of English vocabulary in sentence writing.

Key words: Framenet; use of English vocabulary; writing motivation; Learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners

1. INTRODUCTION

During the period of learning English, how to use the vocabulary correctly extremely helps to improve the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. As Harmer (1992: 14) also put it “competent speakers of the language need to know the lexis (or vocabulary) of a language – although that knowledge will vary depending, for example, on their education and occupation”. So, “language students need to learn the lexis of the language. They need to learn what words mean and how they are used. Whilst this obviously involves giving them the names for things (e.g.: ‘table’, ‘chair’, etc.) it also involves showing them how words are stretched and twisted (e.g.: ‘to table a motion’, ‘to chair a meeting’)” (Harmer, 1992: 23). Of this idea, it is clear that in order to completely possess a word, the learners not only need to remember this word but also need to know how to use it in different situations. That is the reason why the teachers' duty is mainly to find an appropriate way to help their students overcome this obstacle.

“Unfortunately, vocabulary is neglected in some English language courses. This is a pity because

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* Received 15 March 2010; accepted 26 April 2010

working with words can be enjoyable and satisfying for learners” (Davies & Pearse, 2000: 59). Different from this point of view, on the contrary of the neglect of vocabulary, aware of the significance of vocabulary, many researches have also been done carefully to explore various interesting kinds of methods as well as techniques to help the teachers successfully transfer their knowledge to the learners. Even though the process of teaching vocabulary have been improved and the learners seem to understand most of the new words after the class, they easily forget and can not apply them at all to real life situations.

With the way of studying new words desultorily, the words surely gradually disappear. So, some suggestions have been done to enrich learners’ vocabulary. One example is that “students should go home every evening and learn a list of fifty words ‘by heart’” (Harmer, 1992: 24). According to Harmer (1992: 24), such a practice may have beneficial results, of course, but it avoids one of the central features of vocabulary use, namely the words occur in context. This traditional learning skill helps to explain the fact that most of the Vietnamese learners are still confused in which situations the words should be used and how many elements a word must have, etc. With such the reality of learning the English words and the difficulties of the learners, this study will take on the task to find out suitable teaching techniques to help English learners easily obtain English words systematically. That is also the reason for investigating FrameNet.

FrameNet including both semantic as well as pragmatic features appears as a device to help the learners learn vocabulary through a system of related frames. It is the result from collecting a hundred of sentences from real life to generalize a so-call formula for particular words so that the learners can easily pick out and apply them to transferring the information. With FrameNet, all elements of a word can be defined clearly to help the learners avoid using their participants incorrectly. In short, from FrameNet, various teaching and learning applications will be carried out in order to help learners obtain English words easily and systematically.

The research was, therefore, guided by the two subsequent research questions:

1. Can Framenet enhance students' use of English vocabulary in sentence writing?
2. Can Framenet generate students' motivation in practising sentence writing?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teaching vocabulary in sentence writing

In McCarthy’s (1991: 64) view, “bringing a discourse dimension into language teaching does not by any means imply an abandonment of teaching vocabulary. Vocabulary will still be the largest single element in tacking a new language for the learner and it would be irresponsible to suggest that it will take care of itself in some ideal world where language teaching and learning are discourse driven”. In addition, Nation (1990: 174) also confirmed that “strategies which learners can use independently of a teacher are the most important of all ways of learning vocabulary. For this reason it is worthwhile ensuring that learners are able to apply the strategies and that they get plenty of help and encouragement in doing so. By mastering a few strategies learners can cope with thousands of words”. With such the significance of vocabulary, “language pedagogy has viewed and treated vocabulary in very different ways over the years”. (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 73)

In the grammar-translation approach, which was codified by Karl Plotz in the 1880s (Kelly, 1969) and *in the reading approach* of the 1930s, word lists were a core element of the language curriculum. In contrast, *the audio-lingual approach*, dominant from the 1940s through the 1960s, deliberately suppressed the teaching of vocabulary in favor of teaching grammar and pronunciation. *In current naturalistic and communicative approaches*, there is a widely shared assumption that vocabulary will be learnt automatically and indirectly without any explicit formal instruction, merely through exposure to and practice with the target language. Research in second and foreign language vocabulary acquisition (Coady, 1993) indicates that formal instruction is beneficial and suggests *a mix approach* to vocabulary instruction in which basic or core vocabulary is explicitly taught along with strategies. That will allow

learners to deal effectively with less frequent vocabulary that they encounter in context so that such vocabulary can be learnt when needed.

In fact, formal linguists have tended to focus on syntax; they have long maintained that any human language is a rule-governed innate system and that those who have acquired a natural language apply its rules in original and creative ways by producing utterances they have never heard before (Chomsky, 1965). In contrast to this perspective, linguists who focus on vocabulary rather than grammar believe that a significant proportion of social, professional, and everyday language use is formulaic, routine, and fairly predictable. The fact that formal linguists have focused on contextfree aspects of syntax and that lexicographers have focused on words, which derive much of their meaning from context, is part of the explanation. Nowadays, we have the new vision of vocabulary, where word meanings are viewed as reflecting use in contexts, especially the importance of discourse-grounded activities for learners. Generally, the linguists always try their best to improve the “productive use of vocabulary and ways of learning and using new vocabulary because we feel this area has been neglected” (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 74). In short, for years it is proved that vocabulary should be learnt automatically and indirectly not only through appropriate contexts but through practicing with the target language as well.

2.2 FrameNet

The aim of FrameNet

The FrameNet’s aim is to document the range of semantic and syntactic combinatory possibilities (valences) of each word in each of its senses thanks to the resource of a million of sentences from real life. This means that this project was born by generalizing a lot of evidences in real life to withdraw the semantic as well as the syntactic features and each example sentence shows valence properties of one predicating word.

Furthermore, the FrameNet project seeks to construct a computerreadable database of information about English words and the frames they inherit. It also provides attested examples that illustrate the way frame elements are expressed by complements and modifiers of the words in real sentences. So, the important part of this work is the annotation of corpus sentences with frame semantic information.

Comparison with WordNet and ontologies

The FrameNet database is a lexical resource with unique characteristics that differentiate it from other resources such as commercially available dictionaries and thesauri as well as the best-known on-line lexical resource, WordNet.

a. Unlike commercial dictionaries, FrameNet provides multiple annotated examples of each sense of a word. The set of examples (approximately 20 per lexical unit) illustrates all of the combinatorial possibilities of the lexical unit.

b. The examples are taken from naturalistic corpora, rather than constructed by a linguist or lexicographer. In fact, its main corpus is the 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC), which is both large and balanced across genres (editorials, textbooks, advertisements, novels, sermons, etc.). However, it lacks many specifically American expressions although the specialists also use U.S. newswire texts provided by the Linguistic Data Consortium. That is the reason why the newly released initial part of the American National Corpus has been recently acquired to perfect the FrameNet.

c. WordNet and all ontologies provide some sort of hierarchical relations between their nodes; likewise, FrameNet includes a network of relations between frames. These frame-to-frame relations are shown through the FrameGrapher tool in the frame reports; the FE-to-FE relations are not shown in the frame reports but they can be viewed in the annotation reports. Several types of frame relations are defined, of which the most important are:

- **Inheritance:** The child frame is a subtype of the parent frame, and each FE in the parent frame is bound to a corresponding FE in the child frame.

- Using: The child frame presupposes (uses) the parent frame a background; however, not all parent FEs need to be bound to child FEs.
- Sub frame: The child frame is a sub event of a complex event represented by the parent, e.g. the Criminal_process frame has sub frames of Arrest, Arraignment, Trial, and Sentencing.
- Perspective on: The child frame provides a particular perspective on an unperspectivized parent frame, e.g. a pair of examples consists of the Hiring and Get_a_job frames, which perspectivize the Employment_start frame from Employer's and the Employee's point of view.

d. Since FrameNet does not annotate many nouns denoting artifacts and natural kinds, its database is not readily usable as an ontology of things. In this area, it also differs from WordNet, which provides extensive coverage, including hierarchical relations of area such as animals, plants, etc.

Besides the distinguishable features mentioned above, FrameNet and other dictionaries also have some similarities as follows:

e. Like dictionary subentries, FrameNet lexical units come with definitions, either from the Concise Oxford Dictionary or definitions written by a FrameNet staff member.

f. Each lexical unit is linked to a semantic frame so it evokes that frame. This makes the FrameNet database similar to a thesaurus, grouping together semantically similar words.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

91 first-year students (from among a population of 269 first-year students), 54 females and 37 males, from the two classes of practically the same writing proficiency level (predicated on the students' scores from the pretest), who were attending the first course of writing (writing 1 involving sentence writing) at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study. The average age was 19.04 years ranging from 18 to 22 years old.

One first-year class (E10D) was treated as the experimental group (EG), and the other (E10A) as the control group (CG). Merely the students in the experimental group were immersed in use of English vocabulary in sentence writing through Framenet. A sample lesson plan on use of English vocabulary via Framenet is displayed in Appendix A.

Instrumentation and procedure

Pretest and posttest in the form of sentence writing were employed as instruments to measure students' sentence writing proficiency level in terms of fluency and accuracy. Accuracy is the ability to avoid error in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language. And fluency "concerns the learner's capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation. It is likely to rely upon more lexicalized modes of communication as the pressures of real time speech production are met only by avoiding excessive rule-based computation." (Skehan, 1996: 22).

The initial sentence writing proficiency level of the whole population of first-year students was investigated by the pretest, from which scores contributed to the choice of the experimental group and control group of virtually similar sentence writing competence level.

Upon the arrival of the fifteenth week, the students in both experimental group and control group took the post-test, which sought to assess the impact of Framenet on the quality of the students' sentence writing tasks; nonetheless, merely the students in the experimental group participated in the questionnaire survey (see Table 4) collecting their reflections upon the application of Framenet.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of Framenet practice on learners' sentence writing fluency

Since fluency tends to hinge on more lexicalized modes of communication (Skehan, 1996: 22), writing fluency in this research was measured through the writing speed (the number of words produced within a limited length of time) and the degree of task completion.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for sentence writing fluency

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average number of words per paper	187.30	195.20	7.90	4.22%
	Number of unfinished pieces*	9.0	7.0	-2.0	-22.22%
	Number of submitted papers	43	43		
EG	Average number of words per paper	185.81	205.66	19.85	10.68%
	Number of unfinished pieces	13.0	4.0	-9.0	-69.23%
	Number of submitted papers	48	48		
Differences between EG and CG	Average number of words per paper	-1.49	10.46	11.95	6.46%
	Number of unfinished pieces	4.0	-3.0	-7.0	-47.01%

* Unfinished pieces are papers whose one-third or more of sentences are unfinished.

As displayed in Table 1, the average number of words generated by the students in the control group for their 45-minute pretest was 187.30, and that generated by the students in the experimental group was 185.81. Thus, the difference in the average number of words generated by the students between the experimental group and the control group was -1.49 words, which implies that prior to their involvement in the practice of Framenet, the sentence writing speed of the students in both groups was virtually analogous.

Nonetheless, the results from the posttest conducted after the students' thirteen-week practice of Framenet indicated a marked disparity in the average number of words produced by the students between the two groups. The difference in the average number of words written by the students in the experimental group between the posttest and the pretest was 19.85 words (10.68%) whereas that in the control group between the posttest and the pretest was 7.90 words (4.22%), implying that the sentence writing pace of the students in the experimental group improved to a higher extent than those in the control group.

Similarly, the students in the experimental group demonstrated the better improvement in the extent of sentence writing task completion than those in the control group. The disparity in the number of unfinished writing pieces submitted by the students in the experimental group between the posttest and the pretest was -9.0 words (-69.23%) while that in the control group between the posttest and the pretest was -2.0 words (-22.22%).

Impact of Framenet practice on learners' sentence writing accuracy

Table 2 showed that the average number of errors left in the pretest papers by the students in the control group was 21.59 and that by the students in the experimental group was 22.04. Therefore, the gap in the

average number of errors left by the students between the two groups was 0.45 errors, denoting that at the departure of Framenet practice, the sentence writing accuracy level of the students did not substantially differ.

The thirteen-week practice of Framenet, however, brought about a discernible divergence in the average number of mistakes made by the students between the two groups. The average number of mistakes made by the students in the experimental group fell by 14.99 mistakes (68.01%) in the posttest compared with the pretest, whereas that in the control group dropped by 6.87 mistakes (31.82%) in the posttest compared with the pretest, which implies that the students in the experimental group demonstrated the better progress in the level of sentence writing accuracy than those in the control group.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for sentence writing accuracy

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average number of mistakes per paper	21.59	14.72	-6.87	-31.82%
	Number of submitted papers	43	43		
EG	Average number of mistakes per paper	22.04	7.05	-14.99	-68.01%
	Number of submitted papers	48	48		
Difference between EG and CG	Average number of mistakes per paper	0.45	-7.67	-7.22	-36.19%

Impact of Framenet practice on learners’ sentence writing scores

The data from Table 3 substantiate that an insignificant disparity (-0.19) was found between the experimental group and the control group in terms of average pretest score. The average pretest score achieved by the students in the experimental group was 5.28 points and that by the students in the control group was 5.47 points.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for sentence writing scores

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average scores	5.47	6.52	1.05	19.20%
	Number of submitted papers	43	43		
EG	Average scores	5.28	7.24	1.96	37.12%
	Number of submitted papers	48	48		
Difference between EG and CG	Average scores	-0.19	0.72	0.91	17.92%

Nevertheless, the average posttest scores earned by the students in both groups significantly diverged. The average posttest score gained by the students in the experimental group increased by 1.96 points (37.12%) compared to the average pretest score, while that in the control group increased merely by 1.05 points (19.20%) compared to the average pretest score.

Impact of Framenet practice on learners’ writing motivation

As shown in Table 4, Framenet practice generated the EG students’ preference towards this activity as well as their awareness of its worth in their writing learning through 37 positive responses (77.08%) to

question 1 and 37 positive responses (77.08%) to question 2.

28 out of 48 students (58.33%) alleged that Framenet was not difficult to practise. A high response rate as regards regularity of using Framenet in sentence writing in the EG students was encountered through the data that 9 out of 48 students (18.75%) in the experimental group claimed to have often used Framenet in writing English sentences outside the lessons, and 22 out of 48 students (45.83%) claimed to have at times done that.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for EG learners' sentence writing motivation questionnaire survey

No.	Questions	Answers		
		Options	Number of students	Percentage
1	Do you like practising Framenet?	Yes	37	77.08%
		No	11	22.92%
2	Do you find the practice of Framenet useful to you?	Yes	37	77.08%
		No	11	22.92%
3	How difficult you find the practice of Framenet to yourself?	Very difficult	7	14.58%
		Difficult	13	27.08%
		Not difficult	28	58.33%
4	After practising Framenet, when writing English sentences outside the lessons, how often do you use Framenet?	Often	9	18.75%
		Occasionally	22	45.83%
		Rarely	12	25.00%
		Never	5	10.42%
5	Will you keep on using Framenet in sentence writing in the future?	Yes	38	79.17%
		No	10	20.83%

Interestingly, the intrinsic motivation in the application of Framenet in sentence writing was found to have been built in the EG students since 38 out of 48 the students (79.17%) in the experimental group contended to persist in this activity after this sentence writing course.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the benefits of Framenet practice to nurture learners' writing motivation and enhance their use of English vocabulary in sentence writing. Through accompanying learners in their journey to build English vocabulary via Framenet, teachers are able to measure each learner's competence and understand their needs, thoughts, and feelings, which helps teachers accommodate their teaching ways to learners' preferences and give learners appropriate assistance to their problems along the use of English vocabulary in sentence writing course.

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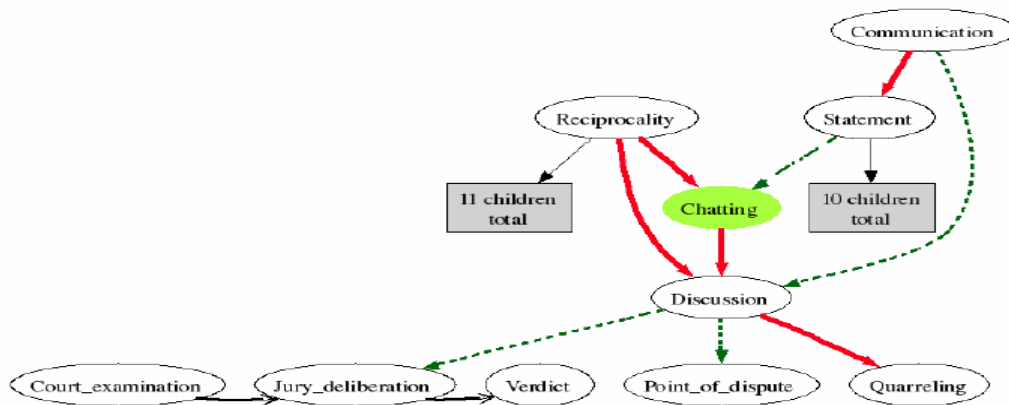
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APPENDIX A

Lesson plan using Framenet

TOPIC: CHATTING



STUDENTS' TASKS

1. Using FrameNet and to write down shortly the definitions for each Frame

Frames	Definitions
1. Communication	
2. Chatting	
3. Discussion	
4. Court-examination	
5. Quarreling	

2. Using FrameNet to put the following verbs into suitable frames. Then analyze the following examples by giving the name for each frame elements
examine, communicate, talk, debate, converse, gab, speak, gossip, confer, discuss, joke, fight, cross-examine, chat, argue, bicker, quarrel, row

FRAME: COMMUNICATION

☞ VERBS:

- a. I have been **COMMUNICATING** with the Minister since 1988 on that problem.
- b. By 1928 when the vote was granted to women over 21, the two sisters had ceased to **COMMUNICATE** with each other -- their ideas and lifestyles were now poles apart.
- c. Central to the overall strategy is the ability to **COMMUNICATE** information about individual patients and their care throughout the NHS about individual patients and their care.
- d. On one memorable occasion, she thinks to **COMMUNICATE** her feelings about Catholic beliefs to some of her older pupils.
- e. Not all biologists accept that insects do **COMMUNICATE** electromagnetically.

FRAME: CHATting

☞ VERBS:

- a. They were both very fair complexioned, and they **CHATTED** sporadically to each other in a language foreign to Mr Frizzell, who imagined that they must be Dutch or German.
- b. The first time I saw him we **CONVERSED** very closely together; and in the prospect of death he seemed solicitous to prepare for it.
- c. You get drunk on the Queen's birthday, and you **GAB** like an Irishman at a wake.
- d. The monks, unused to such curious behavior, **GOSSIPED** with relish about the strange eccentricities of this English clerk.
- e. They were **SPEAKING** with great energy to one another, and laughing.

FRAME: DISCUSSION

☞ VERBS:

- a. The policemen **CONFERRED** almost inaudibly, then the younger one stepped back towards the front door.
- b. Mr Hunte **CONFERRED** subsequently with other ICC officials, principally Sir Colin Cowdrey, the chairman, and drew up penalties which were widely considered as being too mild.
- c. The report is published at a time of intense **DEBATE** between EC member countries about the future of agricultural subsidies.
- d. **DISCUSSING** with North in September 1986 how the arms-sales creditors could be paid off, he was alarmed to hear him say "Well, maybe we'll have to take it out of the reserves."
- e. These problems of determinism have been **DISCUSSED** over the centuries.

FRAME: COURT-EXAMINATION

☞ VERBS:

- a. Meanwhile, Los Angeles Police Department criminalist Susan Brockbank, a specialist in hair and trace evidence, was **CROSS-EXAMINED** by a defense DNA expert about the science she practices.
- b. Prosecutors said they looked forward to **CROSS-EXAMINING** her in front of a jury.
- c. On Monday, the prosecution will **CROSS-EXAMINE** defense forensic expert Henry Lee.

d. **Ferguson** also attempted to subpoena President Clinton, **CROSS-EXAMINED** **his** **victims** **with non-sequiturs** and launched into rambling speeches.

e. She asked the Secretary of State to hold an inquiry at which parties could be heard and **witnesses** **EXAMINED**.

FRAME: QUARELING

☞ **VERBS:**

- a. “**You** can't **ARGUE** **politics** **with** **foreigner**,” sighed the policeman.
- b. **Charman** **BICKERED** **with** **Allison** , often over irrelevant points .
- c. Half the time I don't even understand **what** **they** are **FIGHTING** **about**.
- d. Why did **he** **QUARREL** **with** **his** **family**?
- e. At one level , **Bob and Joan Halton** **ROWED** **about** **his** **old** **car** **and** **his** **mother**