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Binomials: Frozen Chunks of English that Your Students will Think are Really Cool

Marian Woyciechowicz Gonsior
Madonna University

Abstract

Binomials, two words in the same form class connected by the word and or or in a fixed order, are a fruitful area for language learning, with hundreds available to work with in the classroom. Helping intermediate to advanced listening/speaking students of all ages notice these frozen chunks of language is a fun and useful way to introduce and work on acquisition of communicative competence. From “rock and roll” to “bricks and mortar,” there is plenty to be learned from discussing and learning about these colorful expressions.

Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors are always looking for new ways to increase oral fluency in their students. One area that promises to improve students’ fluent use of language is the study of formulaic language. Formulaic language—also known as prefabricated language, multi-word expressions, lexical chunks, and other terms—has been defined as “multi-word collocations which are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated de novo with each use” (UWM Linguistics Symposium on Formulaic Language, 2007). Everyday greetings or leave takings are perhaps the most common examples of formulaic language. We say, “Hello! How are you?” and respond to similar queries without much thought. Without the ability to use formulaic language in these situations and others, students’ language use will lack the automaticity necessary for true fluency. Of course, instructors can introduce their students to many types of formulaic language, but one area that can be useful in speaking/listening classes is the use of binomials. While definitions vary, in general, binomials are groups of two words always said in the same order and joined together by a conjunction. They offer an easy and fun way to liven up ESL speaking/listening classes and enrich students’ language use in several important ways (see Figure 1).

Binomials can be used to:

1. Improve students’ knowledge of formulaic expressions
2. Improve students’ knowledge of idioms
3. Improve students’ knowledge of the English sound system
4. Improve students’ knowledge of the differences between written and spoken English

Figure 1. Using binomials in the classroom
Background

Just as formulaic language itself is referred to in a variety of ways, binomials have been referred to using different terms. An early mention of these forms is found in Abraham’s (1950) Modern Language Journal article in which he refers to them as “fixed coordinates” (p. 276). He notes the fixedness of the order of the structures and that language users ignorant of the correct order of the words in the coordinate will sound “very strange to native speakers” (p. 276). Among the examples given are fixed groups containing both two (binomials) and three (trinomials) elements: first and foremost; dead or alive; man and wife; red, white, and blue; wine, women, and song; and win, place, and show (p. 276). Malkiel (1959) called these structures binomials, and gave some similar examples, including odds and ends, husband and wife, knife and fork, hammer and tongs, and cash and carry.

He proposed what has become the classic definition of a binomial, “a sequence of two words pertaining to the same form-class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link” (p. 113). Pinker and Birdsone (1979) studied similar expressions, but called the forms “freezes.” They called binomials “irreversible conjoined phrases” and gave such examples as wear and tear and first and foremost (p. 497). As can be seen, binomials are a well-documented linguistic phenomenon with hundreds of easily-accessible examples available for teachers to use.

Reasons for using binomials in the ESL classroom

Communicative competence, according to Widdowson (1989), comes from “knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands” (p. 135). Therefore, while it would be quite a stretch to say knowing binomials will make students more communicatively competent, in the long run, the more “pre-assembled patterns” they know, the easier they will find communicating with native speakers to be. Using a group of words—even the three words that make up a typical binomial—in an order not usually heard, will deem the language used by the learner “unidiomatic, odd or [full of] foreignisms” (Pawley & Syder, 1983, p. 193). Binomials can help students to see language as chunks and to understand that learning chunks of language lowers the cognitive load when they try to remember grammar, pronunciation, intonation, and everything else that goes into speaking, while carrying on a real-time conversation with a native speaker (Schmitt, 2000). They might see the beauty in learning a chunk of language that allows them to pull out a string of words for “instant retrieval” (Hill, 2000, p. 55) when necessary. Not only can binomials and other lexical chunks, be retrieved instantly for use, but they operate as a kind of linguistic shorthand, lightening not only the speaking load, but also the effort needed to put into listening.

This happens because our familiarity with the language allows us already to know the end of the binomial when the first element is said, so we are free to start composing our response before the speaker stops talking.

Improve students’ knowledge of formulaic expressions

Being short, binomials are easy for even beginning students to understand and use. In addition, they represent an introduction to the formulaic language so common
in the language use of native speakers. According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), their corpora studies of large samples of language show that formulaic language makes up 30 – 45% of spoken language and 21% of written language (p. 995). Other researchers, including Hill (2000), place the estimate even higher. Hill estimates that “up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression” (p. 53). These estimates make it imperative for ESL educators to focus on these types of expressions during their class sessions. As Nattinger (1980) has noted, students need to be encouraged to see language use “as the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation” (p. 341), not as the stringing together of individual words.

**Improve students’ knowledge of idioms**

Teaching formulaic expressions leads students to focus on how language is organized beyond discrete vocabulary choices. Highlighting what has been called “the principle of idiom,” students can learn about the “large number of semi- preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments” (Sinclair, 1991, p. 110). Of course, not all binomials are idioms. If idioms are defined as “fixed expressions that are semantically opaque” (Everaert, van der Linden, Schenk, & Schreuder, 1995, p. 4), then binomials such as *husband and wife* or *knife and fork* are not idiomatic expressions. However, many binomials are, and because of this fact, they are often introduced to students in books, chapters, or lessons which focus on idioms. The enormous supply of binomials appearing in these reference sources in itself proves their usefulness. For instance, *NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary* (Spears, 2000) includes an appendix of 500 “irreversible binomials and trinomials” (p. 621). In addition, the author of the recently published *Thesaurus of English Idioms* claims that it includes 900 binomials (Nagy, 2006).

**Improve students’ knowledge of the English sound system**

ESL instructors can also use binomials to help students notice the sounds of the English language. For instance, binomials can be used to illustrate the use of reduced speech forms. Starting with a binomial that nearly all students have heard, such as *rock and roll*, teachers can show students the difference between the fully enunciated /ænd/ and the syllabic consonant [n] (Martínez, 1999). Working from this example, other instances of reduced speech can be introduced. Instructors can also point out that binomials are formed, much like other types of figurative or poetic language, with sound in mind. Nagy (2006) highlights a number of “effect-enhancing tools” (p. XII) which serve to explain the format of individual binomials. Some of these “tools,” along with the examples Nagy uses, include: alliteration (*do or die*), repetition (*neck and neck*), and rhyme (*make or break*) (p. XII). Learning these little chunks of language can also help students gain an understanding of how pronunciation, stress, and intonation work together to improve the ability of others to understand them. When students learn the pronunciation, stress, and intonation pattern of a binomial or trinomial, they end up sounding less like walking dictionaries, spewing out strings of individual words, and more like advanced speakers. As Hill (2000) has stated, when “learners learn the stress pattern of a phrase *as a whole*, their stress and intonation will be better” (p. 56).
Students will be also interested in the phonological and semantic rules that are thought to have a role in the ordering of the elements in binomials across languages (see Pinker & Birdsong, 1979, p. 499, for exceptions). The rule that seems to trump all other phonological constraints in the ordering of elements is called Panini’s Law, referring to the 4th century linguist who devised it based on his study of ancient Sanskrit texts (Pinker & Birdsong, 1979). This rule states that the first element in a binomial will have fewer syllables than the second (Osgood & Bock, 1977, p. 99). Cooper and Ross (as cited in Pinker & Birdsong, 1979, p. 498) list other phonological constraints, with examples: lax vowels typically come before tense vowels (stress and strain), words with fewer initial consonants come before those with more (fair and square), and words with more front vowels precede words with vowels which are more back (leaps and bounds). Students might also be curious to learn about Cooper and Ross’s (1975) list of semantic constraints on the ordering of elements in binomials, saying that, in general, items that can be construed as living, adult, male, here, now, or agentive will come before other elements. Some binomials that follow these rules include: life or death, women and children, brother and sister, this and that, sooner or later, and cat and mouse.

**Improve students’ knowledge of the differences between written and spoken English**

Now that the Internet has blurred the lines between written and spoken English, it is important for ESL instructors to re-establish the distinction between these two modes of communication. Since many of our students come from backgrounds in which translation of written text is the focus of instruction or from areas in which the lack of English speakers makes conversational competence hard to achieve, analyzing the difference between writing and speaking can be an eye-opening experience. As already noted, there is a difference between the amounts of formulaic language in general in spoken versus written language (Biber et al., 1999, p. 995). As Biber et al. point out, “Conversation is often regarded as extremely formulaic, and some scholars have suggested that most conversational utterances are composed of relatively fixed lexical bundles” (p. 996). Binomials, like other idiomatic expressions, are found more in informal settings than in formal ones. They are characteristic of everyday speech, rather than formal academic discourse. Listening or looking for binomials in various communicative settings can reinforce an understanding of the ways written and spoken English differ.

**Some classroom activities**

Outlined below are some activities designed for using binomials in the classroom.

- Students can be given groups of four to five binomials. Their task is to then determine which of the groups contains binomials that can actually be classified as idioms and which cannot be. Examples: Group 1—salt and pepper, black and white, man and wife, ladies and gentlemen and Group 2—nuts and bolts, hem and haw, meat and potatoes, ins and outs.

- A dialogue using binomials can be taped and played back for students. They can circle the binomials they hear, choosing from a wider group of examples
listed on a worksheet. Based on the context, they can attempt to determine the meaning of each binomial.

- Scripts of the same dialogue can be analyzed, so students can see how expressions such as *nuts and bolts* or *life and death* are used in context. For example, *nuts and bolts* often occurs as “the nuts and bolts of something,” while *life and death* usually occurs as “a matter of life and death.”

- Students can work in native-language groups to list binomials from their first language. What differences can they notice? For example, while in the U.S. we say, *red, white, and blue*, in France, the colors are said in the opposite order.

- Students can do their own mini research studies, examining a set collection of binomials to see which of the phonological and semantic rules suggested by Cooper and Ross (1975) are verified or disproved. Students can also check binomials in their own native languages against the rules.

- Students can hypothesize about the origins of binomials such as *hammer and tongs* (meaning “to do something energetically”) or *hem and haw* (meaning “to speak timidly”). After presenting their ideas, an Internet search to discover the historical origins of specific binomials can be made.

- Groups of students can each be given a card with a binomial on it. After discussing the meaning of the various binomials, students can be asked to write a short description of a business suggested by the binomial. They can also draw an appropriate logo for the business, for example: “Spick and Span Cleaning Service” or “Bright and Early Wake-up Service.”

- Students can be encouraged to scan reading materials (newspapers, magazines, textbooks, etc.) for examples of binomials. Examples can be brought in and discussed by the group.

**Limitations**

Just as native speakers of English who learn about commas tend to use them everywhere, students who learn about binomials might use them to an extent that their language sounds more comical than fluent. Correct and incorrect use of binomials should be modeled by the instructor. Like many idiomatic expressions, some binomials can be considered clichés, worn-out and trite. Students need to be cautioned that “overuse of clichés … may create the impression that the speaker is lazy, insincere, or poorly educated” (Nagy, 2006, p. XII). However, students might be able to relate to the difference between free-flowing language (symbolized by a cool drink of water), entire conversations taken over by frozen language (symbolized by a drink that has been frozen solid), and competent fluent usage (a tall cool drink, refreshingly served with a few ice cubes). Ideally, students should aim for what Lennon (2000) calls, “an optimal mix” combining “highly automated chunks of language and phrases where the speaker is composing more fluently” (p. 32).
Conclusion

ESL instructors will find that there are many uses for binomials in the listening/speaking classroom. In fact, once students are helped to notice binomials, they seem to be “a gift that keeps on giving” (Martinez, 1999, 5), providing teachers and students with a steady supply of examples and new ideas for classroom applications.

Author Note

Marian Woyciehowicz Gonsior, Adjunct Assistant Professor, ESL Program, Madonna University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marian Woyciehowicz Gonsior (mgonsior@madonna.edu).

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