Conventionalized Multiword Expressions:
“It’s All Greek to Me” or “a Piece of Cake” for English Second Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the difficulties that pose some serious problems to English second language learners in the realm of idiomatic language. It discusses the nature of idioms in terms of origin, types and properties. It also suggests a number of strategies and techniques that are used in assimilating idioms into learners’ language. Identical idioms are easier to learn than unidentical ones. Depending on the structure of the first language, idioms are problematic if they do not exist in that particular language. The incongruence between first and second language also creates a problem. On the other hand, the structure of the second language constitutes a problem rather than the amount of incongruence between the two languages. A final result is that positive transfer should be encouraged while avoiding negative interference.

KEYWORDS: Communication, avoidance, difficulty, exposure, first/second language, transfer, interference, incongruence, proficiency, similarity, difference, structure, metaphor, invariance.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a second/foreign language has been incessantly coupled with a legion of difficulties on the one hand and with veneration, motivation elan and a tremendous yearning to acquire a good command of the targeted language on the other. However, the overriding concern of learners has been basically to achieve a genuine sense of communication in the required field of knowledge and language acquisition. Nonetheless, being shielded with this indespensible language tool is almost always cumbersome when dealing with conventionalized multiword expressions or idioms. The copiousness of the English language of idioms is truly overwhelming. Some recently updated specialized dictionaries list over six thousand idioms ramifying to all walks of life (Longman Idioms Dictionary, 1998). Although idioms are at the heart of the English language, yet they are hardly taken notice of, seem marginalized and penumbral both by teachers and learners alike. Such peripheralization and penumbra do not happen to be haphazard, but are most likely traced back to something grave pertaining to the nature of idioms and their internal structure and composition.

Significance and Problem of the Study

It is a well-established fact that learners in the course of their pursuit of achieving a native-like command or mastery of the targeted language, experience many problems relating to the characteristics of that particular language. Some of these problems pertain to idioms that constitute the crux of the whole issue. Broadly speaking, idioms are rather avoided by quite many students due to various reasons. This is best illustrated by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989:73): (cited in Mahmoud, 2003).

“The foreign learner of English who tries to avoid them will immediately single himself out as a foreigner.”

This being the case, avoidance could be attributed either to lack of knowledge, that is, ignorance, or difficulty of idioms. (for a detailed study on avoidance see Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Laufer and Eiamsong, 1993; Irujo 1986a; 1986b; 1993).

This research paper addresses a basic issue pertaining to the study of idioms, namely, difficulties posed by

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learning and incorporating idioms into the communicative and linguistic deposit of English second language learners. In order to understand the nature of idioms, we need to investigate their origin, properties, and structure. This paper aims at exploring features that pave the way for the emergence of difficulties that entail idiom reticence, reluctance, phobia and avoidance.

As regards idioms, to the researcher’s best knowledge, fervent research has been conducted on various aspects of second language learning but rather frugal on difficulties of idioms (AbiSamra, 2002).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study is an exploratory theoretical research designed to examine the difficulties encountered in the study and implementation of idioms by English second language learners with diverse backgrounds and levels of language proficiency. More specifically, it is in quest for the following questions:

1. What are the most beneficial strategies to boosting the learnability of idioms by English second language learners?
2. What are the best ways and means that facilitate the incorporation of idioms into the linguistic and communicative deposit by English second language learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this research paper adheres to what has been stated in some behavioural theories of conventionalized multiword expressions.

A vast amount of research has been carried out on idioms having the overriding concern of conveying a better understanding and assessment of their nature and composition. Previous studies are classified as: Data-based, textual and theoretical.

Data-based Studies

These studies rely on a body of corpora in the method of data elicitation. Each and every study includes a corpus and purports to get statistical information. Irujo (1986a) tackles the issue of transfer from first to second language in comprehending and producing idioms. The hypothesis claims that identical idioms indicate positive transfer; similar idioms indicate negative transfer and different idioms exhibit neither positive nor negative transfer since they are less understood and produced than the previous ones. Subjects were twelve advanced learners of English from Venezuela. Forty five English idioms comprised the data:15 identical in form and meaning to their Spanish equivalents, 15 similar and 15 completely different. A questionnaire in English and Spanish was administered to ensure comprehension.

Findings showed that the most understood and produced idioms were those transparent, straightforward and frequently used idioms thus confirming the hypothesis of the study. According to these findings, she stresses the need to reinforce positive transfer and avoid interference.

In a subsequent paper, Irujo (1986 b) investigates the issue of avoidance. Her purpose is to see whether English idioms are used or the use of non-idiomatic synonyms or paraphrase is preferred; and what kinds of idioms are used or avoided. Data was collected from twelve fluent bilingual Spanish English speakers. A translation task that contained 45 English idioms was given to subjects. Results showed that identical idioms were the best known English idioms while the least known ones showed less correspondence to Spanish. No correlation exists between the most produced idioms and the frequency of general use. Moreover, semantic transparency seems to be marginal unlike similarity to first language idioms which seems to be of great importance.

Avoidance is also the main issue of Hulstijn and Marchena’s article (1989). Their aim is to see whether avoidance of phrasal verbs in the first language is accompanied by that in the target language. Another goal is to test the prediction that intermediate learners tend to avoid phrasal verbs more than advanced ones. Three independent Dutch groups of intermediate learners of English; three independent Dutch groups of advanced learners of English were given multiple choice, translation and a memorization test. Findings indicate that there is some evidence that Dutch learners have the tendency to avoid the use of a number of phrasal verbs due to semantic consideration. Phrasal verbs are more specific and figurative as opposed to their general and literal one word counterparts. The researchers maintain that these findings are valid for learners irrespective of their first language.

The learnability of idioms is the subject of a master thesis. Chen (1992) wanted to know whether idioms were learned as completely new structures or transferred from first language which is Chinese in her study. Subjects were 53 second year students at the University of Shandong. A multiple choice test on comprehension and
two translation tasks comprised the instruments of data collection. Findings showed that identical and similar idioms were transferred easily. Contrarily, different or unfamiliar idioms were difficult to transfer. The comprehension test promoted transfer while the translation test showed no important difference in the number of transferred idioms. Recommendations included the importance of the first language in such settings.

Causes and sources of avoidance in learning phrasal verbs warranted investigation by Laufer and Eliasson (1993). Their aim was to determine the source of avoidance, that is, L1-L2 difference, L1- L2 idiomatic similarity both languages being cross-linguistic, or inherent L2 complexity, i.e. intralinguistic. Two groups of advanced Swedish speaking learners of English numbering 87 subjects served as data elicitation. A multiple choice test and a translation test each containing 20 sentences were the instruments of the test. Results showed that neither the phrasal verbs nor the figurative ones were avoided. It is worth mentioning that phrasal verbs are part of the Swedish language and therefore do not constitute a learning problem unlike Hebrew. To validate these findings, the researcher further compared the results of two groups: the two Swedish groups and a group of advanced Hebrew speaking learners of English. It has been found that the Swedish groups used significantly more phrasal verbs than the Hebrew group. Consequently, the best predictor of avoidance is bound to the groups’ systemic incongruence between first and second language rather than to the inherent difficulty of L2 structure. This being the case, they emphasise the necessity of a cross-linguistic perspective that regards mutual mirroring of L1 and L2 as an inevitable part in the process of L2 learning.

A different area of interest is best illustrated by Fernando (1996). In her book, she steers clear of studying idioms from a lexical perspective, i.e., the phrase and sentence, into a functional perspective, that is the functions of idioms in discourse at two levels: spoken and written. In describing and analyzing idioms, she tries to achieve a better understanding of the functions of language users in their roles of ideational function (observer/reporter), interpersonal function (interlocutor) and relational function (thinker). A further goal is to find out what purposes they have and how they are utilized. To this end, she draws on the bipolar nature of idiomaticity in the balance between the novel; the linguistic creativity, and the conventional; the routinized expressions. She also demonstrates the use of idioms in conveying representations of the world, evaluating people and situations, signaling conviviality and conflict and finally creating coherent and cohesive texts. To achieve this purpose, she relies on two kinds of evidence:

1. Naturally occurring data.
2. A theoretical framework reliable for explaining the particularities of language use in specific contexts, that is, the ad hoc expressions as ideational, interpersonal and relational. This framework should also be capable of enabling an analysis of communicative strategies. In her study, she adheres to the functional theory of Halliday (1973; 1985). Naturally, occurring data was collected from various sources during two periods: (1975-1981), and (1989-1994). These sources included intensive gathering from newspapers, literary and academic general reading, the electronic media, personal correspondence, advertise- ments, notices, conversations taken down verbatim after occurrence and finally seminars. With regard to the huge amount of language volume which amounted to billions of words, no word count was possible. However, this enormous corpus exhibited a total of approximately 1,000-1,100 idioms. These idioms aren’t confined to any language variety, but are part of a common heritage of the English Language.

The second source of data was the Birmingham Collection of English Text (BCET) which yielded twenty million words.

The consultation took place in 1990. In this study, Fernando adhered to a random sampling in both sources. She arrives at the following conclusions:

a. Frequency of occurrence of a specific idiom indicates its topicality along with its current status. The use of two indicators is a useful criterion in the choice of idioms for the purpose of teaching. Nevertheless, this frequency of occurrence does not explain the various functions of idioms whether ideational, interpersonal or relational.

b. Conclusions based on the statistics drawn from a specific corpus are not adequate since such statistics are subject to variation in corpora.

Fernando, then, compares her study with that of Cowie et al. (1983) to reinforce this conclusion. She finds that the occurrence of the idiom ‘red herring’ yielded only 52 instances, 13 from (BCET) and 39 from her own
corpus during the whole period of data collection. In contrast, Cowie et al. (1983) exhibited 50 instances of the same idiom during a period of only several months.

c. Sources of data could be a determinant of frequency. In written discourse, newspapers were the richest source for the occurrence of the idiom ‘red herring’. By contrast, in the spoken discourse, only few instances of the same idiom were observed, which is considered purely fortuitous. Fernando draws the attention to the fact that such conclusions are valid only for her own corpora and not outside them.

d. A final conclusion of her study is that idioms are an important part of the lexicon grammar basic for the production of coherent and socially acceptable discourse.

A more recent study deals with the knowledge of English collocations. Huang (2001) investigated Taiwanese EFL students’ knowledge of English collocations and the collocational errors they made. Subjects were 60 students from a college in Taiwan. A self designed simple completion test measured the subjects’ knowledge of four types of lexical collocations: Free combinations, restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms. Findings showed that free combinations were the least difficult whereas pure idioms were the most challenging. Moreover, subjects performed equally well on restricted collocations and figurative idioms. On the whole, the subjects’ deviant answers indicated their lack of knowledge of English collocations which in turn was attributed to negative L1 transfer.

Another recent empirical study is that of McCarthy and O’Dell (2003). In their book: English Idioms in Use, their main concern is about which idioms should be taught and how. Data were collected from huge language corpora from native speakers of English. Their emphasis was on idioms that were more common among native speakers of English. Results showed the following:

a. Idioms are mostly used to refer to the third person word rather than second person.

b. Idioms are derived from a nation’s culture and from every day life.

c. Many idioms refer to the eye, animals, the sea and sailing.

d. Idioms are largely used when telling stories, commenting and giving opinions.

e. In real settings idioms explain themselves, 9 out of 10 idioms carried their own interpretation. They paraphrase what was going on.

f. They are very popular in horoscopes since they can carry different meanings depending on the ability of the reader to interpret, therefore, they are subjective influenced by personal emotions.

g. Some idioms are used more in speaking than in writing and, vice-versa.

Their conclusion is multifold, idioms are rarely problematic but this rarity gives them salience; they are culture-related; every day idioms are not that salient; they should be organized into formal, topical and functional. Finally, idioms should be taught for mostly receptive purposes.

The most recent study is Mahmoud’s Interlingual Transfer of Idioms by Arab learners of English (2003). The purpose is to verify the assumption that low proficiency in the target language stimulates interlingual transfer. Subjects were 230 second year university students majoring in English. The writing of paragraphs, essays and term papers as weekly assignments served as the source of data gathering. A total of 124 idioms excluding phrasal verbs and binomials, were found in 3220 pieces of writing. Findings revealed three main cross-linguistic categories: Idioms that showed the same meaning but different form were 66 idioms. Those that showed the same form but different meaning were 12 idioms. Those that were Arabic language- specific idioms were 21 idioms. The remaining idioms (25) were grammatically, lexically and contextually free from errors. Upon close examination of those idioms, 18 idioms had Arabic equivalents. The researcher concludes that the small number of idioms used in the writing tasks coupled with a high frequency of negative transfer (80%) are obvious indications of the problems encountered in learning and using idioms. He further attributes the scarce use of idioms to teachers’ avoidance of idioms in an attempt to establish good grounds for comprehension. Moreover, Students’ exposure is limited to only discourse used for general purposes and it is not encountered in written academic or scientific discourse. Although adult learners acknowledge the role of idioms in achieving good English, yet they face problems and seem to fall back on the interlingual transfer strategy. Pedagogical implications include compare and contrast strategy between first and second language to encourage positive transfer. Exposure to reading and listening is of paramount importance. Language courses should focus on idiomaticity as well as fluency and accuracy. He also
calls for a compilation of lists of some frequently used English-Arabic idioms divided into certain categories as: formally and semantically similar, formally similar and semantically different, semantically similar and formally different, English-specific and Arabic-specific. He recommends research on learners of EFL from different first-language backgrounds.

**Textual Studies**

Smith (1925) regards his book ‘Words and Idioms’ as a preliminary sketch. However, quite the reverse is observed in the wealth of illustrative examples drawn from all walks of life showing a great deal of imagery. Smith’s study is an exposition of the striking idiosyncrasies of English in terms of its lexical and grammatical irregularities and anomalies. It is also a description of how the peculiar genius of English is evident in the use of idioms.

He relies to a great extent on the definition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in the treatment of idioms. His definition of the idiom is compatible with sense three of the (OED). ‘We also use ‘idiom’ for those forms of expression, of grammatical construction, or of phrasing, which are peculiar to a language, and approved by its usage although the meanings they convey are often different from their grammatical or logical signification’ (Smith, 1925:167).

Smith classifies many expressions different in their structure and semantics as idioms by depending mostly on this definition. He focuses on the idiosyncrasies, that is, the interlingual structural peculiarities and intralingual ones, that is, what he terms idiomatic transgressions. Peculiarity, according to him, is firstly observed in the arbitrary character in the use of prepositional phrases. The range of such combinations: verb+particle/adverbs, varies from the terse adverbial phrase such as ‘at leisure’, ‘for good’, to the huge volume of phrasal verbs as ‘keep down’… etc. The second type of idiosyncrasy is what he calls ‘habitual or phrasal collocations’ (named as binomials and pairs of words by others), such as ‘bag and baggage’. This category of habitual collocations also includes familiar similes ‘as good as life’, and proverbs ‘Out of sight, out of mind’. Smith finds that idiomatic transgressions break the rules of grammar and logic and therefore they are considered peculiar.

Smith’s study also reports on different kinds of idioms ranging from figurative, semi-opaque, to fully opaque idioms due to their vague origin. Moreover, his study can be considered as pioneering in its assessment of the origin of idioms which seems to be illimitable (cf Smith’s productive contributions, section 2.3.1.)

Admittedly, the major contribution of Smith’s work resides in the exhaustive account of idioms based on imagery. Such idioms are best highlighted through the human body. Most bodily idioms are indicative of a deposit of kinesthetic metaphors, which in turn highlight muscular efforts. In closing, Smith uses an idiom as ‘expression of determination, of exasperation and vituperation.’

In other words, idioms serve as tools of conveying strong will, bad feelings and rage expressed by the use of abusive, scolding, harsh, and cursing words.

McMordie’s book English Idioms and How to use Them (1966) is a very representative study.

In this book, McMordie lists idioms according to their parts of speech to make it easier for the reader and language user. Hundreds of examples are listed to achieve this objective. McMordie also gives guidance as to how to use idioms and in which contexts. He devotes a final chapter to present miscellaneous idiomatic expressions and proverbial sayings. Many chapters are also devoted to explaining all types of phrasal verbs. McMordie’s book is indispensable to any language learner who seeks correct usage of idioms.

In an extended version of a doctoral thesis, Makkai’s book: Idiom Structure in English (1972), deals basically with lexical and grammatical regular idioms. Seemingly influenced by sense three of the Oxford English Dictionary definition of idioms, Makkai divides idioms into two types. According to him an idiom is ‘a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc. peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one’.

In view of this definition, the two types of idioms are: those of encoding and decoding. Idioms of encoding are those which exhibit phrase logical peculiarities. They are termed as such, because there are no difficulties encountered in interpreting them since no misunderstanding, unintelligibility, the ability to mislead, nor ambiguity characterize them. Conversely, idioms of decoding exhibit such characteristics. Accordingly, idioms of decoding are the principal concern of Makkai’s study.

As it is the case in the tradition of the Soviet phraseology, he defines idioms as ‘any poly Lexonic
lexeme made up of more than one minimal free form or word (as defined by the morphotactic criteria). An idiom, then, requires the presence of at least two independent lexical items. This being the case, expressions that are composed of one free form and one or more bound forms added by the morphological process of affixation, are excluded from the domain of idioms since grammar accounts for such rules. As it can be noticed from his definition, Makkai adopts primarily the concepts and classification with reference to stratification grammar. This stratified view of language is highly evident in his use of a specific model. Hence, he suggests a criterion that is formulated precisely for the identification of idioms. He offers useful categorization and sub-categorization helpful in distinguishing between them relying on the structural or functional differences that they exhibit.

The first criterion of idiomaticity is disinformation potentiality. This refers to the capacity that idioms have in which they are capable of occurring idiomatically and customarily or literally. To formulate this in simple terms, it means that any idiom should be interpreted idiomatically ‘empty of the usual senses, i.e. what words stand really for.’ And at the same time the individual words of an idiom should occur elsewhere apart from the idiom as separate units indicating their literal meaning. Makkai lists the example of ‘hot potato’ if interpreted idiomatically, it means embarrassing issue, yet both words ‘hot’ and ‘potato’ should occur with their literal meaning, which is ‘food item at a high temperature’. So, based on this criterion, any expression that fails this test, is disqualified to be a real idiom. In the other example of ‘Kith and Kin’, Makkai calls such idioms pseudo idioms because ‘Kith’ in this example cannot occur in other discoursal environment once compared with ‘hot potato’.

The second criterion for establishing idiomaticity and identification of idioms is institutionalization. In view of this criterion, Makkai differentiates between disinformation and misinformation. Misinformation has to do with homonymy. Misinformation results from erroneous literal interpretation in the example of the homophonous forms ‘she bears children’, and ‘she bears children’ the meaning of which can be either: carries or gives birth to. Disinformation on the other hand, results from the erroneous yet logical interpretation of an idiom due to its internal make-up which may cause lack of understanding.

Idioms of decoding are classified into lexemic and sememic. Lexemic idioms are phrasal verbs, tournures ‘to rain cats and dogs’, irreversible binomials ‘salt and pepper’, phrasal compounds ‘black mail’ incorporating verbs ‘man handle’, and pseudo idioms ‘spick and span’.

Sememic idioms are proverbs, familiar quotations, idioms of institutionalized politeness, idioms of institutionalized understatement and hyperbole. This class of sememic idioms differs from that of lexemic in that it is functional. Sememic idioms function in terms of signifying warnings, requests, and evaluations. Having served these functions, they have an interpersonal role. To sum up, the five proposed criteria in identifying idioms are: the presence of at least two free morphemes in a certain expression, these morphemes should have the ability to function with different meanings in other environments, institutionalization, the semantic unpredictability due to the fact that an idiom has a meaning that cannot be deduced from its component parts, and the potential ambiguity of idioms of decoding due to the fact that these idioms are possible to interpret literally.

In an edited book entitled: On Collocations: Words shall be known by the company they keep, Mackin’s (1978), chief concern was the problems of idiomatic expressions such as proverbs, sayings, similes, catch phrases, linked words (idioms) foreign expressions, Cocksny rhyming, slang, quotations and metaphors. A second goal was to cast light on the background work done on collocations in the compilation of the Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English (ODCIE) by himself and Cowie.

Mackin adheres to a method in determining which collocation is to be included or excluded in a special dictionary. This method deals with a scale of probability of co-occurrence. Any given collocation may have a position somewhere on this scale. His view is that if a given collocation is more uniform, the other constituent is more fixed or predictable. He aligns idioms in his list of fixed phrases under the term ‘linked words’ to be included in a dictionary. He includes proverbs, sayings, similes, catch phrases, linked words, foreign translated expressions, Cocksny rhyming, slang, quotations and metaphors.

In preparing the basic material for (ODCIE), three methods were used for data collection: They were the use of other dictionaries, the compiler’s own competence and thirdly, reading and listening to the spoken word wherever possible. Over a period of five years where
intensive collecting and desultory additions took place, a mass of 30,000 quotations were gathered. Material provided by the author’s competence was tested by other native speakers as well as mature graduates teaching English as a foreign language. This procedure was done to validate material categorization. As for the procedures of the study, one hundred phrases were taken from the corpus. A set containing one hundred phrases was chosen from the corpus. It was further given to a small group of university colleagues. They were asked to perform a completion test in two sets. Set A, required them to add just one single word missing from the example while Set B required them to add two or more words. In all cases, a little or no additional context was presented to rule out other factors’ contributions to the whole assessment.

Results indicate that users should deal cautiously with fixed phrases and collocations. These results also encourage further work on example collecting. Yet, the extent of variations on the part of the testees indicates that nothing can be taken for granted since language is in constant state of change at all levels. Therefore, caution is needed when dealing with fixed phrases and collocations. The application of the completion method in both sets, along with the collection of examples from other sources, gives way to the finding of a formula. In this formula, head phrases have the entries as base forms in which listing all the alternative collocates along with the variant and deviant forms are given.

In conclusion, Mackin says that although various attempts have been made to find a method for the purpose of teaching high probability collocations, yet what is needed is an assistance towards comprehension. Mackin recommends specialized aspiring dictionaries that can be utilitarian to the utmost.

Cowie’s study (1978) offers a detailed scrutiny of illustrative material and collocations. He describes mainly problems that compilers face in the making of a learner’s dictionary. At the very outset, he acknowledges Hornby’s work of a life time in the compilation of The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (ALD) in three editions, originally having the title: Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary. Cowie, here, pays undivided attention to collocations and their treatment in (ALD). He is concerned with problems emerging from the treatment of collocational patterns independently of example sentences and phrases. In this paper, collocations are defined as “the co-occurrence of two or more lexical items as realizations of structural elements within a given syntactic pattern.” Cowie does not treat idioms apart from collocations, but aligns some of them under the umbrella of collocations.

Collocations exhibit descriptive complexities since they vary in their collocability from open and restricted collocations to established and potential ones. Open and restricted collocations, as the term implies, refer to the relative freedom of collocations that can have wider or narrower range of co-occurrence than others. That is, the set of items that they combine with is more or less collocable. The meaning is a determinant of the collocability of items, then it determines which items necessitate the company of others. For example, the verb ‘run’ if it means ‘to operate or cause to function’, then the list of items to combine with is open-ended and variant. At the same time, ‘run’ collocates with business, machine, car, army, team and scheme. These items can be described as animate, inanimate, concrete and abstract.

Openness and restrictedness of co-occurrence can be placed at both ends of a scale with various types relating to parts of this continuum. Collocations yielding restrictedness can cause problems to learners since they are not intelligible. Problems are also caused by syntactic structures or patterning because they exhibit openness or restrictedness to learners. Therefore, these should be learned as wholes. Open collocations include familiar co-occurrences and firmly established ones due to constant repetition and common association of things as in ‘bacon and eggs’, ‘fish and chips’.

The inclusion of some idioms under the umbrella of collocation has its reasons too. Cowie explains that in such combinations the meaning of one item is accompanied uniquely by another one and is determinate. In the idiom ‘foot the bill’, foot foreshadows the meaning to collocate with ‘bill’ and not ‘account’ which is an unacceptable and non-usable collocation.

Accordingly, such collocations pose serious problems and are baffling for foreign language learners.

Ways as to how to enlighten the language user about the use of collocations, are offered by the (ODCIE) Volume I. Reviewing the three offered solutions, Cowie rules out two of them. The first possibility is specification of the semantic features shared by collocates. For instance, ‘father’ the relevant features are human, male, adult in authority. The second possibility is specification of one general word that stands for more particular terms. For instance, ‘superior’ stands for ‘boss, leader, patron’. These two possibilities are ruled out because they are
subject to imposing more burden of interpretation by the user, and in turn compel the user to resort to using dictionaries. The third alternative which is listing a reasonable reliable selection of such particular items, can be considered as representative of the total range of selection. By doing so, then collocational statements can enjoy an independent status and function apart from syntactic patterns and example sentences.

Seidl and McMordie’s (1978) basically inform the reader about the development and growth of the English language in general and idioms in particular.

Again, this book contains collections on all kinds of idioms following the same procedure and organisation. Yet, this book is not repetitive. It is different in that it widens the scope of the use of all idioms incorporating all those idioms not mentioned previously. A special emphasis is placed upon idioms with common and less common verbs. Idioms from special situations such as: banking, business, buying and selling, health, illness, death, holidays and travel, motoring, politics, and government, telephoning, work and industrial relations are provided. Special categories encompass animals, colours, bodily idioms and the concept of time. In addition, idioms of comparison are treated separately and far more exclusively. About a hundred proverbs are also mentioned and explained based on their commonality and wide range application. This book is trustworthy and valuable in fostering and boosting the learning of idioms.

Seidl’s book “Idioms in Practice” (1982) is suggestive of its contents. It is written with the objective of widening the scope of knowledge of idiomatic English of adolescent and adult learners at all levels from pre-intermediate to advanced. This book can be used as a classwork or self study companion. It contains over 800 of the most common idioms and 114 exercises from various categories. It is didactic and instructive at one time being basic for learning idioms in genuine real life situations.

In an article that impinges on idioms among other related issues, Alexander (1984a) reviews the categorization of idioms, collocations and fixed expressions from the vantage-point of applied linguistic. An additional goal is to discuss the close link existent between co-occurrence of lexical items and the sociocultural background of Britain and a third aim is to demonstrate how the assimilation of vocabulary in a foreign language can lead to the integration of a holistic model of second language learning theory.

Alexander’s conclusion is that ‘fixed expressions are codifiable.’ This means that the way in which these expressions are understood and interpreted by a native speaker and a foreign language learner, is different. Alexander concludes by saying that there is a widely felt need for reference works that are rich in insights about the cultural background in the areas of fixed expressions. Another didactic conclusion is presented at two levels: They are the contemplative level where teachers should be armed with knowledge about the scope of fixed expressions categories as well as collocational configurations and the action level, where teachers should give incentives for students to recognize all those fixed expressions as chunks or wholes to be correctly used.

In a subsequent article, Alexander (1984b), stresses the need to focus on fixed expressions in English. He also analyzes their types and then reviews 13 dictionaries and reference works to see to what extent they cover these fixed expressions. He finally lists an annotated bibliography useful for both teacher and learner. Alexander concludes that the study of phraseology constitutes a solid ground to a principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning.

Another valuable book by Seidl and McMordie (1992) entitled: Oxford Pocket English Idioms, combines in shortened versions two books published consecutively in 1988 and 1989. As it is the case of their previous books, the authors enlighten and provide once again the reader with rich insights about idioms. However, this book adds idioms consisting of pairs of some parts of speech as pairs of adjectives, nouns, adverbs, verbs, and identical pairs. Besides, it builds on bodily idioms stretching them as far as possible.

Baker (1992) devotes an article entitled ‘Equivalence Above Word Level’ to investigating some aspects relevant to idioms. Her main concern is in the realm of translation and interpretation of idioms. She investigates lexical patterning, a cover term to include collocations, idioms and fixed expressions. Baker finds that once compared, idioms and fixed expressions are at the extreme end of the scale from collocations in terms of flexibility of patterning and transparency of meaning.

Baker provides some strategies that are workable to overcome difficulties encountered in the process of translation. These strategies are:

a. Using an idiom of similar meaning or form
b. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form
c. Translating by paraphrase

d. Translating by omission

e. Using the strategy of compensation.

Baker offers illustrative examples to make those strategies clear. She concludes that following these strategies will greatly enhance the readability of the translated text and make it more natural to the target language.

Another interesting study that tackles the issue of idioms is Mola’s M.A. thesis entitled: Teaching Idioms in the Second Language Classroom: A case study for college level German (1993). In this study, the researcher tests the methods of second language instruction; idioms in particular. She reviews some of the teaching practices of 10 foreign language teachers in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Mola’s prime focus is on how idioms are taught in the university’s German foreign language courses. An additional goal is to find which textbooks and reference materials available in the German and English fields, have inspiring thoughts and rich insights in highlighting idioms. She also tries to find whether teachers are utilizing these textbooks or creating materials suitable for teaching idioms.

The following conclusions are drawn from her study:

a. There is a lack of systematic approach to teaching idioms to German students in the area of teaching idioms.

b. There is a dearth of idioms that are treated in first and second year language textbooks at the time of conducting the study.

Based on the scarcity of idioms and a systematic approach to teaching them, she arrives at a further conclusion that idioms are either absolutely of no importance or that teachers have the responsibility for introducing them to students. In her recommendations, she contends that forvent research should be done in this area to assess the best method of teaching idioms. She demonstrates that if a deep knowledge and a proper use of idioms constitute a part of the communicative competence, then teachers of English as a second language must introduce idioms in a more regular and systematic way to their students.

The importance of cultural literacy is the main concern of Bessmertnyi (1994). In his article, Bessmertnyi reiterates the importance of being culturally literate. He explains that idioms along with other categories should be incorporated into the linguistic repertoire of learners to eradicate cultural illiteracy.

Relying on his own experience, in some mass media as ‘New York Magazine’ or the London ‘Times’, he observed that when idioms and other idiomatic items were presented whether humourly or otherwise, resulted in the following outcome. Unless the reader acquired the background information basic for the understanding of idioms, he was unable to interpret and comprehend the humour or the idioms themselves fully. Therefore, he emphasises that cultural literacy should be applied to teaching foreign languages since the prevailing tendency at present is to equip the learner with a basic competence in the English Language dealing minimally with cultural references.

Moreover, to expand cultural literacy, he provides a list of priorities as to what to choose and what is worth knowing to learners.

This list of priorities contains songs, proverbs, homonyms, puns, limericks, nursery rhymes, similes, idioms, sayings and cliches. He sums up by saying that all those suggested purposeful categories can contribute immensely to the expansion of the cultural knowledge of learners, indispensable to the process of learning, understanding and the proper use of language.

A more recent study is concerned with the internal structure of idioms. Ifill (2003) believes that idioms must be included as part of the lexicon. He argues that an idiom’s structure is directly related to its non-idiomatic literal counterpart (paraphrase). In other words, an idiom’s syntactic behaviour is limited to the syntactic behaviour of its literal counterparts. He concludes that idioms are a basic part of language and the study of their structure provides insightful guidance into the nature of figurative language and of language itself.

Theoretical Studies

According to Irujo (1986a), idioms merit investigation as an intrinsic part of the English language. She discusses some of the reasons that are responsible for the difficulties faced in the process of learning idioms. These reasons are:

a. Non-literalness

b. Exposure to idioms

c. Correct use

d. Teaching material

Irujo next suggests some criteria for deciding which idioms to teach and then describes ten activities for students to understand and produce idiomatic English. The criteria for teaching idioms are frequency of use,
transparency, appropriateness, simplicity to form and vocabulary, similarity to first language idiom and students’ generated idiom lists. She calls for the integration of idioms into the program quite from the outset of language learning and not to postpone it until advanced levels.

Her conclusion is that, on the whole, students show penchant for learning idiomatic language. Simultaneously, they encounter difficulties and consequently, they appreciate systematic instructions. Irujo also approves of comparing and contrasting idioms in the first and second languages to consolidate positive transfer and avoid interference. This strategy can be regarded as fruitful in terms of overcoming students’ ‘idiom phobia’.

BACKGROUND

As for the etymology of the term idiom, Makkai (1972:23) explains that this term existed a long time ago and was used in many senses with variations in the use of one sense over the other. It is traced back to the Greek language. It is found in the Greek word “Idiomatikos” which carries the meaning of “private” or “peculiar”.

As for the definition of idioms, Smith (1925:148) provides an expanded definition:

“Generically, idiom is used to describe the form of speech peculiar to a people or nation. Particularly, idioms are those forms of expressions of grammatical construction, or of phrasing, which are peculiar to a language and approved by its usage, although the meanings they convey are often different from their grammatical or logical significance”.

The most recent electronic dictionary, Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999) defines an idiom as: A group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words; a form of expression natural to a language, person, or group.

As evident from this definition, there is no correspondence between the words and their aggregate meaning; the use and application of idioms might hamper communication and consequently learners are incapable of dismantling barriers bound to difficulty of comprehension and interpretation of contexts in which idioms are found. Seen from this angle, the lubrication of mutual understanding is blocked.

Native speakers make extensive use of idioms in various conversations, mass media, journalism, political debates, the movie industry and many other fields. Merikari (1997:1) believes that even a cursory glance at a daily newspaper will reveal the extent of which idioms are part of everyday language.

TYPES OF IDIOMS

1. Pure/Vague/Opaque/Non-Literal/Figurative Idioms

Cooper illustrates these types as follows (1998:255-266):

a. These are idioms that are invariant and non-literal. They are invariant since any morphological or syntactic change in the words that constitute the idiom will result in the loss of the meaning. They are non-literal because the words are neither substitutable nor translatable. For instance, the idiom “hurly-burly” (a Shakespearean idiom) is a good demonstration of pure idioms since it does not permit single word interpretation, thus contributing to a blockage of the whole meaning. It is also irreversible because we cannot say “burly-hurly” whilst maintaining the same idiomatic meaning which is making noisy confusion, uproar, disturbance or violent uprising. Likewise, the Shakespearean idioms: “hugger-mugger”, “scripp and scrippage”, which display the same features.

b. There are pure idioms which have restricted variance and are non-literal as in the example “To speak/see daggers”. To speak/see is easily understood while it is difficult to maintain a connection between speaking and the use of daggers, which is usually connected to battles and wars.

2. Semi-literal/Transparent Idioms

Some idioms are semi-literal, restricted and invariant. For instance, “kith and kin” in which “kin” is understood as denoting some sort of rapport, while “kith” is obsolete and archaic and henceforth is highly restricted in its use, i.e., it does not occur in other contexts at all.

3. Literal/Transparent Idioms

Some idioms are literal, and invariant, that is to say, they do not allow variation or substitution or change. To clarify this, the idiom “to turn a blind eye” has no difficult words and does not tolerate substitution as to replace “eye” by “cheek” or “hand”, where then it would lose its genuine meaning which is to ignore or neglect some act or somebody on purpose (for an extensive study see Fernando, 1996). In a detailed study on teaching idioms, Gibbs et al. (cited in AbiSamra, 2002) talk about syntactically frozen / flexible idioms referring to those idioms that allow or do not allow passivization. They say
that the syntactically frozen ones are easier to learn since they can be learnt by rote.

**Characteristics of Idioms**

**1. Adding Colour and Rich Imagery to Language**

Based on a large corpus of research, it can be noticed that idioms touch upon categories that branch to all walks of life.

According to Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998:vii) which is devoted exclusively to idioms, idioms add colour to the language in terms of helping the reader to emphasise meaning along with the ability of making judgment, observations, and explanations quite lively and entertaining.

The English language is a language particularly affluent in idioms. Without such a ubiquity, it would lose much of its variety and humour in both speech and writing (Merikari, 1997:1). A somewhat related characteristic is that of being terse since idioms enable the speaker to communicate an intended meaning by uttering just few words (Ibid). Likewise, McMordie (1966:6) finds that those expressions are ‘forcible, terse and vivid’ to borrow his own words, since they convey all what is wanted to be said in a very brief way. Seidl and McMordie (1978:4) maintain that idioms appear everywhere whether in colloquial expressions, formal style, slang, poetry, the writings of great playwrights as of Shakespeare and those in the Holy Bible. They are also used in spoken and written English. MacCarthy and O’Dell (2003:1) believe that idioms are used mostly when telling stories, commenting, giving opinions, also, in real contexts they are frequent in popular horoscopes because they are rich in meaning depending on how readers interpret them, henceforth, they are subjective rather than objective, where feelings and emotions might be involved when interpreting them. Moreover, some idioms are more used in writing than in speaking and some vice-versa.

**2. Compositeness**

Fernando (1996:3) points out that idioms are regarded as multi-word expressions, i.e. an idiom encompasses many words. Katamba (1994:164) has the view that idioms have the characteristics of both words and phrases in their syntactic structure; semantically, they are unpredictable as the meanings of the words they stand for.

**3. Institutionalization/Conventionality**

Fernando (1996:3) mentions this feature of idioms by arguing that idioms are conventionalised expressions which at first were ad hoc expressions and with the progress of time became conventionalised and this being the case, are novel expressions. Likewise, Cruse (1986:44) draws on the emergence of idioms with mentioning that most idioms were initially metaphors and synchronically through transitional cases gained their current status. Irujo (1986a:288) too, refers to the notion of conventionalised meanings. For instance, the idiom “To pull one’s leg” means that somebody is teasing someone else. A native speaker will probably know this meaning forthrightly. A relevant quality is the survival of obsolete and archaic words. According to Smith (1925:184), many idioms preserve these words and are confined in their use to such idioms. Let us take the example ‘Hue and cry, hither and thither’. The words ‘Hue’ and ‘thither’ have no meaning whatsoever and are never used on their own while they are completely understandable in the whole idiom.

Nunberg and Wasow (1994:492) maintain that idioms are conventionalised in the sense that neither their meaning nor use can be predicted relying on the knowledge as to what determines their constituents when they appear isolated from each other.

**4. Non-Literalness**

Idioms are semantically vague, which means that the sum of components of an idiom does not convey the meaning of the individual words (Fernando, 1996:3). Cruse (1986:39), states that the syntactic behaviour of an idiom is generally determined by two factors, the syntactic structure of the individual words ‘if any’ and the semantic ambiguity versus the syntactic components. Lyons (1977:145) shows agreement on the notion of semantic idiomaticity. He refers to idioms as phrasal lexemes by demonstrating that phrasal lexemes are either idiomatic grammatically or semantically or both. Their word order throughout the sentences of the language or meaning cannot be deduced from the syntactic and semantic qualities of their constraints.

In other words, this means that phrasal lexemes or idioms can be matched with non-idiomatic phrasal expressions, that is, the forms are identical but the former is a lexeme (part of the vocabulary of the language) while the other is not. Therefore, phrasal lexemes have a figurative or metaphorical meaning while
phrasal expressions have literal or direct meaning, for instance: ‘Couch potato’. This idiom means a person who watches television most of the time. We can match it with a phrasal expression such as *‘couch tomato*. We notice that both forms are identical at one hand, a ‘couch potato’ is a part of the vocabulary of the language since it exists as an idiom that is commonly used while a ‘couch tomato’ is not part of the vocabulary of the language and does not exist as such entity. Henceforth, a ‘couch potato’ carries figurative or metaphorical meaning while ‘couch tomato’ has a literal awkward meaning.

In connection with the same idea of semantic vagueness, Shaw (1975:xxiv) addresses this issue by mentioning that the combination of several words loses its literal or exact meaning and conveys the meaning of something completely remote from what the words themselves suggest. Let us take this example ‘to read between the lines’. The direct interpretation is really to read something that is written between the lines. Idiomatically, it means to understand or pay attention to the implicit meaning rather than the explicit one. In a detailed study on teaching idioms, Cooper (1998:258) maintains that nonliteral or figurative language is rather difficult to tackle and comprehend due to the fact that they mean something different from the meaning of the mere literal meaning of words. He mentions metaphors, similes, proverbs and idioms as belonging to this figurative language.

5. Learnability

Alexander (1984:15) uses the term ‘fixed expressions’ to include idioms as well. He argues that all those fixed expressions have this feature in common concerning their use. Native speakers employ them as whole units except when there is room for change depending on the category of the idiom. Nattinger (1980:338) states that idioms should be stored or recalled as patterns instead of isolated units that undergo modifications in their use. Seidl and McMordie (1978:4) say that these idioms should be learned as a whole since they cannot tolerate any changes except perhaps the tense of the verb. Alexander (1984:16) stresses the need for learning idioms as whole chunks of lexical semantic-syntagmatic entities. This is bound to the fact that idioms, are semantically seldom reducible to their immediate constituents inspite of the presence of varying degrees of compositionality (elsewhere as compositeness).

6. Degree of Fixedness and Flexibility of Patterning

Concerning the degree of fixedness, the Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998:ix) states that fixed idioms are very few. Many idioms are subject to alternation, insertion, omission or deletion. An earlier version of the Longman Dictionary of English Idioms (1979:viii) says that some idioms are invariable in terms of wording and in some grammatical aspects. Consequently, they are not subject to modification the way literal expressions are. Moreover, idioms vary in their fixedness. Some idioms are completely invariable as in ‘down and out’, others are partially invariant, e.g. up to one’s ears/eyes/neck/eye (meaning to show some attention to someone). On the other hand, some idioms are very open allowing much space for change as in the case of nouns. Baker (1992:63) approves this quality. She too says that idioms are frozen in terms of offering some space for variation. She lists this example: ‘bury the hatchet’, this example allows neither substitution nor variation in the form; nor it does allow reversal of word order, deletion, addition, replacement or change in grammatical structure.

McMordie (1966:6) demonstrates that an idiomatic phrase undergoes neither alternation nor synonymy. Moreover, word order can rarely be altered since the distribution of the words may destroy the idiom or make it meaningless. In a later publication, Seidl and McMordie (1978:6) touch upon the same idea by expanding and building on the more investigated area of idioms. They maintain that some idioms are completely fixed while others are partly fixed. They list these examples: ‘To give one the cold shoulder’ is a fixed idiom while ‘To take/have/enjoy forty winks’ (meaning to have a short sleep during the day normally not in bed) is a partly fixed one except changing the tense of the verb from simple present to past. Bessmertnyi (1994:25) elucidates that certain idioms are so fixed in their use that it is advisable to learn them by heart and consider them as based on rules although rules of learning can never substitute reading as an effective means to master English.

Relevant to the idea of fixedness, Mitchell (1975:125-126) thinks that idioms are grammatically productive in the sense that many grammatical aspects are subject to change. He adds that parts of the idiom undergo some morphological modification such as ‘Kick the bucket’ which could be used as ‘kicked the bucket’. Seidl and McMordie (1978:5) assure that idioms are variant in their forms and structures ranging from very short to rather
long. Some idioms have the combination of noun+adjective; e.g. ‘cold war’. Other idioms have verb+adj.+noun ‘to fish in troubled water’. Besides, some idioms are grammatically or structurally incorrect as in ‘I am good friends with him’; ‘long time no see’. Other idioms have regular forms but meaning-wise are not clear. e.g. ‘To have a bee in one’s bonnet’. (meaning to be obsessed by an idea). In some other idioms, both form and meaning are irregular. e.g. ‘To be at large’. They further maintain that most idioms can be classified as belonging to the group where the form is regular but the meaning is unclear although some idioms are clearer and easier to guess than others. Relevant to the idea of fixedness, MacCarty and O’Dell (2003:1) reckon that although idioms are difficult to absorb, yet they are fun too. In addition, they are subject to variation from one geographical area to another. By the same token, the process of substitution is not permitted and passivization cannot be applied, for instance, the idiom “To have other fish to fry” means to have something more important to accomplish. However, one cannot replace fish by ‘salmon’ or apply passivization:* “the other fish is to be fried.”

7. Figuration
Nunberg and Wasow (1994:492) contend that idioms involve metaphors, (take the bull by the horn), hyperboles (not worth one’s salt) metonymies (lend a hand) and many other kinds of figures of speech.

8. Proverability
Nunberg and Wasow (1994:492) point out that idioms are used explicitly to describe and implicitly to explain events of social interest.

9. Informality
There is an extensive use of idioms in informal or colloquial registers in addition to popular speech and oral culture according to Nunberg and Wasow (1994:493).

10. Effect
Idioms imply an effective view towards the things they describe. In this sense, idioms are not used to describe neutral situations as buying tickets or reading a book (Ibid).

To sum up, learning idioms requires both rote-learning and analytical skills bound to the fact that they defy logical and grammatical rules. They are also problematic, metaphorical and invariant rather than literal and variable, however, they vary tremendously to the extent that idiomaticity is a matter of degree or scale.

DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED IN LEARNING IDIOMS
1. Non-literalness
A major feature of idioms is its semantic vagueness, which underlies the difficulties encountered in the process of learning. Irujo (1986a:236) believes that non-literalness constitutes a major difficulty to language learners. She argues that the idiom ‘spill the beans’ does not in any sense hint at the real meaning which is to reveal a secret if taken literally. Since neither ‘spill’ nor ‘the beans’ have anything to do with revealing a secret. By the same token, Seidl and McMordie (1978:6) think that there is no association with the general meaning of the single words of the idiom. In addition, reasons as to how or why some idioms have assumed their present form are not illustrated. Once again, the same idea is conveyed by Mackin and Seidl (1979:116). They argue that the meaning of the idiom as a combination does not equal the meaning of the separate elements of the idiom.

2. Exposure to Idioms
Exposure means having to deal with the versatile aspects of the language such as idioms. This view is interpreted by Irujo (1986a:236). She explains that the speech addressed to second language learners, mostly does not include idioms. Native speakers have the propensity to use simple and straightforward daily vocabulary when conversing with second language learners avoiding to use idioms altogether. She elaborates on the same idea of exposure by saying that although movies and television use idioms constantly, yet they do not offer the required kind of interaction substantial to the process of learning. Therefore, exposure to idioms is restricted to non-interactive situations which provide no opportunity for negotiating meaning versus interactive settings where the meaning can be established and the feedback activated.

3. Correct Use of Idioms
a. Situational Appropriateness
The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms (1979:vii) refers to this difficulty by stating that a number of idioms prove difficult due to their variability and some of them seem awkward except when used by a skilled
English speaker. Irujo (1986a:237) believes that even though learners could exhibit or exercise some mastery in detecting the meaning of some idioms, yet they are ignorant as to how to use them properly because idioms vary in their formality ranging from colloquial, and slang to formal situations. Seidl and McMordie (1978:7) are in line with this kind of difficulty. They explain that the learner lacks the knowledge as to which situation it is appropriate to use idioms. In addition, this lack of knowledge is extended to the level of style, be it formal or informal. Likewise, Watson (1991:4), contends that it is rather difficult to foreign speakers to recognise when the use of idioms is appropriate, then an excessive use sounds even worse than no use at all.

b. Grammatical Constraints

Some idioms can be formed into the past tense while others resist passivisation the matter which creates a problem for learners. Irujo (1986a:237) refers to the whole procedure as grammatical constraints. The idiom: ‘I did not sleep a wink last night’ allows no past tense*‘I slept a wink’. Another relevant fact about the difficulties is that idioms should be learned as whole chunks and not as pieces (Ibid). Seidl and McMordie (1978:8) conclude that these whole chunks that are fixed or partly fixed idioms constitute a chief difficulty due to faulty or unexactness in the use which may result in miscommunication.

Other scholars talk about restrictions imposed upon idioms. According to Gibbs and Gonzales (1985:243), idioms vary in their syntactic transformations. Some idioms permit transformations while others resist even the simplest transformational processes. Fraser (ibid) [cited in Gibbs and Gonzales], suggests that idioms are not homogenous in terms of the permitted transformations. Idioms undergo four basic transformational processes: replacement/substitution as in “catch a bus/train/tram/ferry/plane”but not motorcycle or bicycle. Addition as in “an ivory tower” might change to “carpeted ivory tower.” Permutation as in the active sentence: He’s got “crocodile tears” can be passivized into “Buckets of crocodile tears have been shed”. Deletion as in “A rolling stone gathers no moss” becomes “A rolling stone” (see Fernando 1996).

c. The Lack of Suitable Teaching Materials

Irujo (1986a: 237) maintains that many teaching materials lack the provision of idioms. Moreover, some of these teaching materials relegate idioms in other lists of vocabulary with no drills or exercises or any aids to learning. This being the case, teachers should give additional drills and practices and make them accessible to their students. In an earlier article, Irujo (1986: 287) refers to the notion of transfer from the first language. She argues that due to the fact that second language learners exhibit difficulties in conveying idioms, they avoid using them totally, because they might confuse part of the idiom they know but not master it resulting in this kind of avoidance.

d. Difficulties in the Translation of Idioms

Baker (1992: 64-65) believes that a person’s competence in the way he uses the idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language hardly ever reaches that level of a native speaker. She further maintains that this difficulty of translation, is in terms of interpretation, having no equivalent forms in the target language, specific cultures and the usage of similar counterparts may have different contexts. Likewise, Cruse (1986:42) thinks that a literal rendering of an idiom scarcely matches that level of even approximating the real meaning of the idiom resulting in various uninterpretable or irrelevant in meaning to the original idiom. A great deal of caution is seen by Seidl and McMordie (1978:8) when it comes to translating idioms. They find it extremely unwise to translate one’s own native language idioms into English. If this translation takes place, the result may be utterly bewildering and in turn amusing to the native speaker as in most cases. In rare cases, the translator may be lucky enough that the two idioms match in both languages. Acculturation is a pre-requisite in such cases.

e. Marginalization, Peripheralization and Penumbra of Idioms

Based on the researcher’s keen observation and required information, neither govermental nor private universities at the national level align the study of idioms as an essential component and hence a course that has to be incorporated into students’ curricula during the course of their study. On the other hand, the vast majority of students do show a willingness, eagerness and zeal once being introduced to idioms. More importantly, they try to assimilate them when appropriate whether in speech or writing; they do have an aptitude towards learning and achieving a better status in the second language.
THE IMPORTANCE OF IDIOMS

It has been often demonstrated that almost every occasion makes use of idioms. Speakers are judged by the extent of which they assimilate idioms to their speech and writing. It has been observed that competent native speakers, called as “expert users of English”, are those who use English with expertise including idioms (McCarty and O’Dell, 2003:1).

Sharing this view with many other scholars (Cooper, 1998; Fernando, 1996; Irujo, 1986), the use of idioms is indicative of a learner’s mastery of the target language. In this respect, we conclude that idioms are a basic and crucial part of the language that signifies a speaker/learner’s good command of the language. Cooper (1998: 260) believes that using idioms appropriately in speech and writing generates self-poise and elevates self esteem by learners.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

There is a general agreement that idioms are important in speech and writing. Quite many scholars have emphasized the great significance and value of idioms. The following quotations lend credibility to this view:

“The sheer number of idioms and their high frequency in discourse make them an important aspect of vocabulary acquisition and language learning in general….” Fernando (1996).

“Since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a secondary importance in the curriculum” Cooper (1998).

“A strong knowledge of idioms will help students to be better speakers and negotiators. And they will be in a much better position to take advantage of the opportunities that come their way.”


“English is a language particularly rich in idioms—those modes of expression peculiar to a language (or dialect) which frequently defy logical and grammatical rules. Without idioms, English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing” Merikari (1997).

METHODS OF TEACHING

There are many suggestions, techniques and tips to teach idioms to different levels in which they give some pieces of advice to be heeded in the course of study (see Cooper’s study, 1998).

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having presented a plethora of information on idioms, it has been observed that idioms constitute a major part of language. We cannot but agree that idioms are important in both oral and written discourse. Therefore, there is a desperate need to scrutinize curricula already adhered to at different universities. By modifying these curricula into more encompassing, inclusive and didactic ones, the teaching and promoting of idioms gains a better status to the betterment of learners and the quality of the instructive materials. It is prime time in these days and age we reconsider our own teaching habits and image. The teaching of idioms should be given sufficient concern in all study plans. Therefore, we cannot simply ignore the vital role of idioms and the wealth of idioms in the English language. Irrespective of the degree of difficulty and inflexibility of patterning, a workable panacea would be to teach first the transparent idioms as a good start and then move to the semi-transparent ones until learners various levels of intelligence have accommodated the different types of idioms properly. In the last resort, they would be efficient enough to absorb metaphorical and pure idioms and cope with them accordingly. Teachers play a considerable role in promoting the learning of idioms. They can always refer to their presence in various contexts by explaining their idiomatic meaning. Based on the researcher’s own observation over a period of four years teaching different courses, it has been noticed that students are influenced by the way idioms are introduced and interpreted by their instructors. They also show a considerable inclination towards learning them. However, students should not merely rely on their instructors; they are to consult good dictionaries that are exclusively devoted to idioms. Rote-learning and analytical skills are both of utmost importance to learning idioms. Rote learning is so vital because if a learner uses an idiom in a wrong way as for instance substituting a word with another, or using a singular noun instead of a plural one or even any slight change in the composition of the original idiom would result in awkward, misunderstood idiom defeating the purpose. In addition, students should make use of reading literary works that exhibit abundance of idioms. Reading has a great advantage in the sense that
it enriches students’ vocabulary and language use. Reading for fun is also highly useful since students learn and absorb in a non-didactic environment unlike rigid teaching environment in some cases. Making use of the available Internet is recommended where they have access to good instructive materials. Many specialized sites list hundreds of idioms along with their interpretations and examples on them. They also provide many valuable tips and workable techniques on how to learn them as pictorial idioms, idioms directory, idiom exercises, and idiom games. Reading the daily newspaper in English is of enormous value since it uses many idioms every now and then. On the whole, getting advantage from mass media is immensely profitable. Another useful suggestion is to compare first and second language idioms and see what the similarities and/or differences so as to learn them and try to use them for future reference and when appropriate.

Due to the observation that the explanation of idioms is time consuming, it is recommended that idioms should be taken as separate courses to give them the needed full credit.

Idioms are neither “It’s all Greek to me” that we are advocating, nor “A piece of cake” that we are espousing but a core issue that has to be raised, considered, faced and forced.

REFERENCES


Relevant and Useful Websites, Online and Electronic Material:
Annotated List Idioms Websites
Idioms Resource Page+ Quizzes
Conventionalized Multiword…

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