

## Difficulties of Learning and Using French Compound Words

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### Abstract

Learning vocabulary constitutes a crucial step in language learning. Amongst different word categories, compound words have failed to attract the attention they deserve. This led us to conduct a study trying to pinpoint the difficulties learning these words and to suggest some techniques facilitating their acquisition. To that effect, a questionnaire as well as a vocabulary test were given to two groups of FFL (French as a Foreign Language) learners. Carried out from a descriptive and analytical point of view, this study was based on a real corpus and led to the following results:

Firstly, learners showed little tendency towards making use of compound words, both in writing and in speaking.

Secondly, teachers can contribute to a better learning by providing learners with convenient strategies.

Thirdly, familiarity with Greco-Latin roots enormously help learners to guess the meaning of an unknown word.

**Key words:** compound words, learning, difficulty, use, technique

Learning vocabulary constitutes a crucial step in learning a language. Thus, information on this step about the strategies which facilitate access to full understanding of the target language is most sought after by teachers.

The present article aims at promoting receptivity of French compound words as well as

their use by the learners (Table 1). This receptivity could be optimised if in the course of the learner's exposure to a new word, the ability is developed within the learner to guess the meaning of the word. This is feasible, thanks to encyclopaedic and, of course, linguistic knowledge. At this stage an interaction occurs between what the learner

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knows and what s/he extracts from the context. This is why we decided to incorporate further in this work a discussion on the interaction between words and the context.

To find a solution to some of the problems posed in vocabulary teaching, one should have detailed information on various strategies that a learner puts into practice in order to have access to what s/he does not know.

Therefore we decided to address the question of vocabulary teaching and in particular compound words of Greco-Latin origins formed out of non autonomous roots which can be borrowed from ancient languages such as Greek and Latin (Francois Gaudin & Louis Guespin, 2000, p. 287) and are hyponymous to compound words.

As a starting point, we posed the following questions:

1- What are the difficulties learners come across while learning and putting into practice compound words of Greco-Latin origin?

2- How could teachers contribute to resolving these problems?

3- Can knowledge of Greco-Latin roots be of any assistance to learners?

To answer these questions, we started out from the following hypotheses:

1- Learners may prove doubtful in the face of compound words.

2- By offering some learning strategies, teachers can help facilitate learning of these words.

3- If students are aware of the roots of these words, they seem to be able to guess their meaning more easily.

So far as methodology is concerned, it must be

noted that this research is a field study which is supposed to be descriptive and analytical and is based on a real corpus.

Given the importance of vocabulary teaching, we intend to study the different trends marking last 60 years of teaching. We will also take a look, by means of the diagram opposite, at the two major modes of word formation i.e. derivation and composition (compounding).

We will then consider the interaction between words and the context before attempting to interpret the reaction of two groups of learners to a vocabulary test and a questionnaire.

In the end, we will offer a number of learning strategies followed by a table of compound words along side their etymology and examples.

## **Background**

It has been apparent for some time that little attention has been paid to the needs of the future teachers. Despite in-service training courses offered to teachers throughout the world, these have suffered a lack of appropriate teaching material. This is while what all teachers need is practical ideas, suggestions and demonstrations as well as examples of teaching strategies which have proved successful in the class: strategies corresponding to established theoretical principles which others in the teaching profession have found expedient, practical and correlating to conditions under which most teachers work.

Experienced teachers are well aware of the importance of vocabulary. They know that atudents should learn thousands of words used by native speakers. Fortunately, the need for

vocabulary is agreed on by both teachers and students. However, teacher training programmes have paid little attention to the strategies helping students' vocabulary learning.

Some surveys like Français Fondamental and Niveau Seuil, so analysed and practiced as they are, suggest only the words or notions that serve communication.

Supporters of traditional methods often asked teachers not to teach words before students had gained mastery over grammar. Thus, teachers were asked to put the emphasis on grammar whereas little attention was given to vocabulary teaching strategies. In a word, vocabulary was virtually neglected in teacher training programmes during 20th century. It seems a good idea to seek to know the reason behind that:

### **Reasons for Neglecting Vocabulary in the Past**

The most important reason lies on the fact that there had previously been too much emphasis on vocabulary in language courses. In fact, sometimes learners happened to believe that all they needed in order to learn a language was a large number of words. (French Allen)<sup>1</sup> They thought it was possible to master a language by learning a certain number of words as well as their meanings in their mother tongue. Whereas, in addition to the words and their meanings, one should also know how words function within the sentence. Hence, vocabulary was under the domination of grammar for a relatively longer period of time.

There exists a second reason why teaching

words was virtually unheard of in methodology courses. Some specialists in the field of methodology believed it was impossible to teach word meanings adequately. Therefore, teachers had better avoid presenting them.

In 1950's, it was believed that vocabulary teaching was no mean task and it did not involve simply learning i.e. a particular word in a language has the same meaning as another word in another language. In fact, learners had to learn much more.

Most of the time teacher trainers gave the impression that learning vocabulary was so complex that it was better to spend most of class time to teaching grammatical structures. That is why full understanding of word-meaning could not be given in the class.

To some extent each one of these beliefs about vocabulary was true. It is fact that too much time has been allocated to vocabulary in many classes that no more time was left for other tasks.

### **Reasons to put Emphasis on Vocabulary Again**

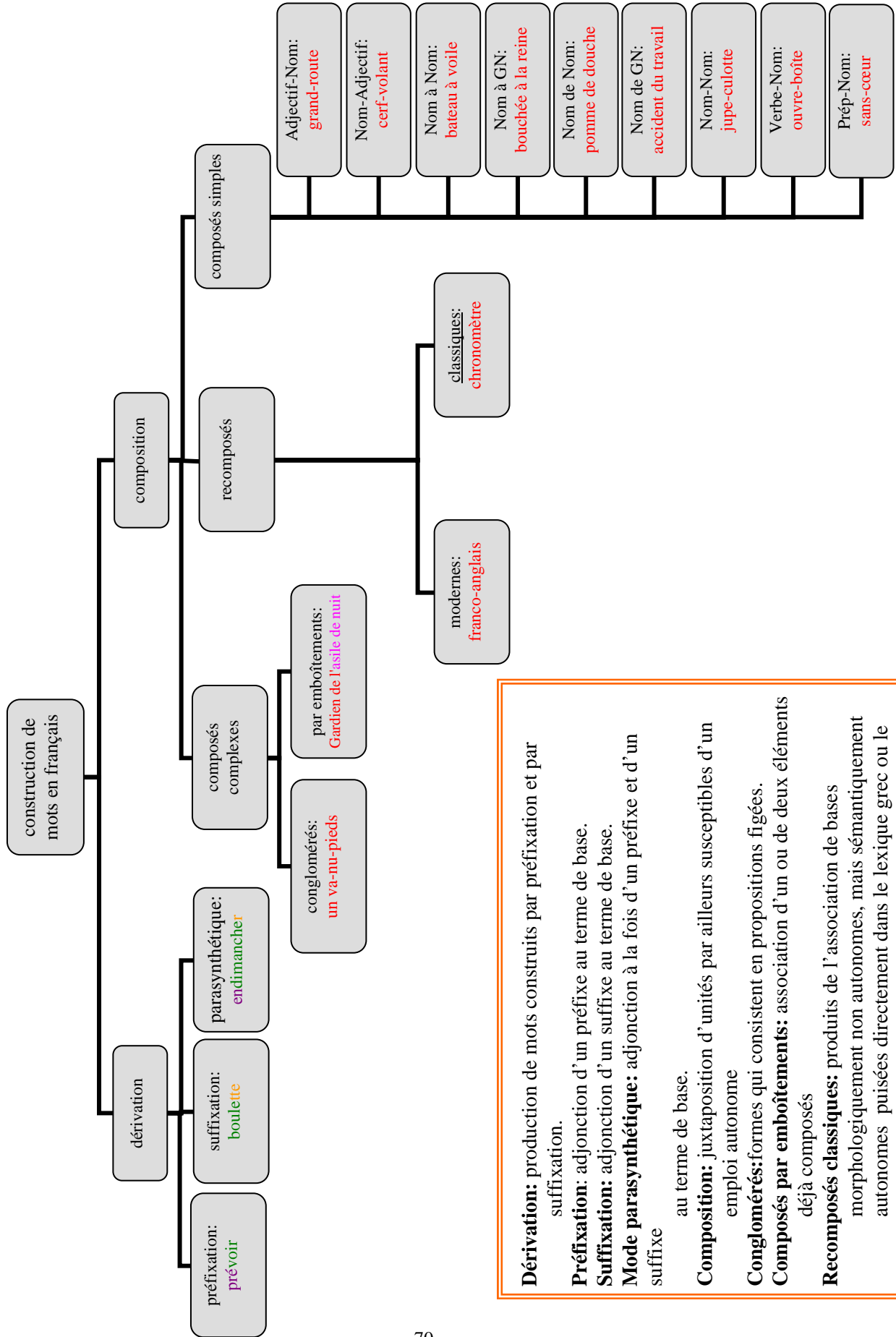
In teacher training programmes more attention is devoted today to strategies of vocabulary teaching. One reason for this is the disappointing results teachers have had in vocabulary teaching despite the time dedicated.

Sometimes, even after long periods of learning, students fail to learn the essential words, which confirms the fact that many teachers need more help with vocabulary teaching than they did in the past, particularly in countries where the language being taught is not the main language of communication.

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1 - French Allen, V., *Techniques in teaching vocabulary*, Oxford, OUP, 1983

Table 1 Construction of French compound words



Today, there is another reason which explains the worry of researchers in vocabulary teaching who recently have become more and more interested in studying word-meanings. Some of them have dealt with problems of lexicon. According to these such problems frequently hamper communication. In other words communication breaks down when the speaker fails to use the appropriate word.

Such discoveries do not surprise experienced teachers as they have never doubted the value of vocabulary learning. They know how communication breaks down when the learner does not have the necessary words at his/her disposal. Also, they do not believe that vocabulary teaching should be postponed until mastery of grammar is gained. In the best language classes neither grammar nor vocabulary are neglected: developing one's command of grammar is by no means contradictory to learning vocabulary.

### **Words and Context**

A person who has to read a text in a foreign language that s/he does not have command, would have the following reaction: "I can't read this text, I don't understand the words". In fact the obstacle in comprehension is widely due to insufficiency of lexical competence. Does this mean that with a dictionary one could manage to understand a text by finding the equivalent of most of the words? Indeed, they would end up with some result after some tedious / tiresome effort. However, it should be borne in mind that understanding a language does not mean decoding a series of words but grasping the relations that bind them in the heart of

the sentence.

In Order to understand a new word, the learner has many strategies at his disposal:

- The word is understood according to linguistic context. The learner uses sentence meaning to make a hypothesis on the new word. He relies on syntactic or semantic clues / hints.

- The word is divided into smaller units. The reader recognises something which s/he has encountered before in the word. S/he sees "courage" in "discouragement" and understands thanks to his / her knowledge of the semantic value of affixes.

- The word is recognised due to the presence of a non-linguistic element ( the role of illustration in audio-visual methods). The same relation exists between a caption and a picture in a newspaper.

- The word is understood by consulting a dictionary or referring to the teacher.

Learners should be encouraged to count on the context to give them the meaning of a word, sometimes retroactively: words of a text could serve as a semantic aid.

### **The Test and the Questionnaire**

To achieve our goal, we decided to conduct a vocabulary test consisting of 4 exercises designed to measure the learners' knowledge of French compound words of Greek and Latin roots. We also through questionnaire tried to pinpoint the difficulties, learners may come across while putting a compound word. It is to be noted that the test and the questionnaire were given to two groups of FFL (French as a Foreign Language) which had respectively taken 300 and 520 hours of French

course.

The test and the questionnaire aimed at (1) to what degree the learners were familiar with the subject of our study i.e. compound words (2) the strategies they put into practice when facing a compound word (3) their strategies of memorising

a new word.

Following is a specimen of the test and the questionnaire. The former will be followed by two tables summarising the results in figures (Table 2 & 3) and the latter will precede analyses of responses each accompanied by a figure (Figure 1-7).

### Vocabulary Test

**A : S'agit-il des antonymes ou des synonymes ? Souligner la bonne réponse.**

égoïste-altruiste	antonyms	synonyms
misanthrope-philanthrope	antonyms	synonyms
misogamie-polygamie	antonyms	synonyms
optique-visuel	antonyms	synonyms
introverti-extraverti	antonyms	synonyms
calligraphie-cacographie	antonyms	synonyms
biopsie-autopsie	antonyms	synonyms
astronaute-cosmonaute	antonyms	synonyms
ophtalmologue-oculiste	antonyms	synonyms
botaniste-zoologiste	antonyms	synonyms

**B : Qui tue qui ?**

1. régicide	a. virus
2. fratricide	b. mère
3. infanticide	c. roi
4. parricide	d. soi-même
5. homicide	e. ver
6. matricide	f. père, mère ou ascendant légitime
7. suicide	g. enfant
8. viroicide	h. être humain
9. génocide	i. frère
10. patricide	j. mauvaises herbes
	k. père
	l. groupe ethnique

**C : Cocher le mot correspondant à la définition.**

1. Médecin spécialiste de l'appareil génital féminin :

a. obstétricien (ienne)	b. gynécologue	c. dermatologue
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2. Médecin spécialiste des maladies infantiles :  
 a.orthopède                                      b.pédiatre                                      c.psychiatre
3. Médecin spécialiste des maladies oculaires :  
 a.cardiologue                                      b.ophtalmologue                                      c.opticien
4. Médecin spécialiste des maladies mentales :  
 a.neurologue                                      b.psychologue                                      c.psychiatre
5. Médecine de la vieillesse :  
 a..neurologie                                      b.obstétrique                                      c.gériatrie
6. Traitement des malpositions des dents :  
 a.orthodontie                                      b.orthopédie                                      c.optométrie
7. Affection caractérisée par des troubles affectifs et émotionnels :  
 a.névrite                                      b.névralgie                                      c.névrose
8. Science de la formation intellectuelle des adultes :  
 a.démagogie                                      b.pédagogie                                      c.philologie
9. Science de la connaissance de la Terre :  
 a.biologie                                      b.géologie                                      c.géographie
10. Connaissance des timbres-poste; art de les collectionner :  
 a.philologie                                      b.philatélie                                      c.philanthropie

**D : Relier**

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 1. psychologie     | a. qui décrit l'interaction du corps et de l'esprit |
| 2. psychique       | b. dérangement mental ou émotionnel                 |
| 3. psychopathie    | c. traitement basé sur les techniques freudiennes   |
| 4. psychothérapie  | d. qui concerne l'esprit, la pensée.                |
| 5. psychosomatique | e. qui trouve son origine dans l'esprit ou dans les |
| 6. psychomoteur    | émotions  |
| 7. psychanalyse    | f. étude de l'esprit humain et de son comportement  |
|                    | g. terme général du traitement psychologique        |

**Table 2**

<b>Groupe A</b> exercice question	<b>A</b> (out of 10)	<b>B</b> (out of 10)	<b>C</b> (out of 10)	<b>D</b> (out of 7)
1	3	1	3	1
2	2	1	3	0
3	2	1	2	0
4	4	6	4	3
5	3	3	1	0
6	1	2	3	2
7	1	2	1	1
8	2	1	0	-

**Continue Table 2**

9	3	1	2	-
10	2	1	2	-
Average	2,3	1,9	2,1	1

Total average = 18,91%

**Table 3**

Groupe B

<b>exercice question</b>	<b>A (out of 10)</b>	<b>B (out of 10)</b>	<b>C (out of 10)</b>	<b>D (out of 7)</b>
1	2	0	1	3
2	6	7	9	5
3	6	4	5	3
4	7	7	4	1
5	7	9	2	1
6	2	0	4	0
7	8	6	5	0
8	5	5	3	-
9	8	7	4	-
10	3	1	2	-
Average	5,4	4,6	3,9	7

Total average = 51,08%

*Questionnaire*

1. Connaissez-vous les mots recomposés de racine grecque et latine ? (Ex : géologie, régicide...)
  - a. Oui
  - b. Non
2. Sont-ils enseignés dans votre cours de langue ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
3. Vous arrive-t-il de les utiliser à l'oral ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
4. Vous arrive-t-il de les utiliser à l'écrit ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
5. Avez-vous du mal à les prononcer ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
6. Procédez-vous à deviner le sens d'un mot en le décomposant en ses constituants ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
7. Servez-vous du contexte pour apprendre un mot nouveau ?
  - a. jamais
  - b. rarement
  - c. parfois
  - d. souvent
  - e. toujours
8. Lorsque vous voulez apprendre un mot nouveau, vous :



- A : le répétez à haute voix
- B : le répétez silencieusement
- C : l'écrivez plusieurs fois
- D : le mémorisez avec un groupe de mots qui riment ou qui commencent par la/les même(s) syllabe(s)
- E : découpez son orthographe en plusieurs parties visuelles
- F : l'analysez du point de vue de préfixe, de base et de suffixe
- G : apprenez par cœur l'expression ou la phrase où il paraît
- H : le révisez fréquemment afin de ne pas l'oublier

**Question 1**

While all members of group A have presumably some knowledge about compound words, only 30% of group B members claim to know these words. This indicates that there is a lack of

awareness among language learners even after 300 hours of teaching, which reveals the teachers' tendency to postpone teaching these words to higher levels.

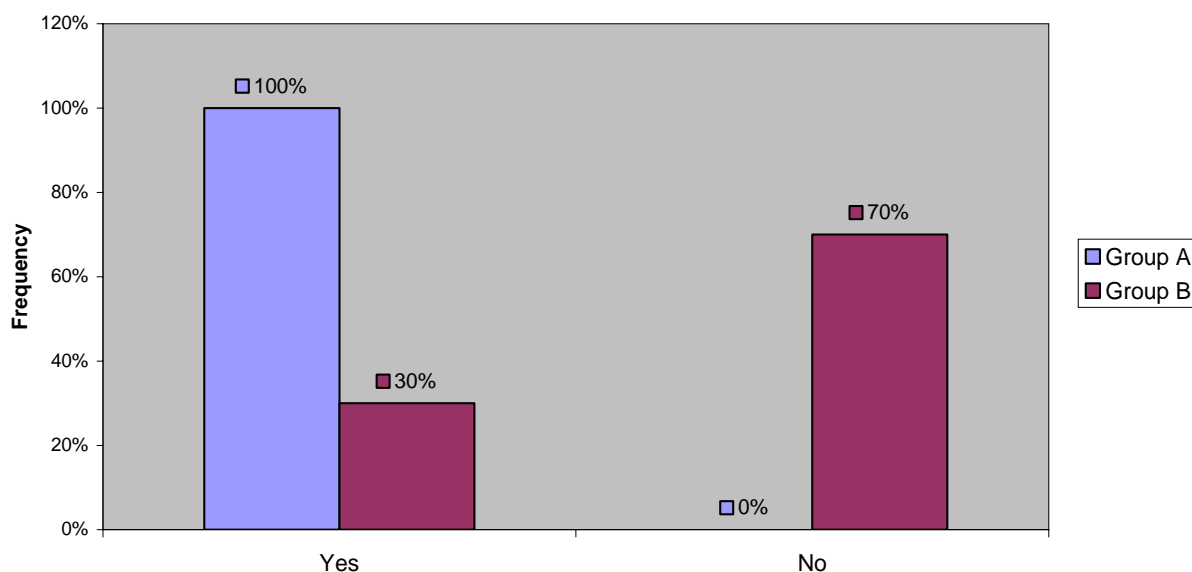


Figure 1

**Question 2**

The responses of the two groups to this question are varied. While an overwhelming majority of group A learners, i.e. 80%, pointed out that they had never received any information about compound words, 70 % of group B members said

they had sometimes been exposed to these words. This gap could be interpreted by the teachers' tendency to make learners aware from intermediate levels onwards.

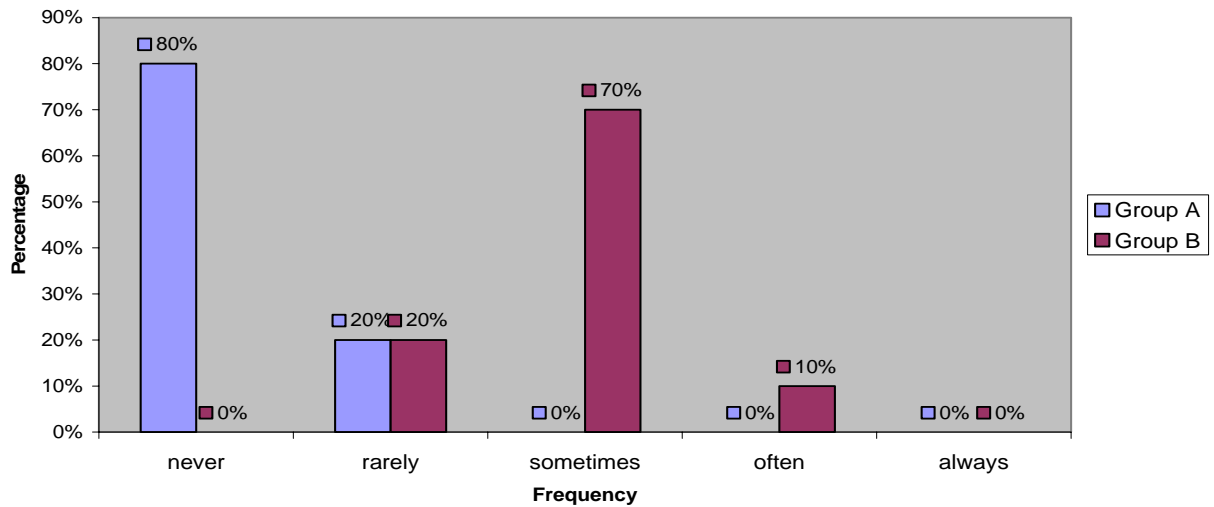


Figure 2

**Question 3**

70% of group A learners having declared being ignorant of compound words, it should come as no surprise that 90% of them have never used these words in speaking. As far as group B is concerned, things are a little more satisfactory; 50% of

learners using the words rarely and 40% sometimes. This indicates that even if students have some knowledge of compound words, they will prove reluctant to use them in speaking. This could be explained by the fact that these words belong to the field of technology and science.

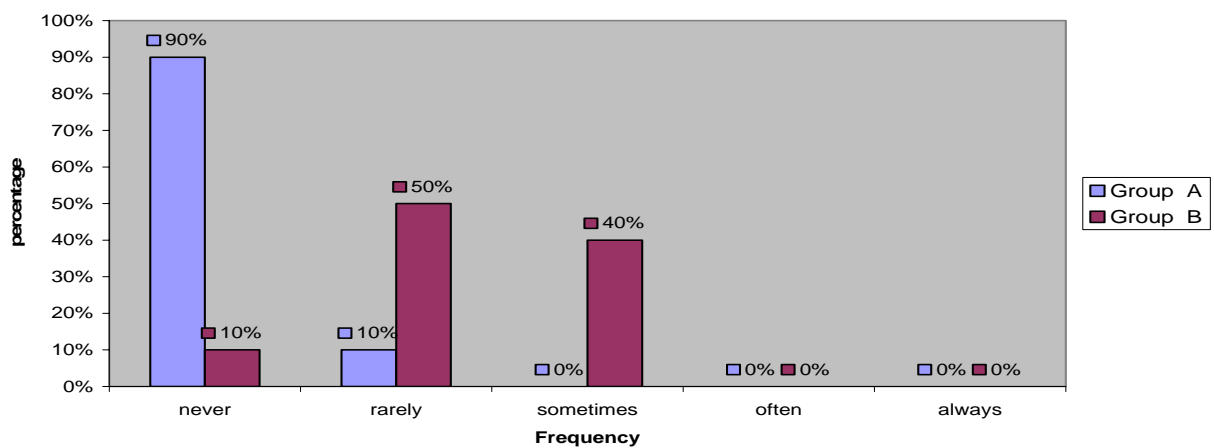


Figure 3

**Question 4**

Once again the overwhelming majority, 90%, of group A learners answered never or rarely whereas group B produced more favourable responses, 80%

making it clear that they use compound words sometimes, often or always. The results are in no way surprising for it is quite normal that learners of advanced levels practice writing more often than

other levels. Thus it follows that they stand fatter chances of putting into practice more sophisticated

vocabulary rather than every day words.

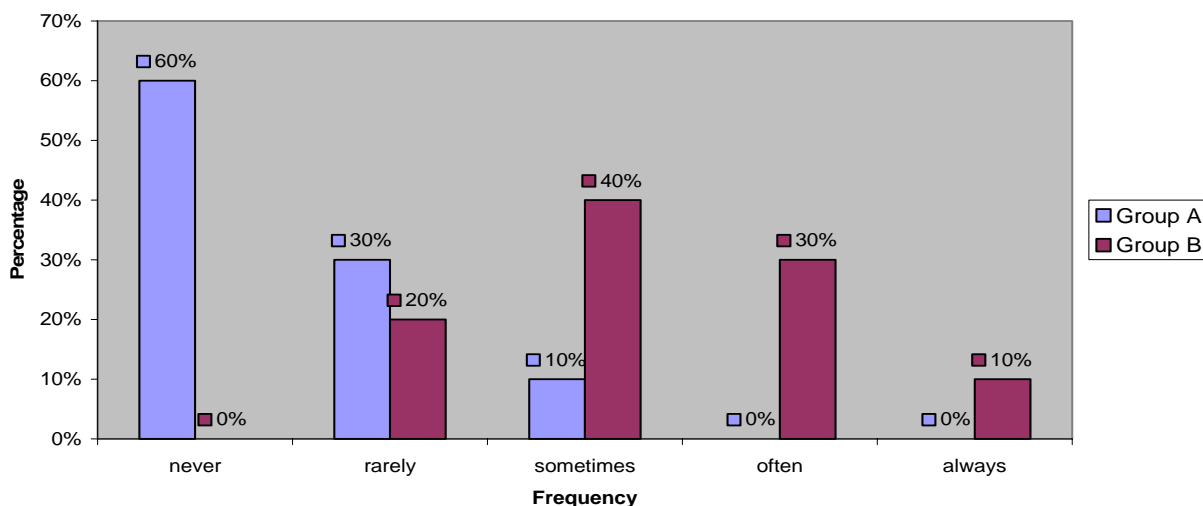


Figure 4

**Question 5**

As far as pronunciation is concerned, a relative majority of the two groups mention that these words are more difficult and articulate compared to other French words. This could be put down to the

inherent length of these words which are formed by juxtaposition of at least two elements. The difficulty could also find its origins in the fact that some of the roots have conserved their original pronunciation e.g. pachy- in pachyderm.

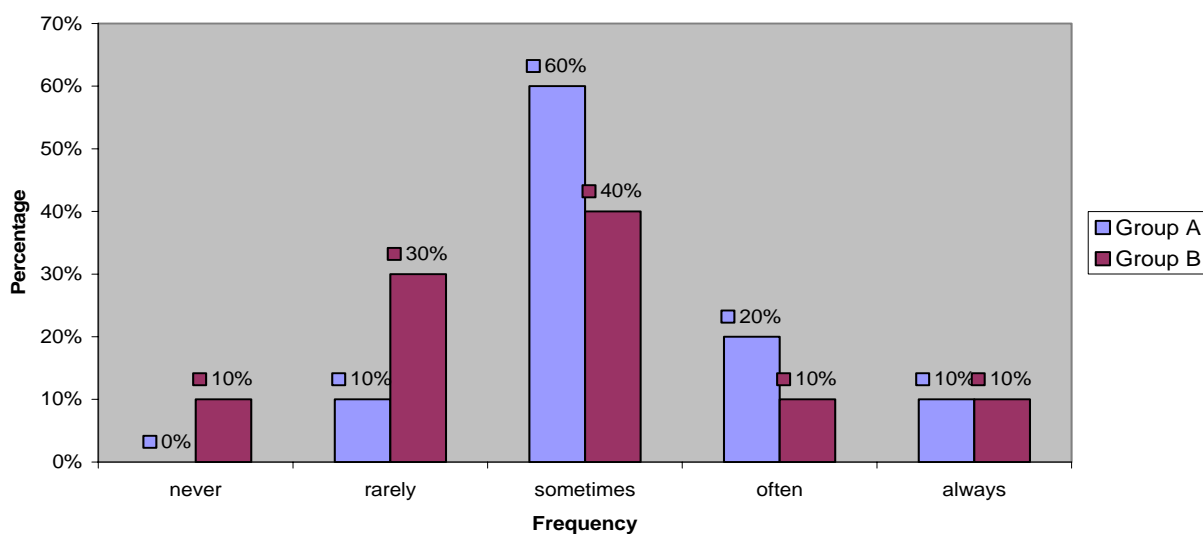
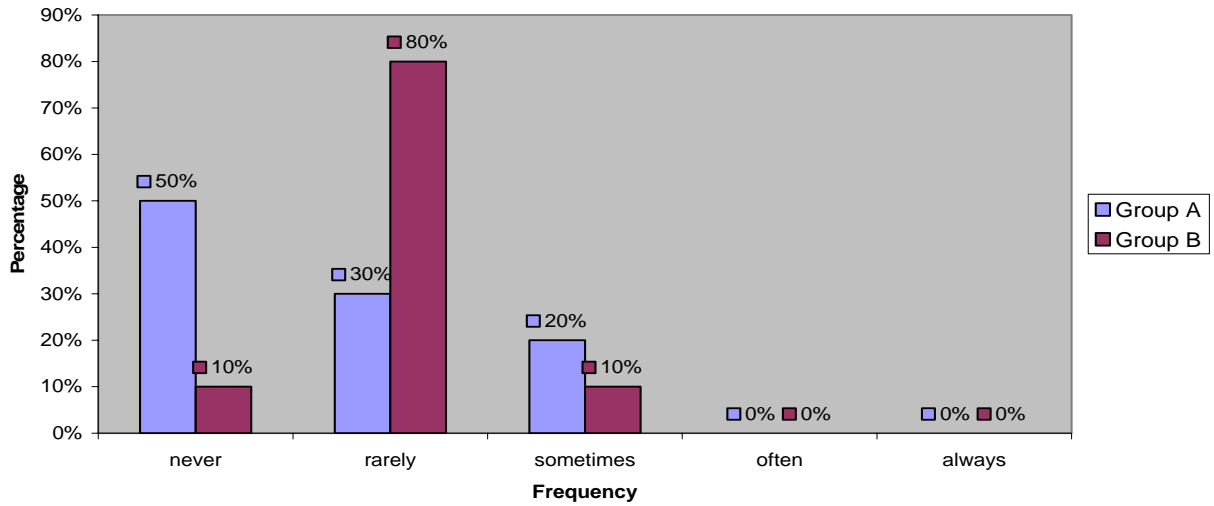


Figure 5

**Question 6**

It is unfortunate that 80% of the learners of the two groups never - if not rarely- make use of the underlying information hidden in the inner layers

of the words. This could be due to the lack felt in teaching word etymology which could greatly facilitate the task of penetrating into the inner world of words.

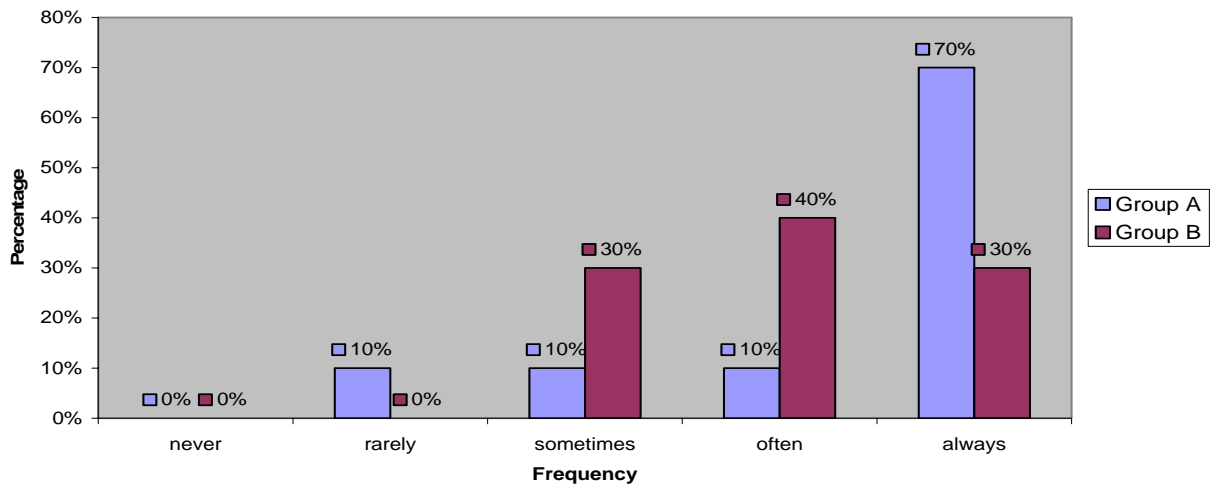


**Figure 6**

**Question 7**

This question proved to be one of the areas of common ground between the two groups. Fortunately, as indicated by the relative majority, the two groups agree that the context can play an

extremely important role in working out the word-meaning. The majority of the two groups mentioned that they made use of the context in order to overcome the obstacles, some words pose to comprehension.



**Figure 7**

### Question 8

There were eight options available to learners who might choose more than one at a time. The question was about the learning strategies usually adopted by the learners vis-à-vis a new word. Let's take a look at the results and try to find out where the problems could possibly lie.

- A. The question concerns oral repetition. The responses reveal that when students achieve a certain maturity in language learning, their strategy changes and they resort more often to oral repetition. At this stage, they have found out the dual function of this technique: (1) repeating loudly brings the voice box into operation and acts as a catalyst in adapting it to the sounds of the foreign language. This will avoid the possible problems, learners might come across in real situations. Usually, we speak more in silence to ourselves than aloud (which one of us has not had the experience of preparing sentence or a series of words before actually trying to utter them?) (2) Repeating loudly constitutes a listening practice which contributes to reinforcing the mental sound image making it possible for the freshly learned word to be retained more easily and for a longer time.

- B. The tendency in some learners to lean toward silent repetition is more explicitly perceived and could be interpreted as improvement of self-confidence and language competence of those who practice this strategy.

- C. Iranian students being reluctant to writing, it is

interesting that many members of both groups practice writing in order to master a new word. By this strategy students are in fact practicing visual repetition.

- D. As it is shown in this research, associating is one of the less widely practiced strategies among our learners. The only way this could be justified is the students' unfamiliarity or at least shortage of information on this strategy.

- E. Visual encoding does not seem to have attracted many students. We put this down to insufficiency of etymological knowledge with the learners. The ones who are aware of Greek or Latin roots would immediately divide the word into meaningful visual parts. Therefore, they can have access to the meaning of a word they have never come across before, without making use of dictionary or even the context.

- F. From the learners' responses, we understand that they are more informed on derivation than composition, which confirms our initial idea that more attention has to be paid to teaching compound words.

- G. 40% of the group members have claimed to use contextual encoding by means of memorising the immediate context of the question.

- H. 80% of the freshly acquired information being lost in the first 30 minutes after learning has taken place, make us realise the importance of revision in vocabulary learning.

### Some Learning Strategies

From didactic point of view, this study indicates that what is true about learning in general applies to vocabulary learning as well. The more the

learner is involved, the more effective learning will be. A recent research in the field of vocabulary learning suggests two facts in teaching which are associated with effective vocabulary learning.

- The amount of exercise given to words
- The degree to which putting the word into practice is encouraged

In addition to being effective, these factors also lead to more pleasant vocabulary learning. As Parry<sup>1</sup> (1990) suggests: "The history of words is the history of people including all the pathetic, poetry and every imaginable inherent pleasure. Studying words is studying ourselves and our world. "As maintains R. Galisson<sup>2</sup>": It is challenge to teach, we should teach how to learn." The process of decomposition is an attempt to put Galisson's advice into practice. When we teach etymology, we teach in fact a way to have access to the meaning of the unknown word in total autonomy.

The observation we have had with Iranian learners brought us to offer the following learning strategies in the hope that they will prove useful both to learners and teachers:

- ✓ Take account of the context in which the word appears.
- ✓ Pay particular attention to the relationship between words.
- ✓ Make use of the general meaning of the

statement in order to find out the precise meaning of the unknown word.

- ✓ Make use of the social context to guess the meaning of the word.
- ✓ Learn to make educated guesses.
- ✓ Learn to live with uncertainty.
- ✓ Do not rely too much on dictionaries. When you read try to get the gist by rapidly reading the whole text many times instead of consulting a dictionary each time you come across a new word.
- ✓ Use techniques to improve your memory. Group together the word which rhyme begin with the same syllables.
- ✓ Make yourself a mental image of the meaning of the words.
- ✓ Try to associate the new word to other words you already know.
- ✓ Use the word you learn as often as you can in speaking or writing.
- ✓ Repeat the word loudly.
- ✓ Write them many times.
- ✓ Divide them into their etymological constituents.
- ✓ Learn Greco-Latin roots in order to be able to decompose the new word into its constituents.

### **Conclusion**

This research allowed us to take an objective look at the history of vocabulary teaching. Its main achievement was portraying the difficulties, learners might encounter in the course of learning FFL (French as a Foreign Language). It also provided teachers and students with some vocabulary learning strategies which we hope will facilitate the task of mastering new words with a

1 - Parry, «Building a vocabulary through academic reading», TESOL Quarterly, 25, 1991  
2 - Galisson, R., *Des mots pour communiquer. Éléments de lexicométhodologie*, CLE international, 1983

minimal effort.

This research offered us the opportunity to find out that the relationship between word and context was one of the interdependence. It was a field study carried out by means of a test and a questionnaire which the make it possible for us to pinpoint the learners' favourite strategies of learning French compound words.

Following is a summary of the results of the research:

Firstly, learners proved reluctant to use compound words, both in speaking and writing.

Secondly, teachers can contribute to a better learning by providing students with convenient learning strategies.

Thirdly, knowledge of Greco-Latin roots can be of enormous assistance to guess the meaning of a new word.

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## مشکلات یا به کار گیری کلمات ترکیبی در زبان فرانسه نزد دانشجویان ایرانی

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### چکیده

یادگیری و آموزش صحیح واژگان ترکیبی امری اجتناب‌ناپذیر در یادگیری زبان می‌باشد. در این میان واژگان ترکیبی آنچنان که باید مورد توجه قرار نگرفته‌اند. لذا، انجام یک پژوهش میدانی کمک مؤثری در یافتن مشکلات یادگیری و به‌کارگیری این نوع واژگان کرده و نیز شیوه‌های پیشنهادی مؤثرتری را به منظور یاددهی، یادگیری و به‌کارگیری آن نزد زبان‌آموزان فرانسه ارائه می‌دهد. به همین منظور تست لغات ترکیبی به‌مراه پرسشنامه‌ای در اختیار دو گروه از زبان‌آموزان سطح متوسط قرار داده شد که پس از جمع‌آوری و تحلیل داده‌ها به نتیجه‌گیریهای ذیل دست یافتیم:

از آنجایی که زبان‌آموزان تمایل زیادی به به‌کارگیری واژگان ترکیبی (نه در زبان نوشتاری و نه در زبان شفاهی) از خود نشان ندادند باید به دنبال استراتژی‌هایی برای علاقمندسازی آنان به این واژگان بود: مدرسین زبان باید واژگان ترکیبی را دریافت و موقعیت اجتماعی آن در متن نوشتاری و شفاهی یاد دهند؛ آشنا ساختن زبان‌آموزان سطح متوسط با ریشه‌های یونانی و لاتین کمک شایانی در حدس معنای واژگان می‌نماید و نیز باعث بخاطر سپاری صحیح‌تر آنها می‌گردد؛ به زبان‌آموزان یاد داده شود که برای خویش استراتژی یادگیری (فهم کلی سپس تحلیلی) پیشه کنند تا تلاش آنها را ساده تر ساخته و در پی کشف معنای واژگان ترکیبی باشند. به جای آنکه از ابتدا منتظر ترجمه آنها باشند.

**کلید واژگان:** یادگیری و به‌کارگیری، واژگان ترکیبی، بافت و موقعیت

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