Learning Academic Idioms
Some Useful Techniques for Beginner Learners

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Abstract

The learning and teaching of idioms has been neglected by both the learners and teachers at the rural as well as urban ESL environment. Hence, the second langauge learners seem to lack the knowledge of idioms. This results in their poor competence of English idioms. This lack of knowledge of English idioms further results in learners' lack of comprehension and in improper use of these idioms even at learners' intermediate and graduate levels.

The learners come from poor educational backgrounds and therefore face academic challenges from their elementary studies right up to their higher education. Having acquired only basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1984) and a limited amount of proficiency in language skills, at college or university level, these learners struggle to cope with academic demands. They are severely lacking in advanced linguistic skills (knowledge of idioms or word combinations) that constitute cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Such a lack adversely affects their academic achievement.

Hence, the present paper offers ESL beginner learners of English some useful idiom learning techniques such as: learning idioms through mnemonics, learning idioms through conversations, and learning idioms through idiom-display on notice boards.

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions create a significant portion of our everyday communication. Therefore, understanding idioms is one of the advanced and fundamental aspects of vocabulary/word knowledge (Nation, 1990). Since, the language at higher level is mostly operated on idiom choice principle, the knowledge of idioms in learning a new language is essential for second language learners as they go up higher levels of learning.

The idiom principle postulates that the word choices or combinations are not random and language users also have available to them "a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments" (Sinclair, 1987, p. 320). This principle involves the appropriate use of idioms which are metaphoric in meaning and not literal. Thus, we can say that 'idiom principle' relies on multi-word syntagmatic chunks which may be the underlying principle of language production (Lennon, 1998).

Inevitable Use of Idioms in English

The use of idioms has become so common in English that it can be difficult to speak or write without using them (Seidl and McMordie, 1978). Learning of idioms must be considered an integral part of language learning because they frequently occur in academic context.

Start Teaching Idioms from the Beginner's Level

Therefore, research suggests that (Irujo, 1993) teaching of idioms should not be put off until students reach advanced levels. Idioms can be taught to learners under vocabulary activities of the course textbook by including them in dialogues and stories which are created to supplement regular materials (Nation, 2001).

The learners who come from mother tongue medium background lack knowledge of idioms in L2. This lack of understanding of idioms thwarts not only learners' communicative competence, but also adversely affects their academic growth. Hence, they need to be taught frequently occurring idioms in the academic context in order to promote their vocabulary and higher level skills in language.

Formulaic Sequences which Include Idioms

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), are of the opinion that Formulaic Sequences (FSs) (i.e. idioms, formulas, prefabricated patterns, etc.) are frequently found in language use and they make up a large proportion of any discourse. Erman and Warren (2000) calculated that FSs of various types constituted 58.6% of the spoken English discourse they analyzed and 52.3% of the written discourse. According to Foster's (2001) rating scale 32.3% of the unplanned native speech was made up of formulaic language.

If FSs are so widespread in English discourse, it would imply that proficient speakers must have a knowledge and mastery of these sequences at some level. Thus, it is quite clear that fixed expressions, including idioms, form a major chunk of any language. This supports the view that language consists of not only individual words – open choice principle – as most of us think, but also chunks/fixed expressions – idiom principle.

Idioms in Natural Communication

Liontas (2002) found that idioms form a large part of natural communication and therefore knowledge of idiomatic expressions leads to increased conversational fluency. In a nutshell, idiomaticity would allow learners to produce English more confidently and 'with less effort' (Sinclair, 1987). From these arguments above, it becomes clear that idioms are quite important in the context of second language learning and teaching.

Academic Idioms and L2 Learners' Communicative Competence

It is a common knowledge that idioms are pervasive in everyday communication. Such frequency of occurrence of idioms implies that a sound knowledge of idioms is inevitable for language proficiency and higher levels of fluency as well. The same view was expressed by Ellis (1997) and Yorio (1989) when they say that adequate knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in L2 is an important indicator of L2 communicative competence.

The emphasis on communicative competence and the social role of language has in recent years led to a concern with linguistic appropriateness rather than accuracy. To elaborate, communicative competence is the ability to interact appropriately with others by knowing what to say, to whom, when, where, and how (Hymes, 1972). Emphasizing the importance of exposure to idiomatic expressions, Yorio (1989) argues that the use of idiomaticity in communication indicates second language proficiency. In other words, a person's language proficiency level can be assessed based on his/her good grasp of idioms. Research (Weinert, 1995; Wray, 1999, 2002; Schmitt, 2004; cited in Liu, 2008) shows that there is a consensus of opinion among language learning theorists and practicing language teachers that the number of idioms acquired is positively correlated with the degree of success on communicative tasks, suggesting a close connection between idiom acquisition and communicative ability.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the ability of the learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning of what has been said. The communicative competence of a learner is measured in terms of fluency, comprehensibility, effort and amount of communication in unrehearsed communicative tasks (Byram, 2004). This implies that learners need higher order language skills to acquire figurative competence in order to perform in communicative contexts. Thus, emerges the notion *figurative competence* is introduced (Levorato and Cacciari, 1992) to account for the production and comprehension of idioms. Figurative competence 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, it is obvious that learners' ability to produce idioms in L2 can be correlated with their development in cognitive and general linguistic skills in L2 (Caccari & Levorato, 1989). Hence, this figurative competence in L2 correlates, to a degree, with learners' proficiency in the target language because the ability to adequately use idiomatic expressions constitutes a substantial part of "communicative competence" within a sociolinguistic interpretation (Hymes, 1968; cited in Coulmas, 1979).

Such knowledge bridges the gap between learners' available functional literacy in L2 and the required figurative competence needed at higher level of academic performance.

Pre-constructed Phrases

It is clear that idioms are an important class of pre-constructed phrases and many of them have a very high-frequency of use. Knowledge of academic idioms is the immdediate requirement of the learners to function well in the academic contetx and it enhances learners' cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Academic idioms are those which frequently occur in an academic context (http://www.idiomconnection.com/mostfrequent.html). They help learners sound fluent in their academic speech. Academic idioms are commonly formed with a particular set of verbs, which have very broad meanings (e.g. get, have, make, take, etc). Some of the useful techniques for learning academic idioms have been discussed below.

1. Learning through Mnemonics

Memory techniques which are often called mnemonics are regarded as cognitive strategies. The beginner learners could rely on the useful memory strategies such as memorization, the keyword method, and idiom notebooks to learn English idioms. These are discussed below.

a) Memorization

Memorization is a very common technique used by all learners. Memorization requires repeated learning and it is one of the techniques used for learning idioms. This technique could be used in contexts where:

- idioms which cannot be easily linked through association,
- many idioms have to be learned in a limited amount of time,
- information had to be recalled quickly, and
- when idioms represented abstract concepts or were difficult to visualize as mental images.

Memorization as a technique strengthens learners' idiom learning through association i.e. remembering links from one meaning to the other. This strategy helps learners to remember not just one idiom, but a group of other related words. Given below is a sample task to help learners memorize meanings of idioms.

Task:
> *Memorize as many idioms as you can from the list given below.*

Idiom	Synonym	Antonym
All of a sudden	Suddenly (adj)	Gradually (adj)
Come up	Happen (verb)	Postpone (verb)
Break up	Divide(verb)	Unite (verb)
For good	Permanently (adj)	Temporarily (adj)
Go on	Continue (verb)	Stop (verb)
Of course	Certainly (adj)	Possibly (adj)

In the list above learners are provided with additional support that aids their comprehension and recall in the sense that they could easily access meaning of a given idiom with either a synonym or an antonym. Idioms that consisted of similar parts of speech (i.e. infinitive verb + infinitive verb; noun + noun; adjective + adjective; etc) could be provided for quick comprehension.

b) The Keyword Method

The keyword method is another technique which could be used to learn the meanings of idioms. This technique could help learners build word associations which in turn facilitate retention of the meanings of idioms. This could also help learners build new and typical connections between idioms and their meanings and between meanings and the context in which they occurred. In the table below notice how the verb 'go' (keyword) conveys different meanings when combined with different prepositions.

Table No. 1
The Keyword Method

Idiom	Meaning	Example
go in for	buy	Suchi wanted to go in for a new car.
go about	do something	I don't know how to go about planning my trip.
go off	start working	If you touch it, the alarm will go off before time.
go on	continue	Once the music started, it would go on for hours.
go through	suffer	Rajesh had to go through a very hard time.
go above	difficult	What the speaker said went above my head.
go up	increase	Prices are sure to go up after the budget.
go for	win	The car has gone for the singer.

Task:

Match the beginning of each sentence in column A with the most appropriate ending in column B.

A	B
Kiran and Mary are very good children. They always look	after his younger brother.
The students are very much looking	for my gloves.
When Lakshmi was away for work, Ravi looked	into the disturbance caused by a few gangsters.
I look	forward to an excursion.
The police looked	in on my grandparents every weekend.
Since yesterday I have been looking	up to their mother.

Here learners have to understand the keyword in order to match the two parts of the sentence correctly. Tasks such as these would strengthen learners' knowledge of word association which they have learned in the previous task.

c) Using Idiom Notebook

Learners could maintain idiom notebooks in which they write idiom definitions, example sentences and other information so that they could consult them whenever required. They could frequently use idiom notebooks learn idioms by themselves. Learners should take some personal interest to maintan idiom notebooks for this purpose. The table below presents a sample page in the idiom notebook.

Table No. 2
A Sample Entry in the Idiom Notebook

Idiom	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning	Grammar
come about	come for sth	to happen	verb
break up	to break sth	to separate/fail	verb/noun
look out	to look outside	to be careful/vigilant	verb
hold on	to hold sth	to wait	verb
kind of	to be kind/type of	somewhat	adjective
in place	in a place	ready/perfect	preposition
for good	goodness sake	forever	adverb

Learners may take interest in the activity to collect idioms which they find interesting and difficult. As part of regular classroom activity, learners could share idioms by writing them on the backboard which they have recently collected. Thus, there could emerge a pool of idioms which could later be organized with the help of the teacher in categories of theme, grammatical structure, grammatical form and keyword, etc.

2. Learning Idioms through Conversations

Another important technique for learning idioms is through conversations. Learners may expose themselves or take part in informal conversations. Learners, as part of the listening calssroom activity, could also listen to conversations played from podcasts. Learners could be encouraged to role play the conversations which in turn enabled them to initiate short conversations among themselves on similar lines. Further, teachers could provide learners with transcripts of short conversations whcih consists of considerable number of idioms. Here, learners could read the conversations and understand the idioms that they find in these conversations. Let us look at an example conversation below.

(Context: *Two friends meet in a park and talk about their past experience*).

A: Didn't you once go sailing? On a holiday or something?
B: Oh, yes!
A: Tell me about it please.
B: I'll never forget the time I first went, actually. Um … I set off from the shore to get to the boat in little hurry …
A: Yes.
B: … with an engine. And that was fine, I was moving along and about halfway there I suddenly noticed water was coming in at the bottom.
A: Oh, what did you do?
B: Hm … I looked around to see if there was a bucket – I could chuck it over the side – and all there was in fact was a sort of shovel thing. So …
A: Oh, what hap … what happened next?
B: Well, I started shoveling water out and … um … oh yes, the … the next thing that happened was that the engine stopped, so there …
A: Uh! How did you feel about that?
B: Oh, terrible! And I'd never been sailing before …
A: Yes.
B: I couldn't even swim, actually. I didn't know what to do … as far as I remember, I started shouting and whistling and nobody took any notice.
A: How did you manage to reach the shore, then?
B: Well, I used my hands and with much difficult I could reach the shore.

The tasks such as the above could motivate learners to do short conversations. Learners could be given the above task in pairs and could be encouraged to come up with such short and real conversations. Learners could be provided sample conversation tasks to read and understand idioms in them. After learners have completed reading it, they could be asked questions such as: *Did you understand these idioms? Is this a friendly conversation? What do the idioms mean?* Learners could be asked to read the conversation again for better understanding idioms. Later, learners should be given an opportunity to use the same or similar idioms in the conversations both in their literal and figurative meanings.

3. Learning Idioms through Idiom-Display on Notice Boards

Idiom display on notice board is a technique which the teacher could inculcate in the learners as the habit of idiom identification and to ensure a sense of learning and responsibility among the learners. Learners may be encouraged to post idioms on the classroom notice board twice a week. Learners may be suggested to collect idioms from course books and newspapers, and to create colourful posters of idioms with their meanings and example sentences.

Such posters on display would be appreciated by their teachers as well as many other learners. Gradually, such an activity would develop into a friendly competition among the learners.

Learners might preserve these posters by pasting them on the classroom walls which would serve as means of exposure to all the learners as they got to see them daily in the classroom which in turn would facilitate long term retention.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some useful techniques for learning most frequently occurring English idioms from the beginner learners' point of view. It has also highlighted the point that acquisition of receptive as well as productive knowledge of these idioms is possible through incidental learning. The techniques discussed in the paper, if practiced well, would enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge thereby preparing them to face the linguistic and cognitive challenges posed by the difficult and unfamiliar idioms in the academic context. However, learners should prioritize learning the aspects of idiom knowledge which are necessary to meet their immediate academic needs.

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