The Problems Encountered by EFL Students in Understanding and Using Idiomatic Expressions in English

DafaAllah Osman Omer   Ibrahim

Department of English - College of Education - University of Zawia

Zawia - Libya

EMAIL: d.ibrahim@zu.edu.ly

ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the difficulties encountered by the students in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English. The objective of this study is to explore to what extent the students find obstacles in using and figuring out the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions in English. It is also an attempt to find solutions to the problems faced by the students in using and understanding idiomatic expressions in different contexts.

The researcher used descriptive method to investigate and handle these problems in collecting data. The researcher conducted a questionnaire for the students in order to explore the difficulties in understanding and guessing the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions in English.

The sample of the study composed of 22 students of English who are studying in the third-year at Faculty of Education, Nasir, Department of English, Zawia University.

The findings of the study emphasized that the students faced obstacles in using and understanding idiomatic expressions. It was also found that the majority of teachers do not give adequate and intensive practice in enhancing their teaching and learning of idioms. The study also proved that the nature of complexity of the idiomatic expressions confused the students to guess their figurative meaning in

different context. The study came with a set of recommendations which highlighted the aims and the problems mentioned before.

المشكلات التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الانجليزية في فهم واستخدام العبارات الاصطلاحية باللغة الانجليزية

دفع الله عثمان عمر ابراهيم

قسم اللغة الانجليزية – كلية التربية ناصر – جامعة الزاوية

الزاوية – ليبيا

EMAIL: d.ibrahim@zu.edu.ly

ملخَّص البحث:

تناولت هذه الدراسة الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلاب في فهم واستخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو استكشاف إلى أي مدى يجد الطلاب عوائق في استخدام ومعرفة المعنى المجازي للتعبيرات الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية. إنها أيضًا محاولة لإيجاد حلول للمشاكل التي تواجه الطلاب في استخدام وفهم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في سياقات مختلفة.

واستخدم الباحث المنهج الوصفي للدراسة ومعالجة هذه المشكلات في جمع البيانات. وقد قام الباحث بإجراء استبيان للطلاب من أجل استكشاف الصعوبات في فهم وتخمين المعنى المجازي للتعابير الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية.

تكونت عينة الدراسة من 22 طالبا وطالبة من طلاب الفرقة الثالثة كلية التربية ناصر قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، بجامعة الزاوية.

وأكدت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب واجهوا معوقات في استخدام وفهم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية. وقد وجد أيضًا أن غالبية المعلمين لا يقدمون ممارسة كافية ومكثفة لتعزيز تعليم وتدريس وتدريب الطلاب للمصطلحات التعبيرية. كما أثبتت الدراسة أن طبيعة التعابير الاصطلاحية المعقدة أربكت الطلاب في تخمين معناها المجازي في سياقات مختلفة بناء على نتائج الدراسة والدراسات السابقة وخلصت الدراسة بمزيد من التوصيات التي تساهم في حل هذه المشكلات والتغلب على الصعوبات المرتبطة بها.

1. Introduction

Language is one of the prized possessions of human beings. It makes us the building blocks essential for any form of communication. It is the main vehicle by which we know about other people's thoughts. Possessing a language is the quintessentially human trait: All normal humans talk, no non-human animal does. Since everyone can talk, an average person tends to think that there is nothing mysterious about language. 'We lose the sight of the need for explanation when phenomena are too familiar and obvious.'(Bacham, 1990).

A language is also a form of culture from where the language originates. Someone who learns a language without learning the culture of that language risky, becoming fluent fools. One of the cultures of language is idioms. Idioms are the constructions of words or expressions whose meaning cannot be explained literary. Understanding and using idioms is a vital part of learning and using a language because it is an important part of human culture. It is a big obstacle to researchers, teachers and students to understand how learners learn and use idioms in communicating and improving their proficiency so as to find effective ways for language learning. On the other hand, learning and using idioms can facilitate and enhances learning process and communication in English. (Allen,2003).

1.1 Statement of the problem

The majority of the students face difficulties in using and understanding idiomatic expressions in English. Ruhl (1989) stated that learners have difficulties in understanding the meaning and structure of new language. This is an important issue that should be considered before teaching language items for L2 students. The researcher through his teaching English at the college of Education, Department of English, observed that the majority of the students face problems in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English. Therefore, the researcher investigated these difficulties and the causes behind them.

1.2 Objectives of the study

This study aims:

1. To investigate the main problems which confront the students in understanding and using idiomatic expressions.

2. To make the students understand and use idiomatic expressions in different contexts.

3-To motivate the students to use idiomatic expressions and understanding of their figurative meaning.

4-To encourage teachers of English to take into account the importance of teaching idiomatic expressions in their teaching lessons, with intensive activities and practice.

1.3 Research Questions

1-Why are idioms hard to understand?

2-Why idioms are important for English language learners?

3. Do the nature of idiomatic expressions causes difficulty in understanding the meaning by EFL learners? And to what extend teachers of English pay more attention and give practice on them?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study is significant because it sheds light on the importance of

Learning idiomatic expressions which helps non-native speakers of a language become more fluent, and sound more native-like. Learning idiomatic expressions also increases the vocabulary and lexicon of the English language learners.

Students are often embarrassed and frustrated if they cannot understand the idioms a person using. A strong knowledge of idioms helps students be better speakers. The high number of idioms and their high frequency in discourse make them an important aspect of vocabulary.

This study is important for teachers of English to pay more attention and give more practice to the students in using and understanding idiomatic expressions.

1.5 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to investigate the difficulties encountered by the students in using and understanding idiomatic expression.

The study is conducted at Faculty of Education, Nasir, Department of English.

The researcher selected the students who are studying at the fifth semester only because their level permit to practice such complex vocabulary and expressions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition idioms

Idioms are defined by Swinney and Culter (1972) as' a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meaning of the individual words comprising that string.' According to Irujo (1986) who defined an idiom as a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its part.

Crystal (1991) described idioms as fixed expressions whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituent.

2.2 The importance of idioms

English language is full of idioms and other figurative aspects of a language. Therefore, mastery of English idioms enables the students to learn English language effectively. Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than just knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have also the understanding of the connotative word and more, understanding of figurative language. (Nunan,1992, p.23).

Thawabteh (2011) illustrated that idioms are one of the universal aspects of all languages; they are considered to be an intrinsic part of human communication. Further, they baffle beginner learners to a great extent. They may cause not only linguistic but also cultural and technical problems for non-native speakers; hence, these problems might affect communication negatively.

Dixon (1994) stated that idioms are essential to successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing.

2.3 Some related studies of idioms

There are many studies which conducted to handle the difficulties of understanding and using of idioms among students.

One of this study was about Challenges and Strategies in Understanding English Idioms by Renata Diah, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The findings of this study proved that the difficulties faced by ELED students in understanding English idioms. All the participants claimed that they found the difficulties in understanding English idioms. From the interview results, the researcher found three challenges faced by ELED students in understanding English idioms. The first finding is because the

different meaning of expression from meaning of each word. The second is because the scarcity of students found and use the English idioms. The third is because the lack of discussion of idioms in classrooms.

The second study was about An Investigation of Some Difficulties in Idioms Encountered by Saudi Learners of English by Hashim Noor & Mayson Fallatah, Taibah University.

The results of this study assured that most of Saudi English major female students are unable to recognize and comprehend idioms in context more than idioms out of context. They also support the notion that context has a significant effect in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending English idioms effectively.

The third study was about Cultural Difficulties of English Idioms Confronting Foreign Learners by Mohammed Nasser Saeed. The findings of the study emphasized that cultural specificity of idioms makes their difficulty to be recognized and interpreted by foreign learners. Idioms are not the main focus in teaching, but special exercises could indeed improve their recognition, interpretation and processing. Therefore, idioms should be introduced to students at least in language lessons. This can help students to be aware of such expressions and take specific care of them. Teachers and teaching materials should include practice on idioms since it improves students' recognition, interpretation and process and may help promote proficiency. All in all, idioms might play a minor role but they are very significant aspects and could not be neglected in language teaching.

2.4 Difficulties of using and understanding idioms

Using and understanding idioms cause students difficulties to English language learners and they are widely recognized as a stumbling block.

The difficulty of idioms can stem from the fact that they are deeply rooted in the culture of the target language. These cultural specific expressions require knowledge of the culture of the target language in order to minimize the difficulty of learning them. (Nippold,1995).

Cooper (1999) stated that idioms are difficult for language learners because the figurative meaning can be unpredictable.

Learners are required to go beyond word-by word interpretation and they must resort to figurative meaning.

Irujo (1986) discussed the difficulties of learning idioms that non-literalness is among the reasons why idioms are difficult to learners in the second language. Language learners are faced with difficulties in figuring out the non-literal meaning of idioms. Idioms also have grammatical constrains and they must be employed in appropriate situation.

3.Methodology

This study used descriptive method to investigate and handle the difficulties encountered by the students in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English.

Creswell (2012) stated that descriptive method describes and interprets what is. It concerns with conditions of relationship that exist; practices that prevail; beliefs; process that are going on; effects that are being felt, or trends that are developing.

The researcher chooses the questionnaire for the students which is considered to be a reliable and valid way of collecting data.The process of this method goes beyond mere gathering and tabulation of data, it involves interpretation of the meaning and significance of what is described. Thus description is often combined with comparison and contrast involving measurement, classification, interpretation and evaluation (Gay, 2003).

3.1 The participants

The participants of the study are the third -year students who study English as a main subject besides other courses at the university of Zawia, Faculty of Education, Nasir, English Department. The sample investigated in this study is composed of 22 students.

3.2 Instruments

The researcher used a questionnaire which was distributed to the students as a main instrument of data collection. The questionnaire divided into two parts; the first part of the questionnaire contained questions or items focusing on student's background knowledge. The students are asked to answer these questions which, included idiomatic expressions, followed by multiple choice questions. These questions were given in order to know the students' background knowledge of understanding of idiomatic expressions in different

context. The second part of the questionnaire, contained surveys about learning and teaching of idiomatic expressions by their teachers, and to what extent their teachers give the students a lot of activities and intensive practice on idiomatic expressions.

4.Findings

The researcher has come out with the results to which this section is devoted to discuss.

4.1 Students' questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire examined the students' background knowledge of understanding idiomatic expressions in different contexts, by giving them several idiomatic expressions with multiple options.

The results of this part come as follows:

Q1 To let the cat out of the bag.

Table (4.1) (Results of item 1):

Option	Percent	Frequency
a- to reveal the secret of something that was given as a secret and never tell to anyone.	23%	5
b- to kill the cat	31.5 %	7
c-to keep the cat in the bag.	45 .5%	10
Total	100.0	22

In this question as shown in the above table, seventeen students out of 22 got the incorrect answer whereas only five got the right. This means that 95% failed to choose the correct answer.

Q2 It is raining cats and dogs.

Table (4.2) (Results of item 2).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a-it is raining very little.	54.5%	12
b-it sounds loudly like barking dogs.	36.5 %	8
c- It is raining heavily.	9 .5%	2

Total	100.0	22

In this item, the majority of the students answered wrongly; only two students out of twenty-two won the right answer. This concluded that

98% of the students failed in getting the correct answer.

Q3 Call it a day.

Table (4.3) (Results of item 3).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a-to stop working on something.	50%	11
b- to work hard.	27.5 %	6
c-working with friend.	22 .5%	5
Total	100.0	22

in this option, eleven of the students selected the correct answer, whereas the others got the wrong answer. This means that the results is equal in the percentage that is 50%.

Q :4 I answered all the questions of the final English exam, it was a piece of cake.

Table (4.4) (Results of item 4).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a-it is difficult.	45.5%	10
b- it is wrong.	31.5 %	7
c-it is very easy.	22 .5%	5
Total	100.0	22

The majority of the students could not answer this item, only five students out of twenty-two obtained the correct answer, they claimed that they know the meaning because they met it before.

Q :5 Do not cry over spilt milk.

Table (4.5) (Results of item 5).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a-don't make noise.	9.5%	2
b-don't feel sorry about what has happened as it cannot be fixed.	45.5 %	10

c-don't drink milk.	50%	11
Total	100.0	22

in this question, 45.5 % of total the students have got the right answer, this may show that some students have been learnt idioms before, but the majority of the students were not exposed to learning or encountering idiomatic expressions.

Q:6 Joe went banana yesterday.

Table (4.6) (Results of item 6).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a-ate banana.	22.5%	5
b- went mad.	18 %	4
c-took the banana.	59.5%	13
Total	100.0	22

In this item, only four students out of twenty-two have got the correct answer. That is 18%. Whereas the others failed to get the correct answer.

Q :7 A bird in hand is better than two in the bush.

Table (4.7) (Results of item 7).

Option	Percent	Frequency
a- I caught a bird in hand.	41. %	9
b-an opportunity in hand, currently is better than a prospect in the future.	31.5 %	7
c- A bird in hand cannot fly to the bush.	27.5%	6
Total	100.0	22

In this item, the majority of the students got the incorrect answer, whereas only seven students succeeded to answer.

The second part of the questionnaire contained a survey that was in a form of open ended questions toward learning and teaching idiomatic expressions and, to what extent their teachers pay more attention and giving a lot of practice in learning and teaching them idioms.

Q: 1-How often do your teachers use idioms in the class?

The majority of students answered that; they did not understand idiomatic expressions because their teachers do not give them idioms with practical activities. They also pretended that they could not understand the figurative meaning of the idioms because they were not exposed to a lot of them with more practice.

2-Why cannot you understand the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions?

Most of the students claimed that they were not familiar with this type of vocabulary. They also said that the majority of the teachers focusing on teaching grammar rather than teaching idioms as skills.

3- What do you think of idiomatic expressions?

All of the students commented that idiomatic expressions are difficult and need a lot of lessons and more practice to understand and use.

4.2 Discussion

This paper investigated the difficulties encountered by the students in understanding and using English idiomatic expressions.

Based on the students' results in this study, all of the findings came in favor of the study's objectives and questions which are mentioned before, that the students encountered difficulties in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English, whether to figure out their meaning or use them or guess their figurative meaning, and the nature of complexity of idiomatic expressions made the students lost the meaning and felt confused.

The results also assured that the majority of the students are confronted by these obstacles, due to the lack of practice in the classroom. On the other hand, the majority of teachers focus on teaching grammar rather than teaching and practicing others language skills, such as: reading, writing, speaking and so on.

5. Conclusion

This study concerned with the problems encountered by the students in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English.

The study used the descriptive method that consisted of a questionnaire which, contained two main parts in investigating the main problems faced by the students in understanding and using idiomatic expressions in English.

The findings of the study revealed that the students faced obstacles in using idiomatic expressions. It was also found that the majority of teachers do not give adequate and intensive practice in enhancing their teaching and learning of idioms which based on the students' results and survey.

The study also proved that the nature of complexity of the idiomatic expressions confused the students to guess their figurative meaning in different contexts. This can be stated that many related studies found that facts about the nature of complexity of idiomatic expressions.

Besides that, the researcher through his experience in teaching English language to the students observed and encountered with these problems while teaching students idiomatic expressions in English.

5. Recommendations

The researcher recommends that:

1.Encouraging the students to use idiomatic expressions with their figurative meaning and do a lot of practice so as to help them communicate effectively in English.

2. Idiomatic expressions should be learned and taught through the strong contexts to become easy for students to guess their figurative meaning, because of their complexity and polysemous.

3-Encouraging teachers of English to give the students a lot of lessons, with intensive activities and practice in idioms, and enhancing the other language skills which consolidate communication skills much better, of the students.

References

1.Allen, W. (2003). Developing intercultural competence in the language classroom. Culture as the core. Perspective on culture in the second language learning,237-270.Longman.

2. Bacham, L. F. (1990). Fundamental considerations in language testing. Oxford University Press.

3.Cooper,T. C. (1999).Processing of idioms by L2 learners of English. TESOL Quarterly, 33(2),233-262. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587719.

4.Creswell   John.(2012).Educational Research: planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research .Published by Pearson Education, Inc.

5. Crystal, D. (1991). A dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (3rd ed.). Oxford. Blackwell Press.

6. Dixon, R,(1994).Essential idioms in English .New Jersey :Prentice Hall Regents.

7. Gay, L., and Airasian, P. (2003) Educational Research: Competences for Analysis and Applications.7th ed. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.

8. Ghazala, H. (2006) Translation as Problems and Solutions .7th ed. Beirut :Dar Maktabat Al-Hilal.

9. Irujo, S. (1986). A piece of cake: Learning and teaching idioms. ELT Journal, 23, 236-237. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/40.3.236.

10. Mezmaz,M.(2009).Problems of idioms in Translation. Algeria : Mentouri University Constantine.

11. Nasser, M. (2019). Cultural Difficulties of English Idioms Confronting Foreign Learners. Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 19:2 February 2019.

12. Nippold, M., & Taylor, C. (1995). Idiom understanding in youth: Further examination of familiarity and transparency. Journal of Speech and Hearing Research, 38, 426-433. https://doi.org/10.1044/jshr.3802.426.

13- Noor, H.(2020) . An Investigation of Some Difficulties in Idioms Encountered by Saudi Learners of English. Taibah University.

14. Nunan, D. (1992). Research methods in language learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

15. Pimenova, N. (2011). Idioms comprehension strategies used by English and Russian language learners in a think-aloud study. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University.

16- Praninskas,J.(1975). Rabid Review of English Grammar. Chicago: Prentice Hall.

17- Renata, D.(2021). Challenges and Strategies in Understanding English Idioms. This is an open access article distributed under the CC BY-NC 4.0 license - http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. 2.

18. Ruhl,C.E .(1989).On metonymy. Buffalo: Sunny Press.
19. Swinney ,D.A. & Culter, A .(1979).The access and processing of idiomatic expressions. Journal of verbal learning and verbal behavior   ,18(5)   ,523-534.https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(79)90284-6.
18. Thawabteh, M. (2011). Linguistic, cultural, and technical problems in English-Arabic subtitling. Journal of Translation and Interpretation, 5(1), 24-44.