High-Frequency English Words in Spoken Learner Language: *actual, career and pretend* as a Case in Point

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**Abstract**

Scholars such as Meara (1995), Schmitt (2000) or Nation (2001) emphasise the importance of high-frequency words in language learning. Although studies on high-frequency words are relatively common in the scholarly literature, there is a need for research on the use of these key words in spoken learner language. The present corpus-based study analyses three high-frequency English words, namely *actual, career and pretend*, in the spoken production of Spanish learners with a view to identifying the students’ knowledge, difficulties and needs regarding these core terms. The results of this survey reveal some linguistic problems which should be addressed in EFL contexts.

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**1. Introduction**

Many influential scholars (Meara, 1995; Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001) have approached high-frequency words from different perspectives and have stressed the importance of teaching the most frequent words in any foreign language. In fact, some academics compiled lists of frequent words which are practical for EFL students and teachers (West, 1953; Coxhead, 2000), others looked into the presence of high-frequency words in textbooks (Chujo, 2004), and some others studied the impact of high-frequency words on text comprehension (Laufer, 1992; Coady, Magoto, Hubbard, Graney, and Mokhtari, 1993; Nation and Waring, 1997; Hu and Nation, 2000; Nation, 2001). All these experts have something in common; they all support the idea that high-frequency words are very

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important and useful because they "cover a large proportion of the running words in spoken and written texts and occur in all kinds of uses of the language" (Nation, 2001: 13). Thus, learners having a good command of these words will be able to manage and succeed in a wide range of everyday situations.

Although studies on high-frequency words are relatively common in the scholarly literature, little research has been done on the actual use of these key words by language learners. Besides there is a conspicuous scarcity of studies which analyse frequent English words which are false friends for EFL learners; and those who do it focus on the presence of these words in written language (Palacios and Alonso, 2005). The present corpus-based study seeks to analyse three highly-recurrent English terms actual, career and pretend which are false friends between Spanish and English, in the spoken interlanguage of Spanish learners to determine the learners’ control of these words. The Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI) is the corpus used in this survey. The results obtained from the analysis of this learner database reveal the way Spanish learners use these three words, the frequency of these lexical items in the learners' spoken performance and the main patterns of difficulty concerning these words. One of the conclusions drawn from this study points to some semantic problems in the use of these English words derived from the influence of the learners’ mother tongue. The following sections will provide further discussion on all these issues.

2. The Study

The present study looks into how language learners use high-frequency English vocabulary. It is an attempt to analyse the occurrence and use of actual, career and pretend in spoken learner language in order to determine whether these highly-recurrent English words have been correctly acquired by Spanish learners. Since the words examined here are false friends for Spanish learners, the results of this study will reveal the impact of the learners’ mother tongue on the acquisition of these high-frequency English words.

2.1. Aims

This study has a threefold purpose: first, to examine if the frequency of a word in the foreign language plays a role in the acquisition of this word by learners; second, to analyse if the false friendship of these high-frequency English terms impinges on the learning difficulty of these words; and finally, to explore the presence of these three common English words in spoken learner data.

2.2. Procedure

The study consisted of three major phases or stages which are summarised below:

- Phase I: In a first stage, the meaning and use of English actual, career and pretend were analysed in order to make an objective examination of what was deviant and accurate in the learners’ use of these words.
- Phase II: In a second stage, I searched for these words in LINDSEI (Gilquin, De Cock, and Granger, 2010).
- Phase III: Finally, in a third stage, the data from this corpus were examined by applying both a quantitative and qualitative approach.

In relation to the semantic and pragmatic analysis made in the first stage and taking into account the information in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), we know that these words have a Romance origin and their meanings differ from their Spanish orthographic neighbours actual, carrera and pretender significantly. English actual is generally used for emphasis to denote that something is real, career is a noun which denotes somebody’s profession and the verb pretend means to feign. As regards the frequency of these words in English, they are among the top 3000 most frequent words according to the Longman 3000 Communication word list included in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE, 2009), which means that these lexical items are widely used in an English context. Below are the main lexical features of these words, their etymological origin, their frequency of use
in English, some illustrative examples of the native use of these words and the main semantic contrasts with their orthographic lookalikes in Spanish.

- **Actual** (<late Latin actualis). Top 2000 most frequently used words in English. Used for emphasis and factuality, as in *I'm not joking. Those were his actual words*. It contrasts with Spanish *actual* which means “current, present”.

- **Career** (<French carrière). Top 2000 most frequent words in English. Used for occupations, as in *He has just started out on a career as a photographer*. It differs from Spanish *carrera* which denotes “doing a degree or university course”.

- **Pretend** (<Latin praetendere). Top 3000 most frequently English words. Its main meaning is to feign, to make believe, as in *She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep*. It diverges from Spanish *pretender* which implies “aspire to do something”.

As for the second stage, these lexical items were searched in LINDSEI. This database contains oral data produced by advanced learners of English from eleven mother tongue backgrounds among which we find the spoken productions of Spanish learners. The 50 spoken English texts produced by Spanish learners of English were used in this survey to draw conclusions on the learners’ use of these words and the major problem areas which should be addressed in EFL classrooms.

In a third stage, the output from this corpus was carefully examined by applying both a quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to have a comprehensive view of the occurrence and use of these high-frequency words in the spoken production of language learners.

### 2.3. Results and main findings

Taking into account the data in LINDSEI, 34 sample sentences were found to contain the three words analysed; 47 per cent of those examples exhibit deviant uses of these words while almost 53 per cent of the concordances obtained show an accurate use of these lexical items. Table 1 illustrates the amount of examples per word and the number of deviant and accurate uses found in the corpus.

#### Table 1. Corpus results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINDSEI Spanish Subcomponent</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Deviant Uses (%)</th>
<th>Accurate Uses (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACTUAL</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1 (7.7%)</td>
<td>12 (92.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAREER</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRETEND</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5 (45.5%)</td>
<td>6 (54.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>16 (47.1%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>18 (52.9%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of the results for the different words shows that career is the most problematic item, followed by the verb pretend with 45 per cent of deviant uses and then by the adjective actual with almost 8 per cent of deviances.

Qualitatively speaking, we observe that the noun career brings important challenges and is mainly used in the sense of university course or degree. By contrast, the words pretend and actual are not so problematic in the students’ interlanguage.

As for English career, this noun is persistently misused by Spanish students of English. This word is commonly used to refer to university degree in learners’ language. If we look at the sample text below, we observe that both the interviewee (referred to as <B>) and the interviewer (referred to as <A>) who is supposed to be a teacher are misusing this noun.

<A> how many more years before you finish your career </A>
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Considering the data for actual in LINDSEI, this word is accurately used in most cases although there is one example of this word in the collocation actual issues which has an apparent Spanish flavour. The phrase actual issues appears to be literally transferred from Spanish to English. The fact that the student corrects himself immediately after uttering this phrase reveals that the learner is aware of a momentous lexical confusion.

If we analyse the occurrence of the verb pretend in the corpus, there are 11 examples of this verb and its related forms pretends, pretending and pretended. When analysing these examples, we notice that pretend is sometimes used in the sense of aspire to do something, try to do something as in a text about films in which the learner says the film Resurrection pretends to be like... instead of the most appropriate verb aspire to try to.

Therefore, the data retrieved from LINDSEI confirm that these high-frequency English words are problematic for Spanish learners. They are not so easy and simple, thus, they appear to have some intricate qualities that are difficult for students to apprehend.

2.4. Conclusions and issues for further research

This study reveals that the way Spanish students use actual, career and pretend in their spoken performance differs from the actual use of these words by native speakers of English. The frequency of these words in English does not seem to contribute to a better acquisition and a deeper knowledge of these terms. In fact, the corpus provides good evidence of several deviant uses which show that learners do not have a good command of these high-frequency English words. On many occasions, students use these words inaccurately giving way to constructions and utterances that do not tally with the topic of the conversation they are maintaining. The fact that these English words are false friends in relation to the learners’ mother tongue adds extra-difficulty to these high-frequency terms and favours crosslanguage interactions which lead learners to error. Thus, Spanish learners apply the sense of the Spanish orthographic neighbours i.e. actual, carrera and pretend to these English words.
Therefore, the influence of the mother tongue seems to weigh more here than the frequency of these words in the L2 input.

It is important to note that the learners’ mother tongue seems to be highly active during the learners’ spoken production. This is particularly obvious in the use of the noun career which, on the other hand, is the most problematic word for learners and also in the sample sentence which shows the learners’ self-correction and the immediate substitution of actual for current (i.e. he speaks [...] about actual issues well current issues).

Concerning those issues which merit further research, this study focuses on high-frequency English words which are false friends in relation to Spanish; it would be very interesting to expand this study to other high-frequency words which are not necessarily false friends and compare the results. Likewise, this study should be replicated and applied to students whose mother tongues are other than Spanish to check if learners of English having different language backgrounds have similar problems with these high-frequency words or if this problem affects only Spanish learners of English.

In any case, this study shows some problems with these three English words; for that reason, teachers should pay attention to these lemmas in the classroom. The following section deals with the implications of this lexical study in language teaching.

3. Implications for language teaching

This corpus-based study shows that learners are being influenced by their mother tongue in their use of actual, career and pretend. When students use these words they are drawing associations with the Spanish formal lookalikes and they use these words as if they were mere synonyms of Spanish actual, carrera and pretender when this is not the case. For this reason, teachers should consider these lexical mistakes and try to prevent and counteract these lexical problems in the EFL classroom as these lexical mistakes affect the quality of the learners’ spoken language visibly. It is important for students to be familiar with these words so that they do not make mistakes which may lead them to serious linguistic or communication problems. Moreover, these words should not be disregarded at advanced levels of English. As shown in this study, many students with a high level of English and even some English teachers have problems with these lexical items and this should be avoided at all costs as teachers are modelling the language of learners.

Drawing on the results of this study, learners should become aware that Spanish actual, carrera and pretender do not denote the same as English actual, career and pretend. Apart from that, teachers should favour the explicit learning of these lexical items through illustrative examples which make the meaning and use of these English words clear.

In order to avoid problems with high-frequency items such as the ones mentioned here, students should be encouraged to learn about cognates in English and Spanish and the main differences between them. In addition to this, learners should be advised to find out more about these and other useful high-frequency English words to have a better and deeper knowledge of the English vocabulary; and, when learning new words or new uses of already known words, learners should pay attention to form, meaning and other aspects of word knowledge such as syntactic and pragmatic features which are relevant and make learners more competent users of the L2 vocabulary.

References


