

The Impact of Teaching Idiomatic Expressions on the Foreign Language Learners' Comprehension

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Abstract

This study explains the role of idiomatic expressions in improving the comprehension of the foreign language learners as these expressions are cultural specifics and can affect the understanding of the foreign language learners. Therefore, it is important that these expressions should be introduced in foreign language textbooks and taught by the teachers of the foreign language. Idiomatic expressions should be taught in context and not in isolation because their figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents.

Introduction

Idioms are defined as fixed expressions, i.e., phrases or sentences whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents. (Wood, 1986, P.96). From a syntactic point of view, the fact that an expression is not interpretable in a literal way necessarily leads to the assumption that it is a fixed (non-compositional) expression. More pragmatically oriented students use the terms "idiomatic-fixed" relationship and allow for other non-literal phrases be idiomatic but non-fixed at the same time.

English is a language with vast idiomatic basis, which makes its learning very exciting and intriguing. There are about 4.000 idioms used in the American English and to explain what they mean needs about 2000 words of the vocabulary. Idioms derived from the culture of the nation and from day –to –day life. In real context idioms explain themselves. 9 times out of 10 times, idioms carry their own explanation. The main function of idioms is, to paraphrase what is going on, and what is being said. Idioms are used in both spoken and written English, and often appear in newspaper articles. They are frequently utilized by native speakers who feel the language at inborn genetic level. One of the approaches to define this linguistic phenomenon stresses that an idiom is a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of the language. It proves that only people who are very good at speaking English can adequately and to the point use idiomatic expressions in their speech. Idiomatic Expressions usually cause serious problems with non-native speakers of English, primarily because they do not know the culture and history behind English idioms. This is why Arab learners

of English use idiomatic expressions very carefully, being afraid of using them incorrectly and being misunderstood. They find idioms very problematic to both understanding and memorizing. The majority of native language speakers cannot always know the origin of idioms they use. Though as long as they utilize them in everyday communication, they know their meanings and feel where it is appropriate to use this or that idiom. According to Bromley (1998) Idioms exist in all languages and “enjoy widespread use among speakers of every language the world over.” (p. 272). Cooper (1998, p. 255) states that there are four kinds of non-literal expressions of which idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse. A definition given in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009, p. 870) states that an idiom is “a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word. For example ‘under the weather’ is an idiom meaning ‘ill’ ”. Idioms make use of mental pictures in order to provide an image of what is being said. For example, one might say (I am so hungry that I could eat a horse) giving the listener a quite powerful idea about just how hungry one is. Undoubtedly, idiomatic expressions make the language of the speakers more vivid and exciting.

In any language, there are language specific idiomatic expressions in Arabic, which reflect the Arabic culture and environment. The transfer of such idioms in English may result in comprehension problems if the listener or the reader is not familiar with the Arabic language and culture.

The aim of this study is to show the importance of introducing some English idiomatic expressions to the Arab learners of English as a foreign language in order to avoid confusion while transferring such idioms from English into Arabic and vice versa.

The questions of the study

This study aims at answering the following questions:

1-Does introducing idiomatic expressions in teaching English as a foreign language improve the learners’ comprehension?

2-How does teaching English idiomatic expressions affect the learners’ comprehension?

The objectives of the study

The current study aims at finding out whether teaching English idiomatic expressions improve the foreign language learners’

comprehension (listening as well as reading), and how this will improve their fluency at speaking the foreign language.

According to Abdulmoneim Mahmoud/ Sultan Qaboos University (2002), an idiom is defined as a group of words which, as a whole, has a different meaning of the individual words it contains. Thus, the meaning of the idiomatic expression is not the sum total of the words taken individually. Accordingly, an idiom is learned and used as a single unit of language; it should not be analyzed into its constituent elements. Idioms are sometimes referred to as ‘fixed expressions’ because in many cases the users should not make linguistic changes such as adding or dropping words, replacing a word with another, or changing the order of words. Some idiomatic expressions are common while others are language specific. As in any language, there are language specific idiomatic expressions in Arabic reflecting Arab culture and environment. The transfer of such idioms in English may result in comprehension problems if the listener or reader is not familiar with the Arabic language and culture. The following are some Arabic language-specific idioms:

- He paid in spite of his nose
- Clear and no dust on it
- We left the camel with the load

This study recommends that Arab students who are learning English especially at the university level should be familiarized with the English language specific idioms to improve their fluency in spoken English and help them improve their reading comprehension.

A study was conducted by Noura Winis Ibrahim (2013) to investigate the difficulties faced by Libyan students in understanding idiomatic expressions. It is to shed some light on some strategies employed by those students to ease their way in understanding and using idiomatic expressions. The study aims to investigate problems and difficulties encountered by the Libyan students and the strategies used to overcome those problems and difficulties. Idiomatic expressions are defined by the researcher as “the colorful side of the language”. Therefore, learners must see the language through rose-colored glasses to learn every single item that leads to proficiency. In fact, the level of command of idioms serves as an important indicator of L2 proficiency.

One of the main blocks of L2 idiom learning is that idioms are often unpredictable in meaning, that is, their meaning cannot always be derived from the literal meanings of the constituent parts. Above all, in the pedagogical sense, teaching vocabulary must be inseparable part from teaching idioms. 'An idiom is an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts' (Marlies, 1995, p.283). An idiom is also defined as a figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally, but that takes a non-literal meaning when used in a specific context (Cain & Oakhill 2005, p.66). The problems in teaching L2 Idioms are in the classroom due to the fact that teachers either do not know many idioms in L2 or they do not know their origin. Lennon (1998) suggests that exercises on problem-solving nature can help learners to discover the metaphors in idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, Lennon believes that students will become highly motivated to translate their language's metaphors into the target language so as to share with the class their own culture method of metaphor encoding.

In the light of what is mentioned above, it is important for EFL teachers to design various activities for the students to use with English idioms and subsequently acquire them efficiently. Moreover, students learn better when they are provided with collaborative activities. They can interact with peers and share fun in learning. Ultimately, when teachers integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing activities together in teaching English idioms, students consequently, can be involved in the application of English idioms in the four skills. Thus, it is effective to teach EFL learners, English idioms when they are provided with various activities to practice and utilize English idioms in different contexts. According to Mantyla (2004) idioms should not be taught directly at all. She considers the best policy of teaching to be a method where the students' attention focuses on the common characteristics of idioms. Cain et al., (2005) demonstrate that there are three factors in idiom comprehension; familiarity, transparency and context. They state that idioms that are presented in texts are easier to understand than those which are presented in isolation. It seems that due attention is not given to the learning of idioms, and students' competence in these forms needs to be developed further not only on the recognition level but also on the production level.

A study, which was introduced by Beate Abel (2003) refers to the generative grammar as the first approach that dominates the early days of idioms research and established distinctions between idiomatic expressions and non-idiomatic ones. From a generative point of view, i.e., syntactic point of view, the fact that an expression is not interpretable in a literal way necessarily leads to the assumption that it is a fixed (noncompositional) expression. More pragmatically oriented studies use the terms “true idioms” (Wood, 1986, p.11) or “pure idioms” (Howarth, 1998, p.28) to refer to the idiomatic fixed relationship and allow for other nonliteral phrases to be idiomatic but nonfixed at the same time.

An article entitled “Teaching Idiomatic Expressions” by CA: Academic Communication Associate (2003. Article 64-8) states that the English language has thousands idiomatic expressions that cannot be understood based on their literal meaning. Considering expressions such as “you are pulling my leg” or “He bit off more than he can chew”, those expressions and many others may confuse the learners of English language from different cultures who are learning English as a foreign language. Teachers often expect students to look in the dictionary when they do not understand words encountered in classroom reading assignments. But the dictionary is often of little help when expressions need to be defined.

An article by Liz Conaty(2012) refers to the English language as one of the most idiomatic languages in the world, containing thousands of idiomatic expressions that are rife in everyday speech, the media and literature. While this makes the language rich, it also presents an extra obstacle to both students and teachers of English. Idiomatic (expressions that have a figurative meaning beyond their literal words, like ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’) tend to be familiar to the native speaker of English, but confusing to a non-native to decipher. Even worse, non-native speakers are often throwing a curve ball when an idiom seems straightforward but in fact more nuanced. For example, a non-native speaker may be able to figure out that ‘a slap on the wrist’ is a punishment, but not that it implies a light punishment or to effectively get away with something. When it comes to learning and teaching English, idioms are not a luxury, they are a necessity. If

you're teaching English as a second language and want to help your students perfect their English, here are some tips on how to incorporate idioms into your English lessons:

1-Traditional idioms may be the most obvious, but they are not the most useful. Instead of teaching traditional idioms that students may never use as "it is raining cats and dogs". It is often best to explain what idioms are and get students to write idioms down every time they hear them. Idioms that students come across naturally are more likely to be kind of idioms that they need to understand and learn. Encouraging students of English to keep track of idioms they hear in passing helps them build their idiom vocabulary naturally instead of having them insert stock phrases into the speech where they do not belong.

2-Teach idioms that translate well: It is a good idea to start with idioms that are similar to idioms in the student's mother tongue. This is especially important in Europe as many idioms in romance languages tend to have English equivalents, making them easier to remember and learn.

3-Remember that idioms are a key to fluency: A sticking for many ESL teachers is that they believe it is pointless to teach idioms, believing they are not as common as linguists make out. Such a statement is a far cry from the truth.

Abdulmoneim M.(2001)introduced a study which sheds light on the interlingual transfer of idiomatic expressions, an issue which has not received much attention. The scarcity of studies in this area is justified since foreign –language students usually express themselves in non-idiomatic language, hence, they are not expected to use idioms unless they attain a native-like command of the language. Such a high level of proficiency is unlike to be attained by most students even after university education in contexts where exposure to EFL is confined to classroom instructions. Adults use idioms fluently and frequently in their mother tongue. Therefore, they are aware of the importance of idioms in learning and using EFL. They know that the use of idiomatic expressions is a mark of good English. Hence, faced with the problem of low proficiency in EFL, the students seem to arrive at a compromise by falling back to the interlingual transfer strategy. Cases of positive and negative transfer could be discussed with them so that they know when to transfer and when not to. Needless to say, more exposure to the foreign language through reading and listening is necessary. Another step that can be

taken in this respect is the compilation of lists of some frequently used English–Arabic idioms divided into the following categories:

- 1-Formally and semantically similar
- 2-Formally similar, semantically different
- 3-Semantically similar, formally different
- 5-Grammatically different
- 6-Lexically different
- 7-English –specific
- 8-Arabic specific

The result of this study shows that the students involved in this study whose native language is Arabic are asked to write essays as weekly assignments in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their reading and writing courses. A total of 124 idioms was found in 3220 pieces written by 230 students. Out of 124 idioms detected, 20% were grammatically, lexically and contextually correct, over two thirds (18 idioms) of these correctly used idioms were found to have Arabic equivalents. They were contextually, formally and semantically equivalent to the corresponding Arabic idioms. The following are some examples:

- 1-history repeats itself
- 2-a white lie
- 3-twist his arm
- 4-the black list

Conclusion

Idioms are fixed expressions or sentences whose figurative meaning is not understood from their literal meaning of their constituents. Therefore, such expressions should be included in the foreign language textbooks and the teachers of foreign language should help the learners understand their meanings not in isolation, but in context. Those expressions are language specific and therefore are difficult to understand by the non-native speakers of that language because of their different culture.

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تدريس مصطلحات اللغة الأجنبية وتأثيرها على استيعاب الطلبة

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث الى شرح اهمية تدريس المصطلحات اللغوية لطلبة اللغات الاجنبية لما لها من خصوصية لغوية واجتماعية . حيث ان المعنى العام لهذه المصطلحات لا يستخلص من معاني الكلمات التي يحتويها المصطلح. كما يوصي الباحث بعدم اعطاء معنى المصطلح بمفرده بل ضمن الجملة التي تحوي المصطلح لاجل توضيح المعنى العام للمصطلح. حيث ان تعريف الطلبة لهذه المصطلحات واستخدامها لها تأثير ايجابي على استيعاب الطالب للغة الاجنبية (تكلماً وقرأة).