
TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS IS A DIFFICULT TASK FOR EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract : Idiomatic expressions are particularly significant when it comes to learning a certain language. Specifically, English language is rich in idioms and covers almost 25 thousand idiomatic expressions. Considering that there are so many English idioms, teachers cannot avoid teaching language skills without involving idiomatic expressions during the teaching and learning process. Since idioms make the language sound more vivid and colorful, the students will not gain the necessary language fluency if they lack idiomatic knowledge while conversing and sharing ideas, thoughts, and experiences with other students in the classroom or in everyday conversations. Also, idiomatic expressions reveal so many cultural, historical and psychological aspects of a certain nation that imposes an obligation and requires from teachers to pay more attention on teaching idioms among their students and expose idiomatic exercises and activities as much as possible during classroom classes. This approach will help the process and make it easier for the students to understand and use English idioms. Even though idioms appear to be an important aspect of the language, still teachers find it difficult to teach them in practice. In general, EFL teachers consider idioms to be complicated as language units and they represent obstacles such as; hard to understand and use; unpredictable meaning; teachers have no background knowledge about themes and stories behind idioms and they ignore teaching them in order to simplify the process of learning English language. Thus, this study investigates why EFL teachers avoid teaching English idioms to Albanian students at high school level in Gostivar and Tetovo, Macedonia. As a result, this study will suggest several methods on how teachers can overcome these obstacles and build the necessary teaching confidence. Finally, teachers should master several methods in teaching and learning idioms to Albanian students and improve their language proficiency.

Keywords: Idioms, EFL Teachers, Albanian students, teaching methods

INTRODUCTION

It is generally known that learning idioms has always been an obstacle for foreign students. On the other hand, teaching idioms also presents a difficult task for EFL teachers while teaching English language as a foreign language. Learning and teaching idioms has become an important issue as far as English proficiency is concerned and requires different study approach. Even though, learning idioms is not easy to master and use them in practice for EFL students, there is still a need to address them when it comes to learning a language. “Learners’ language skills will increase rapidly if learner can understand and use them confidently and correctly. Idioms are a colorful and fascinating aspect of English; they are commonly used in all types of languages, informal and formal, spoken and written” (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2010 : vi). In addition, EFL teachers and students cannot neglect idioms that effortlessly because they are found in everyday speech, texts, novels, media, and other areas of life. According to Fernando (1996), “no translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity if a natural use of the target language is an aim” (p.234). Furthermore, idioms reflect upon a certain culture so, it is necessary to understand their meaning and be able to adjust them according to the context. In order to do so, we need to understand how EFL students and teachers perceive idioms and why they refuse to learn them during the learning and teaching process. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the teachers’ perspective on why teaching idioms appear to be difficult among EFL students while learning English language as a foreign language.

However, before we discuss the teachers’ perspective on teaching English idioms, it is crucial to explain and define idioms. Moreover, idioms are basically multiword units with fixed forms that transmit specific and figurative meaning for communicative purposes. Also, idioms have complicated grammatical structures; don’t require literal translation and are widely considered as nonliteral expressions. Actually, an idiom is “a group of two or more words which are chosen together in order to produce a specific meaning or effect in speech or writing” Sinclair (1991:172). Furthermore, Baker (1992:63) claims: “idioms are fixed expressions which allow little or no variation in form. She explains some actions which cannot be done by idiomatic expressions: change the order of word in it, delete a word from it, add a word to it, replace a word with another, and change its grammatical structure “. Considering the above definitions, it is apparent that there are several aspects that characterize idioms and add to the thought of idioms being complex to learn and teach in EFL environment. In this regard, one aspect is that “idioms do not say what they mean” (Irujo, 1986b:326) and for EFL students is difficult to reveal the proper message behind a particular idiom.

On the other hand, most of the idioms are based in the culture of the target language. Jiang (2000) declares: “language is the mirror of culture, in the sense that people can see a culture through its language” (p. 328). This correlation between idioms and culture represent an obstacle for the EFL teachers. Essentially, these teachers do not have enough background knowledge considering the culture of the target language which complicates even more their approach towards teaching idioms among EFL students. In other words, they lack enough cultural information regarding each and every idiom and this situation prevents them from teaching idioms during the learning process.

METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct this study, there were surveyed ten nonnative English speaking teachers; all females because commonly English teachers at high school level in Gostivar and Tetovo are female teachers. Concretely, the participants in this study were chosen randomly from three high schools in Gostivar such as; Public High School; Economic High School and Medical High School and two high schools in Tetovo such as; Medical High School “-Nikolla Shtejn” and Public High School - “Kiril Pejčinović”. In addition, the study investigated 2 teachers from each school in Gostivar and Tetovo, which means 10 English teachers in total. Even though, 10 teachers might not be a reliable number to generalize and come up with valid conclusions still, considering that each teacher covers around 60 students, it helps us to understand the general learning state of almost 600 students who have or have not been exposed to idioms during the school year.

After being permitted to conduct the survey, all the teachers were contacted, asked and instructed on how to participate and answer the concrete questions of the survey. They were additionally provided with explanations and necessary information if needed.

The survey had six open ended questions. Specifically, the actual questions asked teachers to reflect upon their perspectives regarding English idioms and the role they play in teaching EFL. Correspondingly, the participants were requested to reveal their viewpoints about idioms and list the reasons that describe why idioms are difficult to understand and master while learning and teaching English language as a foreign language. The model of the survey used in this study is equally based on the survey written by Risq (2015:57) which is used in his paper titled; Teaching English Idioms to L2 Students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the following table 1, it is obvious that the first three questions of the survey address the first research question that reveals how teachers perceive the process of teaching idioms. Next, the fourth question answers the second research question that exposes how language relates to culture. The final question addresses the third research question which states how often idioms are taught during the teaching and learning process. However, the table below demonstrates the teachers’ responses and their perspective on relevance and difficulty of teaching and learning idioms, and relationship between language and culture. Since there were only 10 participants in the study, it is evident that each individual presents 10 % out of 100 % .

Table 1
Results of the research

Q	Survey questions	Yes	No
1	Do you believe that idioms play an important role in teaching and learning English? What do you think makes idioms important?	90%	10%
2	Do you think idioms are difficult to learn? What do you think the reasons are for the difficulties in learning idioms?	100%	
3	From your teaching experience, do you support the concept of having classes that teach English idioms to foreign language learners and why?	30 %	70%
4	Do you think there is a relationship between idioms and culture? What kind of the relationship do they have?	80 %	20%

5	Have you ever had a situation that your students were confused because you mentioned an idiom?	90 %	10%
6	How often do you use idioms in your classes? Always (0 %) – Rare (100 %)		

As far as the first question is concerned, 90 % of the participants approved that learning idioms is a significant lexicological factor towards mastering English language. Whereas, 10 % of the participants believe that students can learn a language even if they lack idioms as part of the language vocabulary. So, most of the English teachers agree that idioms bring colorful and vivid nuances to the language and since they are present in every written and spoken form of the language, it's not appropriate to neglect them while exchanging thought and experiences on daily basis or during the learning process.

With regard to the second question, all of the teachers claimed that learning and teaching idioms is a difficult task and requires special efforts to overcome the situation present in these schools. Particularly, they were able to mention several reasons that reveal directly why teachers and students find it difficult to understand and use idioms. Some of the reasons are as it follows; teachers not being familiar with the structure of idioms; teachers also feel like they don't have enough background information considering the meaning of idioms; difficult to memorize them; not being able to use and adjust them in a proper context.

Considering the third question, 30 % of the participants support the idea of having classes that teach mainly English idioms whereas 70 % of the participants believe that there should be separate classes that teach idioms in a manner that covers exclusively idioms; their understanding and usage. The reason behind this attitude is that idioms are common and present in every aspect of the language and having a huge role in the overall picture of it, we cannot exclude them while learning English language as a foreign language.

Regarding the fourth question, 80 % of the teachers believe that there is connection between idioms and culture whereas 20 % of the teachers doubt that there is connection between them. Those who recognize the relationship between idioms and culture declare that idioms reflect culture and culture has a huge influence on the meaning and translation of the idioms.

However, the following two questions present teachers' perspective on how students perceive and use idioms during the teaching and learning process in Gostivar and Tetovo, Macedonia.

The fifth question shows that 90 % of the teachers consider that students find idioms difficult and this situation creates learning confusion among them. In other words, teaching or using idioms during the leaning process, creates further misunderstandings and enables a puzzling atmosphere with a little chance of further language improvement. Only 10 % of the teachers believe that introducing idioms in the classroom is not perplexing for the high school students if they know or study the culture of the target language.

Finally, the sixth question reveals that all the teachers rarely introduce idioms in front of the high school students. On the other hand, we do not have teachers that never introduce idioms among their students; so there is an introduction of several idioms among nonnative speakers of English.

CONCLUSION

With regard to the results of the survey, most of the teachers believe that idioms are an important part of the language and they should be highly considered when teaching a language to foreign students. Even though, they are significant and make language sound more vivid but still, they are difficult to understand and use when it comes to the teaching and learning process. Actually, all of the teachers that participated in the survey find idioms to be exceptionally difficult and complex for the EFL students. Some of the reasons that make the process even more complicated are as it follows; most of the teachers lack background cultural knowledge about idioms; they have poor idiom vocabulary which lowers their self-confidence in terms of handling idioms in front of the students; they lack teaching methods in terms of introducing and practicing idioms openly and clearly among the high school students. In order for the teachers to overcome this difficult teaching situation, Irujo suggests several methods on how to approach and handle idioms during the teaching process. Specifically, she provides them with activities that encourage teachers to consider other teaching strategies while introducing idioms to the students. Some of these activities include topics such as; teaching comprehension, comparing literal and figurative meanings, teaching production and integrating idioms into the programme (Irujo, 1984:239-240). In view of the first method, Irujo

provides us with the following activity which requires the students to “write a paragraph containing an idiom in a logical context, but omit the idiom. Ask students to complete the paragraph with a word or short phrase which fits the context. When this has been done correctly (i.e. the word or phrase is a paraphrase of the idiom you omitted), tell them what the idiom is, and show them how they have already inferred its meaning from the context” (Irujo, 1984: 239). So, teachers can use this activity among their students and provide them with a learning opportunity that activates their sense of guessing unknown idioms from the context and be able to figure out their meaning without having previous knowledge on idioms. “The activities described by Irujo can be adapted for any level, and have been used successfully in high-school ESL and foreign language classes” (Irujo, 1984:241).

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