STUDENTS' IDENTIFICATION OF ENGLISH/PORTUGUESE COGNATES

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RESUMO:

   O artigo relata parte de uma experiência no uso de um exercício de reconhecimento de itens lexicais cognatos a partir de um texto em inglês, aplicado a 158 alunos e 16 professores de inglês instrumental da UFPr. A análise dos resultados obtidos parece indicar que o reconhecimento da equivalência entre palavras cognatas inglês-português não se dá tão facilmente.

   The starting point of this survey carried out at the Federal University of Paraná was a simple exercise given to ESP students during one of their classes. The primary idea was to examine their performance in the recognition of English/Portuguese cognate lexical items. At a later stage, the same exercise was applied to similar groups thus leading to this statistical investigation.
   The exercise was based on a short paragraph, chosen without any prior analysis of its lexical items or of any specific linguistic aspect, but rather because it apparently contained cognate words which would be identifiable by the students.

*As well as engineers, machinists and mechan-
ics, who design, operate and repair   the
machines, modern industry requires people
skilled in organizing and controlling
factories, accountants to look after the
finances, skilled salesmen,   clerical
workers, including stenographers and
typists. It also needs research workers,
the total number of which has   greatly
increased in recent years. Thus, however
true it may be that in the early days of
the machine industry many skilled craftmen
lost their jobs, machine technology has
increased the number and variety of skilled
occupations. In fact, statistics tell us
that since 1910 in the U.S.A., for example,
the numbers of professional, skilled and
semi-skilled workers have risen rapidly,
whereas the number of unskilled workers
has remained about the same.*

Skills for learning - Development

The instructions asked the students to circle the
words which they thought were cognates. Students were
asked not to take more time than that necessary   for
them to circle the words while skimming over the para-
graph. Students were not asked to identify themselves.

158 students were asked to do the exercise.   Al-
though they had not belonged to any homogeneous group
of students they had several characteristics in common:
they had the same teacher, they were already in   the
third month of their ESP course, they were all attend-
ing evening classes, they had not known in   advance
about the exercise and they were all given the   same
set of instructions.

A further 48 students were asked to do the same
sample exercise but as they had a different teacher,
their results will not be computed here. Nevertheless,

the performance of 16 English teachers of our depart-
ment will be considered and examined together with the
158 students.

Analysis of Results

The first step taken was to determine the occur-
rence of cognates and non-cognates in the paragraph:
the classification of the 122 words of the sample show
ed that 24,5% could well be considered as cognate
items and 75,5% as non-cognates.

The words were then divided into two major broad
groups of items:
1. open-system items (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives
and adverbs) and 2. closed-system items (i.e. articles,
pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary
verbs). This distribution demonstrated that nearly all
cognate words belonged to the open-system items,except
for two discourse markers: *in fact* and *for example*.
Despite this fact, the results showed that not all the
teachers and students used as subjects were able to
recognize the items in question as cognates.

	Percentage of Students who scored the items	Percentage of Teachers who scored the items
in fact	3,1%	0%
fact	30,3%	50%
for example	8,2%	6,2%
example	77,8%	75%

This first analysis also showed that the verbs
which were considered cognates were all regular verbs.
These are the percentages ascribed to the verbs
recognized as cognates:

	Students	Teachers
organising	96,2%	93,7%

	Students	Teachers
controlling	94,3%	93,7%
operate	79,1%	87,5%
require	59,4%	56,2%
including	51,8%	75%
design	34,1%	62,5%

After this division into items the words were classified according to their characteristics:

1. Words which are identical in form in both languages:

	Students	Teachers
total	72,7%	87,5%
clerical	16,4%	56,2%
semi-	10,7%	37,5%

These results revealed that both students and teachers did not recognize cognates as efficiently as one would expect. Focussing on several of the lexical items in question in isolation one would find it diffi_ cult to explain their relatively low score, however, if we analyse them in their context we might find an answer. It may be worth observing that *total* precedes another cognate word *number* whereas *semi-* precedes a non-cognate word *skilled* whose meaning is not mastered by most students at that level. These words are "hidden" or "overshadowed" by difficult words in the area. Likewise, the word *clerical* precedes another non-cognate word *workers*. In this case, the main reason for its low score might have been due to the meaning in Portuguese of the cognate *clerical* which students and teachers were not altogether certain about.

2. Words slightly different in form:

	Students	Teachers
industry	100%	93,7%
modern	95,5%	93,7%
recent	74%	87,5%

Although these results were more in line with
those which might be expected, given the   relative
similarity of the items in both languages, when   com-
pared to the previous category (1 above), they   were
not as clear cut as anticipated by the writer.   The
high percentage ascribed to the words *industry*   and
modern may have been due to their similarity to Portu-
guese or/and to their collocation with one another in
the sentence. The same does not occur with the   word
recent which precedes a non-cognate word *years*. It is
also interesting to note that the word *industry* occurs
twice in the same paragraph, in the first occurence it
is preceded by *modern* (100%) while in the second it is
preceded by *machine* (90%).

3. Words with intra - letter differences:

	Students	Teachers
professional	97,4%	100%
technology	93,6%	100%
mechanics	93,6%	100%
machinists	80,3%	100%

The word *professional*, in addition to being simi-
lar to the Portuguese word *profissional* is also   pre-
ceded by a rather easy and known word *numbers*.   Thus,
perhaps, the high score in terms of recognition within
the answer given. No special justification can be given
for this classification. Perhaps, the high score   as-
cribed to the words might well have been due to visual
association.

4. Words with initial letter missing and ending   very
similar to Portuguese:

	Students	Teachers
statistics	84,1%	100%
stenographers	51,8%	75%

These results are also discouraging. Perhaps, the word "estenógrafos" in Portuguese is not widely known.

5. Words which have similar initial letters.

	Students	Teachers
organiz(ing)	96,2%	93,7%
control(ling)	94,3%	93,7%
financ(es)	92,4%	100%
occupa(tions)	89,8%	100%
opera(te)	79,1%	87,5%
varie(ty)	75,3%	62,5%
rapid(ly)	63,9%	93,7%
inclu(ding)	51,8%	75%

6. Other words which were underlined:

	Students	Teachers
engineers	92,4%	81,2%
machines	75,9%	87,5%
number	58,8%	56,2%
factories	54,4%	18,7%

7. "Long" words compared to "short" words:

"long"	Students	Teachers
stenographers	51,8%	75%
professional	97,4%	100%
controlling	94,3%	93,7%
occupations	89,8%	100%
technology	93,6%	100%

"short"	Students	Teachers
fact	30,3%	50%
semi-	10,7%	37,5%
total	72,7%	87,5%
modern	95,5%	93,7%
recent	74%	87,5%

It seems that the "longer" words provide   more
elements for the reader to process thus reducing   un-
certainty. However, it might be the case that in Eng-
lish words of more than two syllables   are   often of
Latin origin.

Conclusion

The assumption that our students are fully aware
of the equivalence between English/Portuguese cognate
words does not appear to be as widely applicable across
the board as one might expect.   Teachers themselves do
not agree on what words are cognates because the
boderline between cognates and non-cognates is   not
always clear cut. Nevertheless, it is important   that
those involved with ESP reading comprehension courses
device exercises to ensure an awareness and correct re
cognition of these words.
Further investigation is necessary to find out the
role which contexts have in the recognition of cognate
words. In a similar piece of research carried   out   at
the University of Chile, Horsella and Sindermann's
study[1] revealed that the lowest percentage was that of
cognates in context, compared to two other tests with
cognate and non-cognate words only. It seems that when
general comprehension involves a certain degree of dif
ficulty for the reader there is no recognition of the
simple and obvious cognate which may well be overshadow
ed by the effort of grasping the idea.
As this survey is in progress the results   and
conclusions cannot be regarded as more than tentative.

NOTES

1. SINDERMANN, Gerda.   Students' identification of
   English/Spanish cognate lexical items in EST. *EST/
   ESP Chile*. 11, March 1982.

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