TEACHING IDIOMS AND SET EXPRESSIONS FOR ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract: No doubt, idioms are an important part of language and culture around the world. Idioms cause difficulties for English as Second Language (ESL) learners because their meanings are unpredictable. Nonnative speakers can find themselves in "hot water" for example when encountered with idioms. This study will discuss some prospective ways of teaching idioms for ESL students and will analyze effectiveness for learners.

Keywords: institutionalized multiword construction, sub-classes, phrasal verbs idioms, noun, context, spoken form

Introduction

From another dimension, the difficulty of idioms probably stems from the fact that idioms are deeply rooted in the culture of the target language. There are morals, themes, and stories behind idioms and L2 learners do not have a chance to learn and read about them. Words constitute the genesis of all languages, and learning any language either the first or the any subsequent one is deemed pointless without learning words. Moreover, the coining of new words never stops, nor does the acquisition of words. This process is evident even in our first language; we are continually learning new words and adding new meanings to the old ones we already know. However, there are some word categories like idioms, collocations, proverbs and fixed expressions, which are neglected by language teachers. Idioms, collocations and proverbs are word expressions that have specific meaning (i.e cultural specific) and choice of words. Much of this lexis consists of sequences of words that have a strong tendency to occur together in discourse, including a wide

and motley range of expressions such as phrasal verbs, compounds, idioms, and collocations referred to collectively as multiword lexical items, prefabricated units, prefabs, phraseological units, fixed phrases, formulaic sequences, etc.

The term idiom is defined as an institutionalized multiword construction; the meaning of this cannot be fully deduced from the meaning of its constituent words, and which may be regarded as a self-contained lexical item (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1989).

The origin of idiom as stated in different sources is as follows.

1) Many idioms are formed from work and technology, a large number of idioms come from a time when far more people worked on the land, there are many idioms which refer to farm animals, for example, the black sheep of the family, take the bull by the horns, don't count your chickens, etc.

2) Some idioms are formed from rural life, transport, for example, strike while the iron is hot, put somebody through the mill, eat like a horse, put the cart before the horse, etc.

3) Many idioms came into existence from science and technology, for example, she has a short fuse, we are on the same wavelength, I need to recharge my batteries.

4) Every year many idioms enter into the English language from the world of sports and entertainment, for example, have a good innings, dice with death, behind the scenes, play the second fiddle, etc.

5) Many idioms have entered English from literature and history, for example, sour grapes, the goose that laid the golden eggs, the streets are paved with gold, etc.

6) Idioms came from the Bible, Shakespeare's works, for example, the salt of the earth, fall by the way side, your pound of flesh, ships that pass in the night, etc.

7) There are a large number of idioms in which a part of the body represents particular quality or ability, for example, use your head, the idea never entered my

head, she broke his heart, he opened his heart, I speak from the bottom of my heart, the news finally reached her ears, keep your mouth shut.

8) Many idioms come from feelings and emotions, for example, give him a black look, lose your bearings, in seventh heaven, in high spirits, it was love at first sight, come out of your shell.

Literature review

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).

Understanding idiomatic expressions is considered 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.

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.

Discussion

Colorful language and powerful imagery make idioms a lot of fun for ESL learners. When you throw cats and dogs in a scene where they are falling from the sky, it's hard to know exactly what a phrase might mean. It's almost like a code-breaking game, where students must learn that when certain words come together in a phrase, they can mean something very different.

It's important to not only teach the meaning of idioms, but to also teach how to use them correctly and effectively. When a non-native speaker uses an idiom correctly, he or she will sound very fluent. But, on the other hand, if they bumble the phrase, they will sound the exact opposite.

There are certain nouns and verbs that are used in a number of idioms and expressions; these idioms are said to collocate with a specific word such as "put" in "put a fork in it" or "all" in "all in a day's work." These general nouns are used repeatedly in English, and in the idioms are used to represent a commonality shared between multiple subjects. Like, around, come, put, get, work, all, and as [blank] as are all commonly used words associated with idioms, though the full list is fairly extensive.

Similarly, action verbs are also often used in idiomatic expressions wherein the verb carries with it a certain universality to the action — such as walking, running or existing. The most common verb that's used in American idioms are forms of the verb "to be."

Many idioms have unusual grammar. In some cases a word that is usually a verb, adjective, conjunction or preposition appears as a noun:

a) Adjectives as nouns, for example, all of a sudden, through thick and thin,

b) Verbs as nouns, for example, the do's and don'ts, on the make

c) Conjunctions and prepositions as nouns, for example, ifs and buts, on the up and up, the ins and outs,

d) Uncountable nouns seeming to be countable, for example, the living daylights and in all weathers. (Stathi, 2006)

No doubt, ESL learners encounter difficulties during the acquisition of the English language. Understanding idioms is one of these difficulties. According to

Cooper (2012), ESL learners would encounter idioms in all kind of discourse; news, lectures, movies, books and daily conversations. Furthermore, Chuang (2013) denoted in her research study that mastering these multiword units or language chunks is not easy for language learners since the meanings of these texts cannot be determined through the analysis of their individual word meanings.

There are several ways of teaching idioms to ESL students up today.

1. **Providing idioms in context**, so students can fully understand the meaning. It is important to provide a sample conversation around it. For example, take the following dialogue featuring the idiom "to be a chicken" when at a local amusement park.

2. **Teaching idioms in spoken form**, not written, and explaining to students how they are conversational, rather than formal is more effective. Have students practice the idioms in dialogue to help them understand they are used in spoken colloquial English.

3. **Taking into consideration to explain how the individual words have different meanings** from the whole idiom phrase.

4. **Providing a picture** to explain the context. This works best if we show an image that humorously illustrates the literal meaning of the idiom. It will make students laugh, but also help them understand or guess what a phrase means. Idioms are full of colorful imagery, perfect for a flashcard or photo.

5. Using small groups to present dialogues

With intermediate ELs in Grades 4–5, students can review basic emotions and feelings needed to complete an activity that demonstrates the literal and figurative meaning of expressions that they come across in literature. Literature about friendship or feelings can also be included in the introduction to this unit as it provides a natural way to talk about the language. Provide a list of the heart idioms to students from the list above. They then brainstorm what each idiom sounds like it means. For example, "to have your heart in your mouth" evokes a picture of someone with a Valentine-type heart in his or her mouth. By giving examples of idioms in a sentence, elicit from students what each of the idioms actually means.

To conclude, 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.

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