

The Effect of Idiom Instruction on EFL Teenage Learners' Retention of Idioms

Bakhriddinova Umida

Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Student of group 2303 of the Faculty of Foreign Language and Literature

Abstract. The present study investigated the effect of idiom instruction on EFL teenage learners' retention of idiom knowledge. The focused techniques used in the intervention were contextual clues, L1-L2 idiom comparison and pictures. Thirty common English idioms were introduced to 37 pre-intermediate Vietnamese students in a private language center in the Mekong delta. During the experiment, idiom tests, IKT and VKSIT, were employed to gauge the effect of instruction on the learners' knowledge. The intervention was controlled carefully for each single technique so that the effects of each technique could be seen clearly. Along with classroom observations for tracking objectives and procedures of instruction, face-to-face interviews were employed for gaining the insights into the learners' attitudes towards learning idioms. The findings showed that all of the participants' posttest results in both IKT and VKSIT were much higher than their pretest results. These results suggested the positive effect of idiom instruction on learners' retention. Moreover, the interviews showed that the use of pictures was the most preferred learning technique of the three. These findings added pedagogical values of these techniques in teaching idioms. Suggestions were made to enhance learner attitudes towards idiom learning..

Key words: *EFL, idiom instruction, using pictures, contextual clues, L1 L2 comparison.*

Introduction

Idioms constitute an important part in understanding the implicit meanings of writers or speakers. They are part of English proficiency that speakers demonstrate in their communication. The ability to understand "a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms" is described as one of the proficiency features (Council of Europe, 2012, p. 66). It also represents a criterion of lexical resource (British Council, 2012, p.1). In Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), especially in such books on training English proficiency (e.g., TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, among others), it is easy for English learners to encounter a number of common English idioms. Although idiomatic expressions appear in all of discourse forms, it seems that second language learners find it challenging to function effectively without the knowledge of idioms. Therefore, learning English idioms is essential for learners to cope with these challenges. Knowing fixed expressions is crucial and indispensable because individuals who can use idioms correctly are regarded as more competent language users (Boers et al., 2006). According to Celce-Murcia (2008), the ability to use idioms, knowledge of idioms, may precede the ability to understand speech by fluent speakers, and therefore, constitutes part of the communicative competence model. However, previous studies in English as foreign language (EFL) settings (Asl, 2013; Khan & Daşkin, 2014; Tarcaoanu, 2012; Tran, 2012; Vasiljevic, 2011; Wray, 2000) have shown that idioms may seldom be

applied. Numerous teachers may ignore teaching idioms (Tran, 2012), probably because of its inherent complexity as well as their lack of interest in this area. This may lead to English learners encountering problems in responding to idioms. According to Cakir (2011), it is concluded that the more language teachers use idioms in classroom activities, the better students achieve idiomatic knowledge. Despite significant previous studies on effective approaches to idiom instruction and learning (Cooper, 1999; Lennon, 1998; Levorato, Nesi, & Cacciari, 2004; Prodromou, 2003; Zyzik, 2011), research on the EFL learners in Asia generally, and Vietnam specifically, is limited. This study was conducted at a private language center in the Mekong Delta, aiming to examine the effect of idiom instruction by focusing on three different techniques on EFL teenage learners' retention of idiom knowledge. More precisely, this study applied contextual clues in the first stage, L1-L2 idiom comparison in the second stage and pictures in the third one for a single group of participants. The study also aimed to gauge the learners' attitudes towards idiom instruction.

Literature Review

Idiom Instruction Idiom instruction involves far more than teaching students how to look up idioms in a dictionary and use the idioms in sentences. According to Michael Graves (2000), since an idiom is a kind of vocabulary, four components of an effective idiom-focused vocabulary program should be: (1) Wide or extensive reading to expand idiom knowledge; (2) Instruction in specific idioms to enhance comprehension of texts containing those idioms; (3) Instruction in idiom-learning strategies; (4) Idiom consciousness raising and idiom-play activities to motivate and enhance learning. As part of vocabulary instruction, several idiom instruction approaches, methods as well as techniques are recommended and employed. An Idiom-Focused Lexical Approach is believed to make a great contribution to idiom instruction. According to Debabi and Guerroudj (2018), the lexical approach is a method of teaching foreign languages which emphasizes the ability to understand and produce lexical chunks. With the lexical approach, students are expected to perceive the meaningful set of uses of words as well as idioms at their disposal. Specifically, Lewis (1997) proposed the following six techniques for teaching vocabulary, including: 1. Intensive and extensive input sources in the target language, 2. First and second language comparisons and translation-carried out chunk-for-chunk, 3. Repetition and recycling of activities, 4. Guessing the meaning of idioms from the context, 5. Noticing and recording language patterns, and 6. Using with dictionaries and other reference tools. A number of studies (Boers, et al., 2006; Rahimi et al., 2012; Abdellah, 2015; Saygili, et al., 2016; Debabi & Guerroudj, 2018; Yasin, 2019) have provided evidence on the effect of the Lexical Approach to enhancing students' both receptive and productive skills of English language. Some have focused on lexical chunks and collocations, which are close to idioms (Boers, et al., 2006; Abdellah, 2015; Saygili, et al., 2016; Debabi & Guerroudj, 2018). Thus, more attention should be drawn to research on teaching idiomatic knowledge, especially in EFL settings. Within the scope of the study, idiom focused lexical approach is regarded as an umbrella term. Like vocabulary, an idiom is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to idioms and intentionally through explicit instruction in specific idioms and idiom-learning strategies.

Intentional Idiom Instruction According to the National Reading Panel (2000), explicit instruction of vocabulary is considered greatly effective. To develop vocabulary knowledge intentionally, students should be explicitly taught both specific idioms and idiom-learning strategies. To deepen students' knowledge of idiom meanings, specific idiom instruction should be robust. Seeing idioms in rich contexts provided by authentic texts, rather than in isolated idioms drills, produces robust idiom learning (National Reading Panel, 2000). Such instruction

often does not begin with the meanings, for the ability to give a definition is often the result of knowing what the idiom means. Rich and robust idiom instruction goes beyond definitional knowledge to engage students actively in using and thinking about idiom meanings and in creating relationships among words or linking with the text. Idiom-learning strategies include dictionary use, compare to L1, and contextual analysis. Dictionary use supports students about multiple word meanings, as well as the importance of choosing the plausible definition to fit into the particular context. Comparing to L1 may be of great help for students to link to idioms in their L1. Besides, contextual analysis, inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom by scrutinizing the text surrounding it, is concerned a helpful strategy. Basically, instruction by contextual analysis involves guiding learners to employ both strategic and specific types of context clues.

Research Methodology The study attempts to gauge the effect of idiom instruction on EFL teenage learners' idiom knowledge retention. Also, the research aims to gain insights into learners' attitudes towards idiom instruction. Research questions include: • Does idiom instruction have any effects on EFL teenage learners' retention of idiom retention? • What are the learners' attitudes towards idiom instruction?

3.1 Participants The participants involved 37 teenage students from the age of 13 to 16, including 19 males and 18 females, at a private language center in the Mekong Delta. These participants had experienced at least 7 years of learning English by the time the data was collected. Based on the results of placement tests before being assigned to the same English classes, they were judged to be at the same pre-intermediate level of English. Also, their results from previous courses were taken into consideration since most of them had at least two years studying at this international English center and got familiar with having two teachers, one Vietnamese and one native speaker teacher. These students studied at two different shifts, but were at the same level with the same teacher, program and textbooks. Those two classes started at the same week and lasted for 12 weeks, 2 days (4 hours) per week. At the beginning, the total number was 39 students, but data of two of them were removed at the end due to their regular absence.

3.2 Research Design The design used in this research was single-subject experimental design and made use of features of an explanatory mixed research methods. The quasi-experimental design was chosen to find out the answer for the first research question. For the second research question, the qualitative method, specifically interviews and observations, was employed. The use of mixed methods was appropriate since the research mainly relied on the learners' performances on the idiom tests and during the experiment through observation notes, as well as the interviews to analyze the students' attitudes. Considering the purpose of the study, no traditional technique and no control group were applied, the use of qualitative approach as interviews and observation notes was enormously helpful to gain insight into learners' attitudes regarding idiom teaching.

3.3 Instruments Three instruments utilized in the study were idiom tests, interviews, and observation.

3.3.1 Idiom Tests In this research, two different idiom knowledge tests were applied for different purposes, including IKT and VKSIT. A. Idiom Knowledge Test (IKT) Since the results from Vo & Nguyen (2020) showed EFL teenage students' limited knowledge of common used idioms, an idiom knowledge test was designed relatively with 35 idioms selected from Vo & Nguyen (2020). This IKT was applied as the Pretest to the participants to assess their knowledge of 35 idioms. This was to ensure no prior knowledge affected the experiment result. Also, in order to minimize the difference of parts of the whole test, one type of questioning- fill in the blanks- was employed. This design was based previous studies and references of works from famous experts in TESOL/TEFL field (Nation, 1990; Milton. 2009). In detail, this study focused on measuring idiom knowledge, so the techniques used in the idiom

test adapted from Nation (2001), Milton (2009), McGavian (2009), Fotovatnia & Khaki (2012), Tran (2013) and Vo & Nguyen (2020). The pretest included 30 idiom test items related to the three techniques in the experiment, 10 idioms for each technique. All the items were designed to assess three components of idioms: form, meaning and use. In addition, in order to help the students easily deal with the test, clear instruction and an example were given at the beginning of the test. The selected idioms were screened from a prior test of which the participants had no prior knowledge. The IKT posttest (appendix 1) was designed with a similar format. The same items were kept and with 3 sets of 10 items respectively for 3 techniques in the intervention namely contextual clues, L1-L2 comparison, and pictures; however, the order was changed within each set. The length and level in 2 tests, pre and post, were equal to determine the receptive (and controlled-productive) ability, comprehension, and students' retention of idiom knowledge. In addition, the test results were collected, graded, and analyzed with the aid of the SPSS software.

Suggestions and Conclusion The present research, in line with the literature, indicates idiom instruction has positive effects and that students are inspired, interested, satisfied and willing to learn idioms. Using pictures is most favored by learners in shorter term while comparing idioms in L1 and L2, the least favored, was the most valuable in the longer term retention. This suggests the review of the target language lessons, particularly in all features of idiom knowledge should be considered, as supported by Karpicke (2012); Karpicke & Roediger (2007); McDaniel, Howard, & Einstein (2009). Difficulties encountered in learning idioms by learners added several suggestions. First, the issue of EFL context where idioms are rarely taught as well as the lack of English environment caused learners not to acknowledge the role of idiom learning. Also, they found difficulties in getting familiar with the figurative meanings instead of the literal meaning. In order to enhance their awareness and knowledge of idioms, more and more opportunities for English practices and use should be created together with more idiom instruction and practice. Second, teachers should be careful in picture selection to promote learning and avoid looming pictures which may cause confusion and hinder idiom acquisition. Teachers' language choices in instructions, explanations and giving examples would also be greatly essential in promoting learners' understandings of idioms. Both the instructions and choice of idioms should be relevant to with learners' level of proficiency. For pre intermediate teenage learners, idioms contain similar or identical words in both first and second language, which may enhance learners' motivation. It was recommended that a combination of more than one technique in teaching like pictures and games, pictures and songs or contextual clues and L1-L2 comparison may intensify the learners' positive attitudes and effects on learning. The research had several limitations. The experiment was conducted in a short term of 12 weeks, and the delayed posttest was not organized to observe the longer retention of idioms. The time of applying each technique was limited, so longer treatments for each method need to be conducted for assurance of effects. Due to the small convenient sampling, the findings could not be generalized; thus, further research should focus on a larger sample and involve other age groups of participants. Despite these admitted limitations, the current research has contributed further understanding of the effect of idiom instruction with a focus on EFL teenage learners with a lower proficiency level. The value of the study is of useful reference to practitioners in other similar contexts.

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