

Lexical Knowledge of Verb Particle Constructions with the Particle on by Mexican English Learners

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Abstract : The acquisition of Verb Particle Constructions is a challenge for Spanish speakers learning English. The acquisition is particularly difficult for speakers of languages with no verb particle constructions. The purpose of the current study is to define the procedural steps in the acquisition of constructions with the particle on. There are three outstanding meanings for the particle on; Surface: The movie is based on a true story, Activation: John turn on the light, Continuity: The band played on all night. The central aim of this study is to measure how Mexican Spanish participants respond to both the three meanings mentioned above and the degree of meaning transparency/opacity of on verb particle constructions. Forty Mexican Spanish learners of English (20 basic and 20 advanced) are compared against a control group of 20 American native English speakers through a reaction time test (PsychoPy2 2015). The participants were asked to discriminate 90 items based on their knowledge of these constructions. There are 30 items per meaning divided into two groups of transparent and opaque meaning. Results revealed three major findings: Advanced students have a reaction time similar to that of native speakers (advanced 4.5s versus native 3.7s), while students with a lower level of English proficiency, show a high reaction time (7s). Likewise, there is a shorter reaction time in constructions with lower opacity in the three groups of participants, with differences between each level (basic 6.7s, advanced 4.3s, and native 3.4s). Finally, a difference in reaction time can be identified according to the meaning provided by the construction. The reaction time for the activation category (5.27s) is greater than continuity (5.04s), and this category is also slower than the surface (4.94s). The study shows that the level of sensitivity of English learners increases significantly aiming towards native speaker patterns as determined by the level of transparency of meaning of each construction as well as the degree of entrenchment of each constructional meaning.

Keywords : meaning of the particle, opacity, reaction time, verb particle constructions

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