Brief Report

TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IDIOMS IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

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The English language is rich in idiomatic expressions. In fact, "most English speakers utter about . . . 7,000 idioms per week" (Pollio, Barlow, Fine, & Pollio, 1977, p. 140). L2 English learners struggle to comprehend, produce, and retain idioms, which are relevant for every form of discourse ranging from conversations, lectures, and movies to electronic communications and more. Learning idioms not only helps improve L2 English communications skills but also the understanding of the L2 culture and society (Samani & Hashemian, 2012). With New York State's ELL public school enrollment ranging between 6.0% and 9.9% (U.S. Department of Education, 2011–2012), the question of what pedagogy best addresses the learning of this challenging area of language becomes critical. A spectrum of research indicates how L2 learners process idioms differently from other aspects of language and best practices for teaching them. This report reviews research on the learning and teaching of idioms and outlines practical teaching methods that go beyond rote memorization.

Keywords: idioms, L2 English learners, processing idioms, teaching idioms

Idiomatic expressions are pervasive in the English language. Pollio, Barlow, Fine, and Pollio (1977) estimate that in the use of nonliteral language in political debates, psychology texts, novels, and psychotherapy sessions, "most English speakers utter about 10 million novel metaphors per lifetime and 20 million idioms per lifetime. This works out to about 3,000 novel metaphors per week and 7,000 idioms per week" (p. 140). When comprehension, retention, and appropriate production of idioms are considered, L2 English learners are at a disadvantage in comparison to native English speakers. This disadvantage enters every form of discourse: conversations, lectures, movies, radio/television broadcasts, print (newspapers, magazines, and books), and electronic communication (Cooper, 1999). Emphasis in the classroom on learning idioms will help learners improve their L2 English communications skills as well as enhance their knowledge of the L2 culture and society (Samani & Hashemian, 2012), which is critical given the increasing number of ELL students in New York State public school classrooms. In order to identify purposeful and effective research-based teaching practices in this area, empirical findings on how L2 learners process and retain idioms should first be reviewed. This report begins with definitions of idioms in the literature, followed by an overview of the differences in processing idioms between L2 and native speakers of English, concluding with a range of research on how idioms can be learned by L2 students.

Defining Idioms

For the purposes of this report, idioms will be regarded as semi-fixed multiword units (MWUs) that may be non-compositional (Zyzik, 2011). Figuratives and core idioms as explained by Grant and Bauer (2004) are also included.

Although providing examples of English idioms is readily done, it is challenging to define them, especially when a range of interpretations by different linguists is considered (Zyzik, 2011). Often, the

criterion of non-compositionality is invoked (Zyzik, 2011). This criterion posits that if the full meaning cannot be determined by adding up the meaning of the individual elements, it can be considered an idiom as a whole unit.

For example, the expression *kick the bucket* could be referred to as non-compositional—an expression that cannot be decomposed to understand its full meaning, as the words *kick* and *bucket* bear little relation to the concept of dying. In grasping the meaning of *lay down the law,* however, we may apply the meaning of *a set of rules* and *invoking the law*. As a result, the meaning of *lay down the law* becomes clear and we have a completed a decomposition, or compositional analysis. From these two examples, it can be deduced that "decomposability is a gradient concept, with some idioms being classified as more decomposable than others" (p. 414). In other words, idioms are not equally non-compositional or cannot be equally decomposed.

Alternately, idioms might be defined as dead metaphors and therefore obscure in their meaning. *Kick the bucket* is a dead metaphor, as its origin is lost on the majority of people; consequently, its meaning may no longer be directly clear. The phrase is believed to originate from the notion that people hanged themselves by standing on a bucket with a noose around their neck and then kicking the bucket away. Like the degree of decomposability of idioms, however, the level of obscurity of dead metaphors can be argued to be gradient. The idiom or dead metaphor *to drop the ball* can be said to be motivated by the conceptual metaphor *mental control is physical control*, and with this interpretation the meaning of the idiom becomes clear (Zyzik, 2011).

Grant and Bauer (2004) propose more restrictive criteria for defining idioms. They eliminate figuratives from the idiom category, as these can be explained by extending or stretching the meaning of the individual words (p. 51). From their perspective, *hit the nail on the head* would be a figurative expression, the individual components of which can be slightly stretched to facilitate understanding of the entire expression. According to Grant and Bauer, then, core idioms are both non-compositional and non-figurative and will have to be learned/memorized as multi-word lexemes.

Another criterion that can be used to define idioms is lack of grammatical flexibility. *Kicked the bucket,* as in *he/she kicked the bucket,* must always be in that basic form and not *he or she kicked buckets* or *the bucket was kicked by him or her* or *he or she kicked a large bucket*. This criterion, however, does not always apply. *He is a hard nut to crack* or *he is an appallingly hard nut to crack* or *he is a hard nut, as always, to crack* are all grammatically correct variations of the same idiom.

Processing of Idioms by L2 Learners

Research has demonstrated how L2 learners process idioms differently from native speakers of English in reading and listening. Based on her research with Polish learners of English, Cieslicka (2006) claims that L2 learners first go word for word through a literal translation of an idiom before moving on to a non-literal or figurative interpretation. Along similar lines, Abel's (2003) research with German speakers of English finds that, unlike native speakers, L2 students judge most idioms to be decomposable (even if they are not) and complete compositional analyses of idioms, which often lead to figurative interpretations that may be incorrect. This process may be modulated by exposure, however, since in Abel's study—with increased exposure to idioms through the daily reading of English literary texts—the German speakers started to regard idioms as non-decomposable, much like native speakers do.

Other work on the processing of idioms in reading and listening has focused on the speed and use of prosody, or the rhythm, stress, and intonation of the idiomatic language. Conklin and Schmitt (2008), for example, found that so-called "formulaic sequences," or fixed combinations of words, are read more quickly by *both* non-native and native speakers than non-formulaic sequences. This finding, however, seems to appear to conflict with Cieslicka (2006), given that use of literal approaches to understanding idioms by L2 learners would seem to take more time. Vanlancker-Sidtis (2003) investigated whether L2 speakers could distinguish the prosodic differences between idiomatic and literal sentences. She

compared native speakers of American English, native speakers of non-American English (such as dialects from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia), fluent non-native speakers of English, and more advanced students of English as a second language (ESL), and found that the native speaker groups outperformed the fluent nonnatives, while the advanced ESL learners tested poorly. Her study shows that "differences between two kinds of languages, idiomatic and literal, are signaled by quantifiable prosodic cues in English" and that native speakers can differentiate between the two whereas non-native speakers experience more difficulty (Vanlancker-Sidtis, 2003, p. 53).

We can conclude from the this research that processing of idioms by L2 learners is quite different and more arduous than processing by native speakers. When encountering idioms, L2 learners cannot rely on applying the idiomatic language properties of non-compositionality, speed, or prosody.

Teaching of Idioms to L2 Learners

If processing idioms for L2 learners is complex, then selection of instructional techniques becomes more critical. Research on L2 idiom learning and teaching shows several key practices for comprehension, production, and retention.

Apply Trial-and-Error Method

Cooper (1999) subscribes to a heuristic approach to idiom comprehension, with the use of strategies of trial and error to identify their meanings. The participants in his study used three strategies 71% of the time: (a) guessing from context; (b) taking the literal meaning of the idiom to understand the figurative meaning (a point also emphasized by Abel, 2003, and Cieslicka, 2006); and (3) discussing and analyzing the idiom to arrive at the figurative meaning. Five strategies were used the remaining 29% of the time: (a) requesting information; (b) applying background knowledge; (c) referencing an L1 idiom; (d) repeating or paraphrasing an idiom; and (5) using other strategies. Cooper believes that under the guidance of an instructor, L2 learners can rehearse a purposeful heuristic or trial-and-error approach to comprehending idioms, with the idea that the students will eventually be able to navigate this process of interpretation on their own. The following is a literal example from his research of how this method could be used pedagogically.

Stimulus situation: The salesman sold Mrs. Smith a broken dishwasher. He pulled the wool over her eyes. What does *to pull the wool over someone's eyes* mean?

Yoshi: Oh, it's very painful!
Instructor: What do you mean, Yoshi?
Yoshi: Because sometimes I get dust in my eyes, and I have a hard time to get the dust out of my eyes?
Instructor: How does this relate to the expression?
Yoshi: I think it is pretty much a similar situation; so if I pull the wool over the eyes, is my eyes covered?
Instructor: Yes. That's right. How does this relate to Mrs. Smith?
Yoshi: He, the salesman, disguise people.
Instructor: He disguises people.
Yoshi: Yes. Mrs. Smith sees cross-eyed; so we, she can't see good. We are easily cheat, cheated. Mrs. Smith is cheated.
Instructor: Great! So the idiom means to cheat someone?
Yoshi: Yes. I think. (p. 257)

Start with Most Common Idioms

Based on research with Turkish EFL students, Elkilic (2008) argues that idioms can be divided into transparent (high degree of agreement between the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom), opaque/common (often encountered in conversation and authentic texts, but with low or no agreement

between the literal and figurative meaning), and opaque/uncommon. Elkilic asserts that most common idioms should be taught first, whether transparent or opaque. For example, *kill two birds with one stone* and *to rain cats and dogs* can equally be internalized by L2 learners. The meaning of the first one can easily be accessed because of the close relationship between its literal and figurative sense. The meaning of the second one can easily be learned because of its high-frequency use in conversation and texts.

Use Underlying Themes or Origins

Conceptual metaphors. Some research refers to the conceptual metaphors underlying idioms and how these metaphors can help with the comprehension, production, and retention of idioms. Lennon (1998), for example, argued that problem-solving exercises where L2 students learn how to unearth the metaphors in idiomatic language are helpful. Samani and Hashemian (2012) conducted research on the effect of attention to conceptual metaphors on learning idioms by L2 learners majoring in English translation in Iran, and found that metaphoric awareness positively influences the learning of idioms. For example, *to shoot down* an argument or the criticisms *were right on target* match the conceptual metaphor of Argument is War, claiming that ". . . argument is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of war" (p. 251). Examples such as *she is blowing off steam* or *she blew up at me* function similarly from the Anger is Heat metaphor. The authors advocate that L2 lesson materials should cover conceptual metaphors as an applicable and effective method in teaching idioms.

Imagery source domains. Instead of using conceptual metaphors, Boers and Demecheleer (2001) focused on imagery as an underlying theme when interpreting idioms. They exposed 78 French-speaking students at the Universite Libre de Bruxelles in Belgium to 12 English idioms that were tied to the imagery of *hats*, *sleeves*, *ships,* and *food*. These idioms and associated imagery were carefully selected based on the variety/frequency of expressions referring to the four image sources in French and English. For example, English has more idiomatic expressions involving the imagery of *hats* and *ships* (*pass the hat around, sail through something*), French contains more idioms around the source domains of *food,* and the source *sleeves* seems to be equally used in both English and French idioms.

Acknowledging the obvious shortcoming of the small sample, Boers and Demecheleer (2001) found that the French-speaking learners of English more likely inferred the correct meaning of the idioms that used the imagery of *sleeves* rather than *hats*. Furthermore, the students did better with idioms referring to the image source of *food* than they did with *ships*. Boers and Demecheleer concluded that if a source domain is more salient in the L1 culture, the L2 learner has a greater chance of correctly interpreting an idiom if it refers to that particular source domain. There is, however, a risk of a false transfer. The researchers found the French-speaking students mistakenly thought that *To wear one's heart on one's sleeve* was identical to *Avoir le coeur sur la main,* which carries the meaning of being generous rather than easily showing one's emotions. In other words, false-friend idioms can be tricky and misleading. Pedagogically, Boers and Demecheleer still emphasize the beneficial approach of understanding and discussing the cultural-specific imagery source domains of idioms.

Etymology. The origin of idioms is another way to learn and retain idiomatic expressions, according to Boers, Eykmans, and Stengers (2007). Their research with Dutch university students, age 19 to 21, of modern languages (majoring in English) revealed that when students are first taught the original, literal usage of the idiom, it facilitates comprehension and recall of idioms. For example, *to run the gauntlet* is derived from "a form of punishment in the military in which the wrongdoer was forced to run between two lines of men armed with sticks, who beat him as he passed" (p. 58). *To be a red herring* originates from "the strong smell of smoked, and, thus, red, herring used to teach hounds to follow a trail despite the smelly red herring having been drawn across that trail" (p. 60). Thus, the researchers concluded that material design for L2 learners of English should include the teaching of the etymology of idioms to enhance students' understanding/retention of idiomatic language.

In addition to explaining the origin of an idiom, however, Boers, Piquer Piriz, Stengers, and Eykmans (2009) added images of concrete scenes depicting the origin of an idiom to see whether L2 learners would not only comprehend and remember idioms more easily, but also whether images would help with the retention of the form of the idiom, i.e., its precise lexical composition. Such a combination of approaches is known as dual coding. As an example, the idiomatic expression *a carrot and stick approach* could be illustrated with a drawing of a donkey being motivated to move forward with a carrot in front of the animal and a stick behind. This presentation strategy had a positive impact on comprehension, but, when they were asked to remember the exact words via a gap-fill activity, the L2 learners performed poorly. The researchers stated that the pictures may actually distract the L2 learners from learning to produce the idioms accurately—in other words, image association may interfere with remembering and producing the lexical composition of an idiom.

Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions, broadly defined as figurative multiword units, are abundant in the English language. In order to become an enhanced participant in English communication with a deeper understanding of society and culture, L2 learners would benefit from learning idioms. With New York State experiencing an ever-increasing ELL enrollment in public schools, the issue of how best to teach and facilitate the learning of L2 English idioms is critical. Research has addressed teaching practices pertaining to comprehending, retaining, and producing idioms. What is important to note from these findings is that the outdated method of rote memorization as a teaching method has not received empirical support. Instead, instructors may apply and evaluate the trial-and-error method (Cooper, 1999), the teaching approach based on conceptual metaphors (Samani & Hashemian, 2012), imagery source domains (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001), or etymology (Boers et al., 2007), starting with the most commonly used idioms where possible (Elkilic, 2008). Ultimately, instructors may want to ensure that their L2 students are not *at a dead loss* when they are exposed to idioms in their new world.

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