

Teaching English Idioms at the University Level

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Abstract

Introduction and aim: The aim of the research is to find out the ways and approaches of teaching English idioms. The article deals with the selection and teaching of English idioms at the University level. First of all teaching and learning idioms is crucially important. They help learners to improve their language proficiency, enhance their word-stock and make their performance native-like. On the other hand it is often difficult for learners to interpret or successfully use them. That is why this issue triggered our attention.

Research methodology: The article presents the classification and characteristic features of idioms. It also analyses the results of a mini experiment. The author has chosen the English idioms that she thought would be easy for Georgian students to learn and remember. The results of the study are based on the analyses of the questionnaire and the idiom quiz. The subjects of the study were first, second and third year students (undergraduates) of the English language and literature programme.

Results and implications: The test results showed that students are able to memorize easily, interpret and use a number of English idioms that have similar or almost similar Georgian equivalents.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the author gives teachers some practical advice on the selection of idioms. She also suggests the activities that can be successfully utilized for the teaching of idioms.

Keywords: English idioms, teaching idioms, learning idioms, University level

Introduction

Teaching and learning idioms is crucially important. They help learners to improve their language proficiency, enhance their word-stock and make their performance native-like. However, it is often difficult for learners to interpret or successfully use them. The main reason of all the complications connected with the idioms is caused by the cultural and historical information that is embedded in the idioms. According to Langlotz (2006), “idioms are very complex linguistic configurations” which puzzle not only language learners but linguists as well. The questions usually concern the definition, classification and grammar of these linguistic phenomena.

The importance of teaching and learning idioms is supported by many scientists (Steines, Goertz, 2006; Fernando, 1996). According to Fernando (1996), “no translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity if a natural use of the target language is an aim”.

What is an idiom?

There are various definitions of idioms. But we will present only two of them: a dictionary definition and a definition by the linguist.

Fernando (1996) in her book *Idioms and Idiomaticity* states that “idioms are indivisible units whose components cannot be varied or varied only within definable limits. No other words can be substituted for those comprising, for example, *smell a rat* or *seize/grasp the nettle*, which take either of these two verbs but no others: thus *grab* is unacceptable. Nor are the words of an idiom usually recombining”.

In *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* idiom is defined as “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts”.

Idioms are connected with the themes of animals, the sea, sports, parts of the body, food and drink, colours, names of people and places, sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Idioms are commonly used to describe physical appearance, character and personality, work and success, health and illness (Mc Carthy, O'Dell, 2008). Different linguists suggest different classification of idioms.

According to Langlotz (2006), idioms have several features that characterize them. They reveal:

- “semantic characteristics,
- structural peculiarities and irregularities and
- constraints or restrictions on their lexicogrammatical behaviour which cannot be explained by the general grammatical rules of the given language. Nevertheless, idioms are
- conventional expressions that belong to the grammar of a given language and
- fulfil specific discourse-communicative functions”.

Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) provide more idioms’ features:

1. Conventionality – the meaning of idioms cannot be predicted or at least entirely predicted
2. Inflexibility – idioms typically appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions
3. Figuration – idioms typically involve metaphors, metonymies, hyperboles, or other kinds of figuration
4. Proverbiality – idioms are typically used to describe a recurrent situation of particular social interest
5. Informality – like other proverbial expressions, idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial register and with popular speech and oral culture
6. Affect – idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation of affective stance toward the things they denote.

Some idioms are easier to guess with the help of our imagination. Others might be comprehensible in the context. However, there are idioms which are difficult to infer.

Healey (n.d.) claims that teachers should pay attention to the teaching of idioms. They should be taught after the introduction of their constituent words and patterns.

Holmes (n.d.) suggests techniques for learning and remembering idioms and presents three steps. At the first stage teachers should make a note of an idiom. Then they should provide its explanation. This time the definition should be comprehensible and easy to understand. Finally, teachers provide sample sentences to show students how idiom is used in the context. The author supports the idea of presenting one idiom at a time. This will promote the process of learning and remembering.

Teachers can successfully use form focused activities and help students to remember the structure of the idiom. For example, teachers can ask learners:

- to fill the gaps with the missing words in the idiom or
- to group the words from the given list and reconstruct idiom.

Idioms can be effectively incorporated in writing or speaking activities.

- Teachers can use idiom as a title and ask students to write a story. For example: the idiom *a wolf in sheep's clothing* could be good for the invention of an amazing story.
- Idioms can also be utilized as a starter for discussion. *Curiosity killed a cat* or *it's no use crying over spilled milk* could be a good starting point for discussion.

In search of ways and approaches of teaching English idioms at the University level we have carried out the research. The aim of the research was to find out the idioms that would be easier for Georgian students to learn and remember.

The subjects of the study were first, second and third year Georgian students (undergraduates) of the English language and literature programme. They were forty and the age ranged between eighteen and twenty.

Methods of study. The results of the study are based on the analyses of the questionnaire and the idiom quiz. The questionnaire aimed to collect data about the following issues:

1. the frequency of learning idioms;
2. students’ wants concerning learning English idioms;
3. students’ awareness of English idioms. In this question we intended to find out whether students have taught the selected idioms or not. For research purposes, we have selected the following ten idioms (later they were incorporated in the idiom quiz):
 - *question of time* – დროის საკითხი

- *easy money* – ადვილად ნაშოვნნი ფული
- *(your) hands are tied* - ხელფეხშეკრული
- *young blood* - იდეებით სავსე ახალგაზრდები
- *playing with fire* – ცეცხლთან თამაში
- *a wolf in sheep's clothing* - ცხვრის ტყავში გადაცმული მგელი
- *a matter of life and death* - სიკვდილ-სიცოცხლის საკითხი
- *light at the end of the tunnel* - გვირაბის ბოლოს სინათლეა
- *hold your tongue* – ენას კბილი დააჭირე, ენა დაიმოკლე
- *a drop in the ocean* – ზღვაში წვეთი

As we see these English idioms have similar or almost similar Georgian equivalents. Hence, we consider that it will be easy for Georgian students to interpret them. At first students completed the questionnaire and then went on working on the idiom quiz.

What concerns to the idiom quiz, it aimed to check Georgian students' comprehension of English idioms. It contained ten multiple choice questions. Students were asked to find appropriate/logical ending for every single question. Each question had three possible answers.

Since the data that was collected from first year students differed from the data collected from second and third year students, we decided to analyse them separately. The first year students' data was calculated separately. Second and third year students responses were summed together.

The results of the questionnaire showed that first year students often learn idioms but 72 percent of them have not learnt those particular idioms before. However, 72 percent of learners successfully completed the idiom quiz. They were also very interested in the learning of these idioms. What concerns to second and third year students, they claim that they sometimes learn idioms. 60 percent of them have learnt the selected idioms previously and only 40 percent did not know them. Students also state that they have learnt these idioms from English movies. The study of the test results of second and third year students showed that 75 percent of learners correctly filled the test. Only 25 percent failed the quiz.

Conclusions

To sum, idioms are not always as tricky as they seem. They need to be attentively taught. At first teachers can choose those English idioms that have similar or almost similar Georgian equivalents. This will promote learning process. The results of the study proved that students can easily guess the meaning of these English idioms. Teachers can start teaching of idioms with these types of idioms. Later they can choose and present more difficult ones. Teachers can successfully use the above mentioned activities to promote learning. But they should keep in mind that they can present one or two idioms at a time. This will stimulate the process of learning and remembering. It is also better to define idiom's words separately and enrich students' vocabulary.

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