



LEARNING IDIOMS TILL THE COWS COME HOME : A STUDY



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ABSTRACT

Idioms are an intrinsic part of human communication. Learning idioms is certainly *not a piece of cake* (very easy), sometimes *you will be all at sea* (totally confused). Traditionally, teaching and learning idioms was considered as *a hard nut to crack* (difficult to understand). Moreover, a *pin-drop silence* (complete silence) is maintained in teaching and learning idioms. The present study investigates the strategies, problems and difficulties the second year students at Intermediate encounter while learning idioms. A questionnaire was administered on ninety eight subjects. The results demonstrated that a majority of the sample displayed a major difficulties they encounter and strategies they adopt in learning and using idioms. Implications as well as suggestions for further research were portrayed.

KEYWORDS

Culture; figurative language; human communication; Idiomatic expressions; L2 learners; positive attitude.

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Idioms are the windows into the thought, experiences and culture of the people of every language (Arefeh,2014). The words idiom, idiot, idiocy, idiosyncrasy are cognates. They all have one common semantic characteristic, something different from the accepted norm. An idiot is so called because he is different from normal human being in spite of his commonsense and understanding. Similarly the word '*idiom*' means a way of expression different from the normal pattern of the usage of words. Idioms like *let the cat out of the bag* is composed of several words(*let/the/cat/out/ of/the/bag*) whose individual meanings do not seem to contribute to the meaning of the idiom as a whole (*reveal a secret*).

In addition to this, apparent incongruity between form and meaning, the scarcity of teaching materials and the lack of a clear methodology make idioms *a stumbling block* (an obstacle) for second language students (Deignan et al, 1997, L.Cameron& G. Low 1999). Thus, learning idioms is certainly *not a piece of cake* (very easy), but once you know them, they can be a lot of fun, and anyway, because English people use idioms nonstop *you will be all at sea* (totally confused) in most conversations *until you learn the ropes* (understand how things work) (Armenuhi, 2014).

Zorana, (2015) contended idioms remain a source of perplexity. According to Cooper (1999), idioms present a special language problem for all language learners because the figurative meaning is unpredictable. At the same time, idioms lack grammatical flexibility. *Kicked the bucket*, as in *he/she kicked the bucket*, must always be in that basic form and not *he or she kicked buckets* or *the bucket was kicked by him or her* or *he or she kicked a large bucket*. This criterion, however, does not always apply. *He is a hard nut to crack* or *he is an appallingly hard nut to crack* or *he is a hard nut, as always, to crack* are all grammatically correct variations of the same idiom.

Furthermore, idioms have been considered as one of the **core areas** to be taught in a foreign language classroom, especially when teaching English as a foreign language (Boers, Frank and Lindstromberg 2008). Researchers have acknowledged the importance of placing special emphasis on teaching idioms due to their significance in native speakers' language use and non-native speakers having difficulties with acquiring metaphoric language (Schmitt 2000; Cieslicka 2006; Tran 2013). In other words, usage of idioms makes the language more colourful and adds a dimension to it, as well as knowing idioms is crucial while communicating with native speakers because they use idiomatic expressions quite frequently.

Since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum.” (Cooper, 1998).

The English language is rich in idiomatic expressions. In fact, “most English speakers utter about . . . 7,000 idioms per week” (Pollio, Barlow, Fine, & Pollio, 1977). L2 English learners struggle to comprehend, produce, and retain idioms, which are relevant for every form of discourse ranging from conversations, lectures, and movies to electronic communications and more. Learning idioms not only helps improve L2 English communications skills but also the understanding of the L2 culture and society (Carla Zimmerman, 2015).

Literature Review

The scarcity of well documented empirical studies related to idioms in the language-learning process illustrates the profoundly limited amount of research interest this area has received so far. It is obvious that L2 learners have some difficulties in becoming more fluent in the target language, and that they apply different strategies to overcome these difficulties and to comprehend the meanings of idioms. Irujo (1986) demonstrated different types of difficulties in learning idioms appropriately in a language-learning context. Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy (2011) reported the difficulty of learning idioms comes from the fact that idioms are arbitrary and non literal. Pimenova (2011) pointed out that the difficulty of learning idioms could be related to five major challenges: (a) unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms; (b) no analogous idioms in L1; (c) cultural differences; (d) lack of experience dealing with idioms; e) lack of the broad context for a given idiom. Lundblom E. G., E & Woods, J., J. (2012) studied improving Idiom Comprehension through Peer Tutoring. Saleh & Zakaria (2013) mentioned that one of the main challenges of L2 idiom learning is that idioms are often unpredictable in terms of meaning. Murali.K (2014) noted the effective Communication through Idioms. Fatimah S. Alshiraida (2014) investigated the impact of teaching idiomatic expressions on the foreign language learner’s comprehension. Maedeh Tadayyon and Saeed Ketabi (2014) studied Iranian EFL Learners’ attitude towards idioms in English, whereas, Mahmoodi-Shahrehabaki, Masoud, (2015) documented attitude of Iranian EFL learners and teachers towards using movie clips in teaching idioms. In a similar vein, Sahar Najarzadegan and Saeed Ketabi (2015) articulated Iranian teachers’ beliefs about teaching idiomatic expressions. Li Liu & Jiayi Yao (2017) explored the factors that influence the learning of Chinese Quadra-syllabic Idiomatic Expressions (QIEs) as a Foreign Language (FL).

Learning idioms which is considered a very essential part of learning and using language (Sridhar, 2013) has recently attracted a great attention of researchers. As there is rudimentary research documented in this area, the less trodden one is taken for present investigation.

Objectives

1. To delineate the difficulties encountered by senior Intermediate students of Hyderabad District in Telangana State in understanding the idiomatic expressions.
2. To appraise the strategies adopted by the senior intermediate students of Hyderabad District in Telangana State in assimilating idiomatic expressions.

Delimitations

1. This study is confined to the perceptions of senior Intermediate students in Hyderabad District of Telangana State on idiomatic expressions.
2. This study is limited to investigate the strategies pertaining to learning of idiomatic expressions in English language by senior Intermediate students in Hyderabad District of Telangana State.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of senior Intermediate students in Hyderabad District of Telangana State with regard to difficulty they face in learning idioms in English language?
2. Which is the best and least strategies adopted by senior Intermediate students in Hyderabad District of Telangana State.

Methodology

The accessible participants in this study were (98) **ninety eight senior** students (Boys and Girls) studying second year Intermediate in Government institutions in Hyderabad District. The questionnaire was constructed with a slight modification of previous questionnaires such as those of Rohani et al. (2012), Saleh & Zakaria (2013), Angel (2014), Al-kadi (2015), and Al-Khawadeh et al. (2016). The questionnaire for this study comprised **twenty statements**, the first ten focusing on difficulties encountered and the later ten emphasizing the strategies the students adopt in assimilating the idioms in English language.

Discussion and Conclusion

Table.1 Difficulties encountered

Sl. No	Statement	Descriptive Stats	
01	Idioms are difficult to understand because of lack of cultural background.	4.30	.934
02	Idioms are difficult to understand because lack of experience dealing with them.	4.35	.763
03	Idioms are difficult because they are not a part of the daily usage.	4.28	.978
04	Idioms are difficult because teachers give scant attention	4.00	.664
05	Idioms are difficult because they are not found in other subjects taught at college level.	3.20	.742
06	Idioms are difficult because they have unfamiliar words.	3.11	.762
07	Idioms are difficult because they have no analogue in mother tongue	3.50	.688
08	Idioms are difficult when they have no contextual meanings	2.70	.746
09	Idioms and figurative speech are inter linked	3.62	.821
10	Idioms cannot be used if the other person is not aware of its meaning	3.10	.752

The table explicitly demonstrates that all students seem to have difficulties in understanding idioms. This could be due to the fact that one need to be experienced in dealing with them and also lack of cultural background are the attributes for the difficulties and they are not taught well by the teachers. These findings corroborates with the researches of T.C.Cooper, (1998); J.Ambrose,(2013); Alptekin, (2005); Jenkins, (1996, 2000, 2002, 2005); Seidlhofer, (2001),Rahim Uddin Choudhury,(2014); Sridhar Maisa,(2013) ; Thyab,(2016).

Similarly, most of the subjects pointed out that idioms are not found in other subjects taught to them; unfamiliar words make the idioms more inaccessible to learn; no analogues in target language. The same is echoed in the findings of Al-Kadi, 2015; Saleh &Zakaria, (2013); Maha H. Alhaysony (2017).

Moreover, the results illustrated that the subjects experienced difficulty in understanding idioms because of contextuality; figurative speech and others not aware of its usage. Most of

the researchers like Andrew Ortony (1978); T.C.Cooper (1998) Anna Siyanova (2011)Eve Zyzik (2013) supported these findings.

Table.2 Strategies adopted

S.No	Statement	Descriptive Stats	
		Mean	SD
01	I guess the meaning of idioms from the context.	4.43	.925
02	I learn idioms with clear literal meaning	4.25	.816
03	I learn idioms by visualization	4.00	.928
04	I learn idioms through memorization	3.99	.825
05	I learn idioms by using key words.	3.00	.826
06	I can figure out an idiom from an equivalent one in my language.	4.18	.789
07	I up look up unknown idioms in the dictionary.	4.37	.851
08	I learn idioms by using them in sentences.	4.08	.877
09	I learn only familiar idioms with familiar vocabulary.	4.14	.813
10	I learn idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom	2.80	.683

With regard to strategies senior students of Intermediate adopt, the results revealed that the subjects employed different strategies to understand idioms. The highest score mean score as indicated was 4.43 and the least was 2.80. A good majority of the subjects preferred context to decipher meaning of idioms. This finding is in line with the results of Asl, (2013) ; Irujo, (1986); Rohani et al., (2012); Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Sridhar & Karunakaran, (2013); Noura(2013); Maha H. Alhaysony(2017). The second most frequent strategy used by the subjects reported was learning idioms through discovering idioms from dictionary with mean frequency at 4.37; followed by finding idioms from their literal ;meanings, mean value at 4.25 and another one is equivalent idioms in mother tongue. Learning idioms in sentences; through visualization; memorization; familiar vocabulary and key words. The least preferred strategy indicated is learning idioms outside the classroom with mean frequency at 2.80. Previous researches undertaken by Rohani, Ketabi, & Tavakoli (2012); Chen & Lai (2013); Moein & Khosravi (2014), and Violetta (2015); Maha H. Alhaysony(2017) reflect the same trend.

To conclude, knowing which idiom should be used when comes with practice and time. "If you *keep an open mind* (willing to listen) and *play your cards right*, (behave in a right way)

your proficiency in English will soon be *something to crow about*” (to boast about) (Laflin, 1996).

The findings of the study revealed that the majority of students encounter a number of difficulties when learning and understanding idioms. The most preferred strategy was contextuality and the least one was learning idioms outside the classroom. So, *teachers* of English should teach idioms till *the cows come home (for a long time)* to overcome difficulties. At the same time, *Students* should *leave no stone unturned* (try everything possible) and put *their shoulders to the wheel* (work diligently) in learning idioms. *Parents* are to imbibe a sense of positive attitude in their wards *to burn the midnight oil* (studying late at night) in learning idioms. At the same time, the *peers and siblings* should *extend their helping hands* (give some help) to make their pals more proficient.

A fascinating future research is to focus on intricacies in teaching and learning idiomatic expressions and explore the ways in which idioms can be made more accessible and alluring to learners, especially at Intermediate level.

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