INNOVATIVE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS FOR EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: Idioms are an important part of acquiring a language and often indicate proficient learner. English idioms are a part of the cultural elements of the language which should be mastered by EFL learners. By developing a clear understanding of figurative language, such as idiomatic expressions, students can further comprehend texts that contain metaphorical and lexical meanings beyond the basic word level. However, learners with cultural literacy and language weakness are often challenged by idioms. There are several different ways to improve learners' idiom comprehension. The present article investigates what types of innovative teaching approaches and methods can be used when teaching idiomatic expressions to learners of English. It suggests that idioms need to be learned so increasing the learners' awareness of these unique words and phrases can help them learn to identify and interpret them with greater success.

Key words: *idiomatic expressions, teaching, EFL learners.*

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration demand teachers to increase learner effectiveness and efficiency as well as learner engagement and satisfaction (Kim, 2011). Consequently, they must create a stimulating and effective learning environment which brings about more positive student attitudes toward learning.

This kind of innovative teaching becomes necessity when teaching English idiomatic expressions. Idiomatic expressions are phrases that carry different meanings than the literal definition of their component words. Therefore, there are some problems in both processes of understanding and translating them. Understanding idiomatic expressions is considered to be problematic for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner. Idioms are often unpredictable in meaning, that is, their meanings cannot always be derived from the literal meanings of the constituent parts (Strakšiene, 2009). Many idiomatic phrases appear to be decomposable or analyzable, with the meanings of their parts contributing independently to their overall figurative meaning. Quite possibly,

EFL learners are unfamiliar with both the words in the expression and the expression itself. Usually, they first analyze the literal level. For instance, "It's raining cats and dogs," means it is raining extensively, but they usually get the meaning of "dogs and felines are falling from the sky". Another example is the idiom "He kicked the bucket" meaning that someone has died, but they would picture a man literally kicking a bucket down a road.

In addition, even though idioms are considered to be one of the "hardest and most interesting parts of the English vocabulary" they can be culturally-restricted (Strakšiene, 2009) meaning that it can be "valid only within a particular culture" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 2002)*.Culture plays an important role in the course of the idiom interpretation. It, therefore, requires enhancing cross-cultural awareness and needs open – minded understanding of the culture of the second language from different aspects. (Al-Shawi & Mahadi, 2012). Each language has its own idiomatic expressions, although they can vary across borders. In America, when one is accused of being crazy, he is referred to as "off the wall" or "over the deep end." In the United Kingdom, he may be "sixpence short of a shilling," "mad as a bag of ferrets" or "mad as a box of frogs." Differences in idiomatic expressions within a single language can lead to confusion and misunderstanding (Shapely, n.d.). Fei (2005) has suggested that "when understanding metaphors in cross-cultural communication, people tend to transplant their own cognitive mode of a metaphor into another, which becomes the main reason of the misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication." Furthermore, the scarcity of teaching materials and the lack of a clear methodology make idioms a stumbling block for EFL students. This leads the teaching and learning of idioms to be a hard task (Rohani & Ketabi, 2012; Saleh &Zakaria, 2013).

However, learning idiomatic expressions in English may bring about some benefits for EFL learners. Firstly, learning the idiomatic expressions of another language will be a guide to understanding the humor and character of that culture as idioms constitute an important cultural element of the language. Secondly, it helps them grasp the peculiarities of the English language (Shapely, n.d.).

Traditional methods of teaching idioms focus on rote learning and memorization. They are time- and effort-consuming, as learners picked up idioms discretely without associations between forms and meanings (Chen & Lei, 2013).

There has been the need of a flexible and dynamic approach towards the teaching of English idioms. This paper therefore attempts to provide a strategy for the teaching and learning of idioms in the EFL classroom which, in turn, build up their metaphoric competence, while making the learning experience enjoyable. It may offer some useful guidelines to teachers of English on improvement of their methodological strategies used for teaching idiomatic expressions.

WHAT IS AN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION?

The word 'idiom' is a Greek term meaning 'own or 'peculiar.' An idiom is a figurative expression that can usually be interpreted literally but that takes a non-literal meaning when used in a specific context (Rohani & Ketabi, 2012). Idioms are pervasive in the English language. They are used in formal style and in slang. Idioms may appear in poetry, literature, in Shakespeare language and, even, in

Bible. Idiom is "a number of words which, taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone."(McMordiew, 1983: 4). An idiomatic expression "let the cat out of the bag", for instance, 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, i.e. "reveal a secret".

There are three sub-classes of idioms according to Fernando (1996: 35) cited in Strakšiene (2009) and Shojaei (2012):

1. Pure idioms: a type of conventionalized, non literal multiword expression, fully opaque, e.g. "kick the bucket"
2. Semi-idioms: having one or more literal constituents and one with non-literal sub sense, partly opaque.
3. Literal idioms: invariable and allowing little variation, transparent or can be interpreted on the basis of their parts.

More specifically, idioms can be broken down into several categories (Badger, n.d.):

1. Simile idioms
These idiomatic expressions compare one object or action to another using the words "like" or "as." For example, the expression "like two peas in a pod" describes how two things are similar or close in nature, by comparing them to peas which grow together in a pod. "Light as a feather" and "busy as a bee" are two other examples of simile-based idiomatic expressions.

2. Phrasal verbs idioms
These idiomatic expressions function as verbs. They usually contain one or more individual verbs and prepositions that, when used together in a sentence, act as a single verb. For example, the phrasal verb "to get away with" is used to mean "avoid punishment" as in the sentence, "She will get away with stealing that car."

3. Metaphorical idioms
The metaphorical idiom is a phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is inferred to another, making an implicit comparison (Tang, 2007).It compares two situations, objects or actions. However, idioms based on metaphors do not use the words "like" or "as" to connect the two ideas. For example, a "carrot and stick method," is used to mean a method of coercion. It compares the situation at hand to the practice of luring stubborn horse or mule by dangling a carrot in front of him and prodding with a stick behind.

4. Aphorisms
Aphorisms are idiomatic expressions intended to convey wisdom or morals. They are also colloquially called "sayings," widely read books, famous speeches or other texts. They contain profound philosophical truths in short, easy-to-remember sentences, for example:

- *Youth is a blunder; Manhood a struggle; Old age regret*. [Benjamin Disraeli]

- *Life's <u>Tragedy</u> is that we get old too soon and wise too late*. [Benjamin Franklin]
- *Yesterday is but today's memory, and tomorrow is today's dream*. [Khalil Gibran]

5. Cultural and Historical Idioms

These idiomatic expressions deal with landmark events and important historical figures. They are therefore particular to certain cultures. For example, in the United States, "John Hancock" means to provide a signature. This expression references one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, John Hancock, whose signature is one of the largest and most distinct on the document. Another example is "Honest Abe." This idiom alludes to the fabled honesty of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States.

TEACHING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS WITH INNOVATIONS

Traditionally, the teaching of idiomatic expressions has fallen into neglect and been conducted by presenting idiomatic expressions in isolation, as though they were an obscurity of language. More recent materials illustrate "figurative usages with cartoons, group them under topics (e.g. weather, food, colors, etc), list them in vocabulary sections, accompany them with their literal paraphrase or insert them in random sentences as to provide contextual clues for their interpretation. Whichever the case, nevertheless, students are not provided with the necessary tools to come to terms with figurative usages, but rather "they come to think of English idioms as though they were the anomalous creations of a whimsical people" (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009).

Rodriguez and Moreno (2009) further stated that the traditional teaching of idioms constituted rote learning and memorization. In this kind of teaching, even though the students memorize chunks of language and practice them frequently, the students will forget them immediately. The memorization of figurative expressions which at first sight present a clear mismatch between form and meaning creates a heavy learning burden on the student, which usually leads to a lack of motivation and failure in comprehension, retention, and production of idioms. In this regard, the role of the teacher in reducing the learning burden of the students is essential. Instead of fostering learning idioms by heart, the teacher should draw attention to systematic patterns which underlie such expressions.

Adequate knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in an EFL setting is an important indicator of communicative competence of English. The comprehension and productions of idioms is included in the figurative competence which includes a set of abilities, such as the skill to decode the various (dominant, peripheral, polysemous) meanings of a word, the ability to suspend a literal-referential strategy, to produce novel figurative expressions and to construct a coherent semantic representation related to a given figurative expression (Andreou & Galantomos, 2008).

Thus, to create a meaningful environment for EFL learners to use idioms, the present paper suggests some innovative teaching strategies in which the

learners learn idioms for purposes and then use the idioms in meaningful contexts. They are presented as follows:

Using idioms in essay writing

One of the ways to present idiomatic expressions in EFL contexts is by integrating it into the teaching of essay writing as suggested by Chen and Lai (2013). They integrated the teaching of metaphorical idioms into the teaching of narrative and descriptive essay writing as illustrated below:

1. The teacher asked the students to write a three- to four-paragraph essay describing an experience of being extremely angry.
2. After submitting the first draft, the students were introduced to the concept of metaphors.
3. Two-page handouts were distributed in class as the teaching materials. The content was a few idioms as examples.
4. To illustrate the concept of metaphor, a short article about issues of emotion controls was given on the first page of the handout; the students were asked to read over the article and to circle the idiomatic expressions used in it. Figure 1 is the sample handout.

Metaphor—Make Language Lively
Read the following article. Identify and circle metaphors used in it (including words, phrases & idioms).

Managing the Emotions

People manage their emotions in different ways, depending on their personality and the culture they live in. In western culture, for instance, crying is usually seen as a sign of weakness, especially for men. Research has shown, however, that crying it out makes people feel better. So perhaps we should encourage our children to wear their hearts on their sleeves more often. It has become a widely accepted idea that, instead of bottling up the emotions, one should ventilate one's emotions once in a while. One should blow off steam in order to avoid sudden explosions.

However, one emotion may prove to be an exception: anger. In fact, ventilating anger is one of the worst ways to cool down: outbursts of rage typically pump up the arousal, leaving people feeling *angrier*, not *less*. When people blow up at the person who has provoked their anger, their rage not only peaks during the outbursts, but the angry mood is also prolonged. After reaching their boiling point, these people keep fuming much longer.

A far more effective way of managing anger is to simmer down first, and then, in a more constructive manner, confront the person to settle a dispute. Imagine that someone pushes you aside in a crowd. Your first thought may be "How rude!" That reflex may then be followed by more negative thoughts: "He could have hurt me! I can't let him get away with that." Then, if someone else behind you bump into you because you have slowed down, you are apt to erupt in rage at that person too. Now imagine a more positive line of thought toward the man who pushed you aside: "Maybe he had a good reason, such as an emergency." Your may be cool down by thinking like this, and could dismiss the anger with a laugh.

Figure 1. The sample handout 1 (Chen & Lai, 2013)

5. The teacher then led the students to think about general metaphoric themes of the idiomatic expressions, and to draw linking diagrams for expressions which belonged to the same metaphoric themes. In the meantime, the teacher

explained to the students that the linking diagrams were the logical mappings for the metaphors (i.e., metaphoric mappings).

6. The teacher then directed the students to complete the exercise on the second page of the handout: to create metaphoric mappings for the idiomatic expressions of anger. Figure 2 is the sample handout.

English has a lot of expressions to describe emotions. Take *anger* for example. Some of these are very common: *she's angry*. *He's mad at you*. To make your language more varied, other expressions can be used to specify the kind of anger. Following are 15 expressions. Think about the corresponding characteristics and relationships between *anger* and comparable concepts, and briefly write down these relationships.	
Anger is fire.	
If you add fuel to the fire, the fire will rise up and become stronger ➔ *add fuel to the fire = make angry person much angrier!*	~~What he said added fuel to the fire.~~ He made *an inflammatory remark*. He was *hot under the collar*. She was *breathing fire*. She *exploded*.
Anger is the hot fluid in a container	
	She is *all steamed up*. I am *boiling with anger*. She *flipped her lid*. She *blew up at me*. *Simmer down*.
Angry people are dangerous animals.	
	He has *a ferocious temper*. He *unleashed his anger*. Don't *snap at me*. Don't *bite my heat off*. He was *breathing fire*

Figure 2. The sample handout 2 (Chen & Lai, 2013)

7. The handouts were collected back to the teacher after the students completed the exercise.
8. In the end of the class, the students were told to revise their first draft at home, and were encouraged to integrate as many idiomatic expressions as possible. They submitted both the original and the revised essays a week later. The essays were then analyzed by the teacher to investigate how the students used idiomatic expressions.

Creating conversation using idioms

In this teaching strategy, not only the students understand the idioms; they also learn how to use them contextually. As most idioms belong to simple categories, e.g. idioms with time, animals, parts of body, etc. the teacher can ask the students to have some categories and find some sample idioms under the chosen categories. Then, they use them in simple conversations where the meanings of the idioms are clearly understood. Here are the strategies:

1. To introduce the idiom *to give someone a hard time*, for example, the teacher may present a conversation such as this one:

    Juan: Hey Sarah, you look sad. What's up?
    Sarah: Well, I didn't play very well today during volleyball practice and my teammates were not very understanding. They said I was clumsy and had to focus more on the game. They said a 5-year old girl played better than me.
    Juan: Oh! I'm so sorry they gave you such a hard time.

2. After introducing this conversation, the teacher can ask the students to guess or figure out the meaning of the idiom. They may correct as necessary and ask them to provide other examples of what it means to give someone a hard time. Then, they can move on to another conversation for another idiom.
3. This practice may continue by having the students write conversations with the given idioms. Firstly, the teacher can divide the class into pairs. Each pair of students gets one or two idioms to work with. They must write a conversation and use this idiom in it. The teacher may walk around the classroom to assist students and check for accuracy.
4. The students may act out the conversations they have written. In this instance, each pair stands before their classmates and acts out the conversation they have written. This way they not only practice using the idiom phrases, they hear other examples from classmates, other ways in which these idioms may be included in conversation (Pesce, n.d.).

Using real life or authentic materials

Basically, anything can be used as authentic material. The sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are infinite (Berardo, 2006). By using authentic materials, a teacher can exemplify how idioms are used in the media, in newspaper and magazine articles, and in songs, cartoons, videos, advertisements, etc. It is, in particular, concerned with the use of authentic texts. In this activity, by using newspaper, for instance, students do not need to read the entire article, just the headline and the basics. The important thing is that the students can understand how this idiom is used in a newspaper headline. The students need to know that there are real people out there who actually speak and say such idioms. Afterwards, they may feel ready to start using some of these themselves (Pesce, n.d).

To use English language newspaper in teaching idiom, a teacher may take the following steps as suggested by Clandfield & Foord (2000).
1. Give each group of four or five students a newspaper and a piece of paper.
2. Tell the students that they have ten minutes to make a quiz based on that section of the newspaper. The quiz deals with the idiomatic expressions the students encounter in the newspaper.
3. In groups, the students write five questions. In the meantime, the teacher may circulate and monitor, check the grammar and spelling in the questions and make sure that questions are not too difficult. Figure 4 is a sample question.

Look at the following idioms. What do you think they mean? Check with a dictionary.

1. to face music
2. to bite the bullet
3. to take the gloves off
4. to call the shots
5. to make a killing

Figure 3. A sample question

4. When the groups are finished, they pass the paper and the questions to another group. In this instance the teacher may set a time limit for new groups to do the quiz. They may repeat the process if they have time. Afterwards, they may do feedback and check the answers to the quizzes.

This activity is good to practice the reading skill of scanning for information as well as dictionary use.

Another authentic material that may be used in this instance is the Internet since it large amounts of varied material being easily accessible. The Internet contains teaching materials which make it possible to teach every language skill. In addition, it is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as being interactive (Berardo, 2006). There is a wide range of websites available for teaching idioms such as discussions, definitions, divisions of idioms into categories, dramatization, drawing, storytelling, games, audio and video activities etc.

One of the examples of teaching idioms using the internet is suggested by Henry (http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/figurative-language-teaching-idioms-254.html?tab=4) as follow:

1. The teacher asks the students to go online and type this address http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/idioms/ on their browser. They are then directed to *Eye on Idioms* site and click Start Here button, and do the exercises in completing the provided sentences by choosing the correct idiom from the list. After that, the students are asked to identify the metaphorical meaning of the idioms, use them in a sentence to indicate their understanding of each meaning, and print their works because the application does not provide save button.
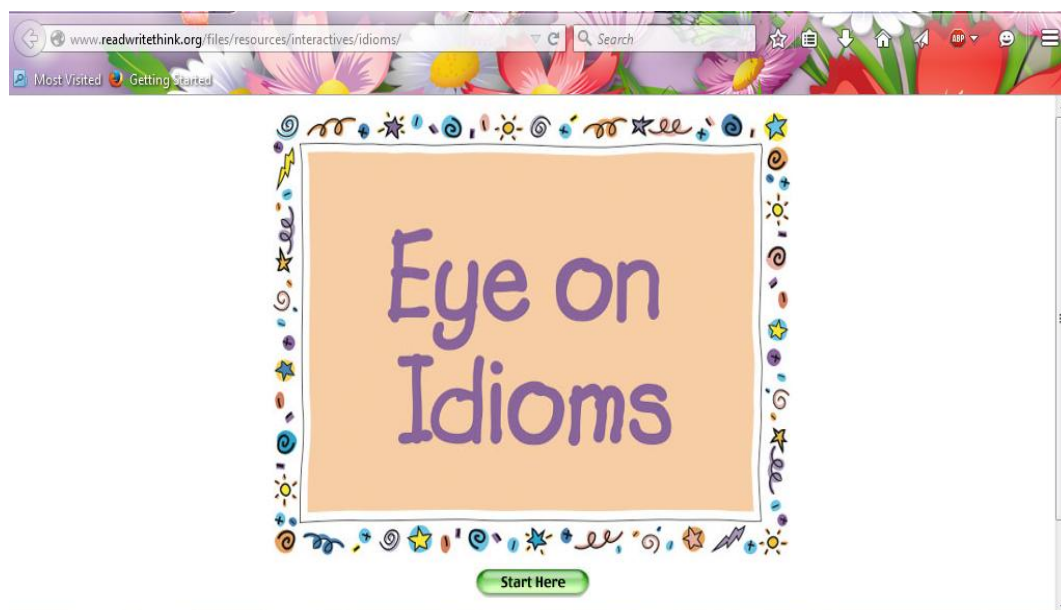
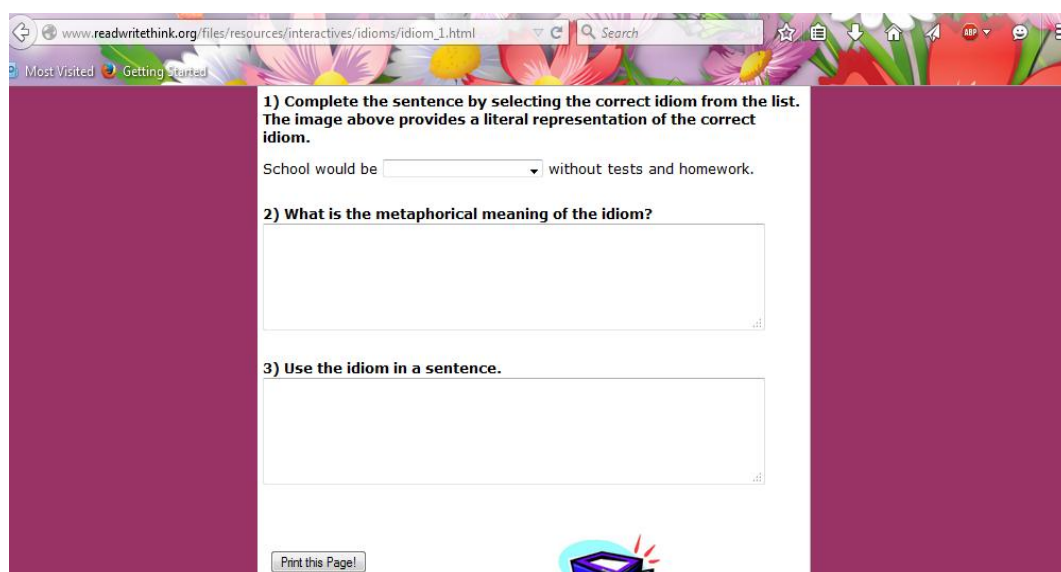Figure 4. The display of *Eye on Idioms* home site

Figure 5. A sample of the exercise on *Eye on Idioms* site

2. After completing the online activity, the students are asked to research the origins of each idiom and type a short passage to explain how the origins of the phrase relate to its metaphorical meaning. They may also write about their personal experiences with each idiom and how those experiences help them to determine its metaphorical meaning.
3. As a final project, it is suggested that students compile their printed idioms and typed passages and bind them together to make an idiom book which can be used as a reference for their own reading and writing in the future.

Using exercises of problem solving

The students also need to be provided with exercises of problem solving to help them understand the hidden meaning of the idiomatic expressions. Besides, this strategy allows the students to use their cognitive abilities to relate and compare the meaning of those expressions with their own native language and culture. As suggested by Lennon (1998) in Rohani and Ketabi (2012), comparing differences between the metaphors in the target language and the students' native language are effective in learning idiomatic expressions. Moreover, she believed that "the 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."

Below is an example of problem solving exercise that may be used in the teaching of idioms as suggested by Lennon (1998) in Figure 7.

Try to work out the meaning of these idioms. Do you have idioms in your language which have the same meaning as some of these?
1) To be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth
2) To kick the bucket
3) To have a bone to pick with someone

Figure 6. A sample problem solving exercise

Making idiom posters

Concrete, student-made tools, such as idiom posters may be used to develop the students' idiomatic competence (Tompkins, 2001). These posters illustrate literal and figurative meanings of idioms as part of the instructional process for teaching figurative language.

The sample idiom posters are presented in Figure 8 below.

Figure 7. A sample idiom poster

(http://headoverheelsforteaching.blogspot.com/2012/07/idiom-posters.html)

These *posters* are colorful and self-explanatory. They show idioms, their definitions or meanings used in a sentence, along with a picture of what they actually mean. They help the students recall idioms.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, idioms, indeed, constitute a notoriously difficult area of foreign language learning and teaching because, by definition, idioms are conventionalized expressions whose overall meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of their constituent parts. Moreover, they are culturally-determined. However, objects which are more common to people's lives are often included into metaphorical expressions. Understanding idioms are often problematic for EFL learners.

To teach idiomatic expressions with innovations, a teacher may apply the following strategies: (1) using idioms in essay writing, (2) creating conversations using idioms, (3) using authentic materials, (4) using exercises of problem solving, and (5) making idiom posters. These are useful ways to teach and review idioms.

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