

Examining the ability of non-native university teachers of English on teaching idiomatic expressions

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Abstract

This paper studies the ability of non-native university teachers of English on teaching idiomatic expressions, and whether students are positively or negatively affected. It is a general phenomenon in Sudan that, on-native university teachers of English lack the proper knowledge of teaching idiomatic expressions; despite the fact that they are abundantly found in university syllabus. Through the data collected from the method which was an interview carried out with different teachers from a variety of universities, the researcher concluded that, the result of the above mentioned claim was true, the principal objective of this paper is to draw non-native teachers' attention to the importance of teaching idiomatic expressions at university level. Because the significance of this paper emanates from the vital importance of idiomatic expression in English language without which the language becomes vague.

Keywords: teaching idiomatic expressions, non-native university teachers, students

Introduction

The following chapter includes an introduction, general views about the topic, problems with pinning down word meaning, the birth of idioms, the history of idiomaticity, different views on defining idioms, categories of idioms which consist of (transparent idioms, opaque idioms, semantic opacity, compositional fixity, semantic function, partial idioms, Katz and Postal's classification of idioms, lexical idioms, phrase idioms), collocations, idiom lexicons, lexical semantics, importance of idiomatic expressions, idioms and arbitrariness, key characteristics of idioms, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic views on idioms, Swan's point of view on idioms, functional differences between idioms and single words, idioms facilitate communications, idioms contain more meaning, idioms convey speakers and writers commitment and evaluation, grammatical restrictions, the structure of idioms, fixedness of idioms and internal structure, synonymy and idioms, idioms and passivization, in idiomatic structure, idioms in people's life and previous studies.

General views on the topic

One of the purposes of language teaching is to prepare the learner in such a way that, he/she would be able to perform a specific set of rules of a new language and culture. The above view was stated by Wilkins (1978: 80) [20], and (Doughrly *et al*, 2003) who think that mechanism of learning a language might be simple, but the product is a rich and diverse population of hundreds of thousands of lexical items and phrases. The store of familiar collocation of the native language speaker is varied indeed. words and their patterns; variously explains why language learning takes so long, why does it require exposure to authentic sources, and -why there is so much current interest in corpus linguistics in second language acquisition, native like

competence and fluency demand such idiomaticity. Cook (2010: 42) [5] claims that, despite the fact that many learners know the rules of a language, but in fact they don't have the ability to communicate and write successfully in that language. Example, some learners do not respond appropriately to what is said or written in the target language, or he/she may comprehend what is being said or written and what to say or write, but still somehow fails to express oneself, or one may understand the literal meaning of what has been said or written, i.e. the knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary, although they are necessary, but being able to put them into use involves other types of knowledge and abilities as well. The study of cross-cultural communication has often been related to ELT. It highly commended for learners to study the culture of the people who speak and write it.

Gebhard (2006: 63-64) [5, 10], considers the primary goal of communicative class is student's development of communicative competence in; either written or spoken English. Socio-cultural competency is essential, that is, the ability to use English in social contexts in culturally appropriate ways. Language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist. They are a feature of discourse that frustrates any simple logical account of how the meaningful utterances depend on the meanings of their parts and on the syntactic relations among those parts. According to Cacciari (1993: vii) [1, 2] idioms are comprehensible to native speakers or writers, but they are mysterious to those who are acquiring a second language. If someone says Mrs. Thatcher has become the queen of Scotland, a response may be 'that's a tall story!'. Pull the other one!'. As anyone Struggling to learn English will assert that stories cannot be tall. They have no height, and so the expressions violate a restriction on the normal sense of the word. Similarly, to pull something is a physical event.

Certainly, 'tall' has an idiomatic Sense that relates to another idiom, 'to pull someone's leg' which means to joke or tease someone. Foulsham (2007: 5) ^[8] states that English is a flexible language and it is developing all the time. Our communication with others is greatly enriched by the expressions we use, making what we say or write more concise, amusing and interesting. English idioms come from different sources, including the Quran, the Bible, folk tales, town and Country life, other languages, warfare, politics and sport. Being an island, Britain has generated expressions related to a seafaring life abundantly. Vocabulary has been traditionally considered as individual words. But, according to Schmitt and Carter (1993: viii) this view is inadequate because vocabulary includes many units which are larger than individual orthographic words. Examples: a single meaning is attached for such expressions like: 'give up', 'fish shop', 'freeze dry' and 'burn the midnight oil 'the two scholars assure that these multi-word lexical units are common in language use as shown in Corpora. Schmitt and Carter (2000: 1) consider such lexical phrases as 'strings'. They describe these strings of language as sequences of words that are learned and stored as individual wholes, arguing that lexical phrases are necessary for achieving fluency in a language. Schmitt and Carter refer to Pawley and Syder's (2002:2) ^[17] point of view about native speakers of the language and the lexical phrases. They agree with them that lexical phrases are a key element of fluent language production which plays a vital part in vocabulary learning.

The Birth of Idioms

Hockett (1968: 304) ^[13, 14] states that a speaker or a writer may say or write something that he/ she has never said or written and never heard before to listeners to whom the utterance is equally novel, and yet be understood. This is a daily occurrence, and the way in which it came about is basically simple: The new utterance is a nonce-form, built from familiar material by familiar patterns. However, as Hockett explains, the mere occurrence of nonce-form for the first time does not in itself constitute the creation of a new idiom. An additional component is required: something more or less unusual either about the structure of the newly-produced nonce-form, or about the attendant circumstances or both, which makes the form memorable, exposed to such new circumstances, people may produce a phrase or an utterance which is understandable only because those who hear it are also confronted by the new circumstances. Otherwise, an individual may react to conventional circumstances with a bit of speech or writing which is somewhat unusual, only being understood, once again, because of context. Given any such novelty, either expression or circumstances or both, the event gives special meaning on the linguistic form which was used and the latter becomes idiomatic.

Here are two examples

1. A little boy asked his parents 'what's a poy?' This utterance is unusual in its form' the members of the family who overhear him are to remember the event and tell the story to others. They may even use the new form 'poy' in family jargon. Just what the form will mean, will depend on the circumstances in which the boy used it perhaps it will not denote anything but it will certainly have connotations.

Even if the form is not destined to survive for long or to spread very widely, it is nonetheless a new idiom. Probably, this particular coinage has occurred many times, quite independently, in different family circle in the English-speaking world.

2. The second example is an image of a rather different circumstance: Mrs. X comes home with a new blouse, of one of those indeterminate blue-green shades for which many women have a special fancy name, but which they definitely class as a shade of green, not of blue. Mr. X compliments her by saying 'that's a nice shade of blue'. For days thereafter, Mrs. X teases her husband by pointing to any obviously green object and saying 'that's a nice shade of blue, isn't it?' Here, there is nothing usual about the form of the utterance, only about original attendant circumstance, yet the utterance has taken on, at least temporarily, idiomatic value.

The total context, linguistic and nonlinguistic, in which a nonce-form takes on the status of an idiom, is thus the defining Context of the idiom. In the two examples given above, the defining contexts are informal. But formal contexts of various sorts may equally serve well. Hockett (1968: 305) ^[13, 14].

The History of Idiomaticity issues

Kavka and Zybert (2003: 54) ^[15] believes that, the focus on the study of idioms began in recent times only, and in his opinion the study of idioms is necessary, though sometimes ungrammatical and illogic as stated by Cacciari, 1993 vii. But in fact idioms as described by them as 'mental monuments' of history and source of language change. According to Kavka and Zyber, the history of investigation on the study of idioms had been neglected in earlier studies of idiomatology. The problem that is presented by Kavka and Zybert is seemingly the different analogous terms. To explain: which history to be dealt with? Is it the history of idiomatology, idiomaticity, idiomatic or perhaps phraseology?'. All those terms, and may be some others; have been used to refer to the same discipline. Therefore Scholars are expected to define precisely and unambiguously what they mean by the terms they choose when referring to matters they discuss. The example given by Kavka and Zybert (2003: 55) ^[15]; deals with phraseology. They argue that teachers as practitioners may feel fairly satisfied with their pupils keeping by heart lists of phrases. Perhaps they are not aware of the fact that, idiomatic expressions are based on semantic rather than lexical grounds or that the very term phraseology is derived 'from the base-term 'Phrase' which, for modern linguists, has connotations of reference primarily to grammatical structures'. The term idiomaticity and idiomatology can be similar to some other expressions such as phonology, morphology, philology and so on. Therefore, the idiomatology makes it possible to regard the discipline as a truly linguistic one and accordingly to be treated as a field of science which has its objectives and its methods of investigations. As a result; Kavka and Zybert (2011), say that idiomaticity which is morphologically comparable to regularity or priority, refers to a quality derived from an attribution constituting or containing an idiom or idioms. But according to (Kavka, Sand Zybert J (2011: 55) this explanation does not encompass everything that should be included. Certainly idiomaticity refers to quality, but does not necessarily need to imply that the idiomaticity of an

expression depends on its containing of an idiom.

Lexical Semantics

Fromkin *et al*, (2010: 181) argues that the meaning of an expression is not always obvious, even to a native speaker of the language. Meaning may be ambiguous in many ways, but Cascara's (1993: viii) opinion opposes Fromkin saying that idiomatic expressions are clear to native speakers. Fromkin *et al*, (2007: 181) claims that the meaning of a phrase or a sentence is partially a function of the meanings of the words it contains, similarly the meaning of many words is a function of the morphemes that compose it. However, there is a major difference between word meaning and sentence meaning. Fromkin *et al* (2007: 181) believes that the meaning of most words and all morphemes is conventional, that is, speakers of a language implicitly agree on their meaning, and the children acquiring the language must simply learn those meanings directly. Otherwise, the meaning of most sentences must be constructed by the application of semantic rules. Fromkin *et al*, (2007: 181) continues that knowing a language includes knowing the metaphors, simple words, compound words and their meanings. In addition, it means having the knowledge of fixed phrases consisting of more than one word, with meanings that cannot be inferred from the meanings of the individual words.

Idioms and Arbitrariness

Many linguists embraced the concept that idioms are arbitrary, that is, their meaning could not be guessed from the words they consist of. Consequently, in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) when teachers deal with idiomatic expressions, they typically inform their students that learning idioms by heart is the only way to master them. Fortunately, Swan, (1988:244) ^[19] comments that, many idioms can be explained; and therefore can be learned systematically.

According to Knowles (2004) the learning process of idioms ought to be fixed and systematic: the first step is to make the students acquainted with idioms, then comes the second step which is to distinguish them and the final phase is the comprehension of idioms which would consequently lead to mastery and automaticity. But learners used to struggle with the first two phases: acquaintance and distinction, which may result in neglecting or avoiding them. Nippold and Taylor (1995) ^[16] state that, the number of times an idiom is frequently occurs in a language is often defined as familiarity, which is restricted by culture. Familiarity of idioms demands less conceptual analysis; more frequently used idioms may be more significant. Cain *et al*, (2005: 67) ^[33] demonstrates that there are three elements that can make idioms easily understandable: familiarity, transparency and context. They State that idioms that are presented in context are easier to understand than presenting them in isolation, conforming that context might facilitate the interpretation 'of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which the 'reader/listener can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression.

Context is more important for peculiar idioms of which meanings are not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrases. Research show, as Swan (1988) ^[19] states, that when idioms are presented as non-arbitrary features of language, students find them much easier to understand and remember.

Key Characteristics of idioms

According to Cowie (2009: 51) ^[6] idioms originate in Phrase with a literal meaning which have settled firmly into the lexicon through repeated use. Many literal phrases remain in constant usage over a certain period, unchanged in form and meaning, for example, (spread the butter, and peel the potatoes). It is arguable that many of these sets, rather than being made up a fresh on each occasion of use, are simply stored and recalled as wholes. Cowie maintains that these phrases pass on into the next stage of development. They are figuratively extended, in terms of the whole expression, but may or may not also preserve their original literal sense. Phrases that originated in the development of railway network, for example, which are not now idiomatic, are among those which will still be understood in both a literal and figurative sense by native speakers. The following examples show such phrases from that period.

- Go off the rails.
- Run off the rails.
- Reach the end of the line.
- Run into the buffers/ hit the buffers.

In my point of view many idioms came to existence as a result of some special occasions; then due to constant circulation they acquired idiomatic meaning. Example: in our community in Sudan; people have coined new expressions such as [cut your face] 'iqtaa washak'= 'get lost'; which has become an ordinary expression of everyday language.

Swan's point of view on idioms

Swan, (1997 3d: 244) ^[19] States that idiomatic expressions are common in English whether Formal or informal, spoken or written. Havrila (2009: 3-8) mentions that idiomatic expressions forms a significant part of everyday English. Even today people use expressions of which original sense is far apart from their present communicative function, such as 'spill the beans' which is used to express the idea of revealing a secret ; and 'kicked the bucket' when they mean die. Miko (1989) assumes that idiomatic expressions can help learners to grasp the gist of what is said or written in a more refined communicative manner.

Functional differences between idioms and single words

The functions of idioms differ from single words semantically and structurally.

Idioms Facilitate Communication

Idiomatic expressions or any other type of prefabricated speech or writing structures enable the speakers or writers to fix their attention to larger content units of the spoken or written discourse. If speakers or writers were supposed to focus on individual words as the are pronounced or written one by one, then the desired idiomatic fluency of a native-like speech or writing would die out. According to Havrila (2009) ^[11, 12] idioms facilitate communication. One of the principle goals of using formulaic and idiomatic language is to 'facilitate communication in the sense that idiomatic and formulaic language the based on holistic processing of phenomena came to be the preferred strategy for coping with a wide range of troubles that could arise in the course of language communication. Where interaction fluency of processing complex utterances might be in danger, formulaic language is drawn upon to meet the

communicational shortfall. It is simply in natural human tendency to economize the effort of communication about recurred human affairs through generation of stereotyped formulae and so avoid processing overload.

The study will adopt the following methods

The descriptive and analytic approaches have been adopted for collecting the relevant data for the study.

An interview has been used as a tool for data collection.

The sample consisted of five university lecturers from different universities in Sudan.

Aims and scope of the study

A major concern of this study is to examine the reasons behind the tendency of university teachers of English to avoid and neglect English idioms in their teaching, and to propose solutions to the problem.

This paper aims at finding out the roots of the above mentioned problem, and to answer the question; why University teachers of English language avoid teaching idioms.

The researcher hopes to come up with reasonable solutions that might help teachers to teach idiomatic expressions.

The Result

Table 2: Many of the non-native teachers lack knowledge and ability of teaching idiomatic expressions.

Value	Mean	Std. Deviation	T test	Df.	Sig.	Scale
Pre	48.0	22.6	1.333	1	0.41	Insignificant
Post	36.0	9.8				

(Table.2) illustrates the views of the value of t-test (1.333) significantly value (0.41) which is greater than the probability value (0.05) this means that many of the non-native teachers lack knowledge and ability of teaching idiomatic expressions. One of the reasons of the weak results of the pre-test is that, teachers themselves lack the required knowledge to teach idiomatic expressions. Teachers ought to have familiarized students with the minimum knowledge of idiomatic expressions; because they are an integrated part of English language; it cannot be imagined that, one writes or speaks English without having the least knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Thus the hypothesis has been proved right according to the weak results of the pre-test.

Findings of the Study

1. Idiomatic expressions actually comprise part of university syllabus i.e. as in literature, but it has always been ignored and not taught.
2. A considerable number of university teachers lack proper knowledge of idiomatic expressions, and that is obvious from the results of the interview.
3. Moreover, the results show that effective teaching of idiomatic expressions would certainly improve students' written and spoken capability. It is known among scholars that the absence of formulaic language may be what marks out competent language learners as non-native. Smith and Carter (2000:1) consider idioms as key-elements of fluent and articulate language production whose role in vocabulary learning is considerable.

Recommendations

Students liked idiomatic expressions and their associated

task because it gives them a chance to decorate their style in written and spoken English, students can find much of the idiomatic expression in their syllabuses, the problem that students usually face; is their inability to recognize idiomatic expression by themselves. Therefore the researcher recommends the followings:-

1. Teachers of English should be encouraged to include such items of language as a part of teaching and learning process.
2. Although teaching idioms is not an easy task, but students need to be familiarized with them.
3. Syllabus must contain a considerable portion of formulaic language.
4. It is also highly recommended to use effective methods while teaching idiomatic expressions as: using stories, teaching idioms in context using rich illustrations such as pictures and diagrams.

Suggestions for further studies

This study is about using idiomatic expressions to enhance EFL written and spoken English. It focused on a particular area in the field of developing writing and speaking skills by the use of idiomatic expressions. This makes it possible to suggest other areas in the same field for other researchers to study or research about. These include areas like:

1. The effectiveness of using collocation to improve writing and speaking skills.
2. Using opaque idioms extracted from literature to enhance writing skills.

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