

A Study of University Students' Idiomatic Competence

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Abstract

There is no doubt that formulaic expressions such as collocations, idioms and compounds play an important role in the second language acquisition and their teaching should be an integral part of foreign language learning since they show insights into foreign language culture and promote fluency, proficiency and communicative competence. That is the reason why idioms present an integral part of the English language curriculum at the Faculty of Food Technology and students are taught idioms related to food. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to establish whether the students are familiar with the food idioms prior to teaching them in order to incorporate them into the curriculum. The assumption is that most of the idioms are not intelligible to students since it is impossible to guess their meaning by analysing their individual components. However, due to the fact that the subjects were the 1st year graduate students who have been learning English for 15 years, this research will reveal whether there are students who are almost proficient users of English since they are familiar with most of the idioms. These results will, then, be of great importance when revising and designing the teaching materials intended for the students of food technology.

Keywords: idioms, multi-word units, formulaic expressions, collocations

1. Introduction

Acquisition of vocabulary and word combinations presents an important aspect of language learning. Language learners are often not aware of the existence of compounds, collocations and idioms and they perceive them as separate units, which leads to a number of errors. Language for specific purposes is a special area where the knowledge of specific lexical items is of great importance. Since idioms present a major component of lexical knowledge, their importance for successful communication cannot be denied. Figure 1 shows the hierarchy of errors and, as evident from this figure, lexical errors are considered the most serious because it is possible to understand a speaker if he/she makes a grammatical error, but not if a lexical error is made, which can lead to misunderstanding. For this reason, lexical

units play a pivotal role in language teaching and learning and lead to native-like proficiency.

THE MOST SERIOUS
SERIOUS

THE LEAST

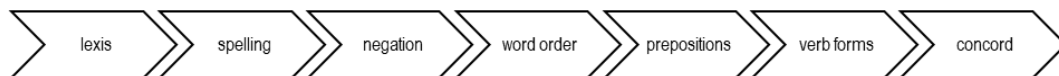


Figure 1. Hierarchy of mistakes according to McCretton and Rider. Source: Adapted from James (1998, p. 229)

2. Defining idioms

A lot of problems emerge when one tries to define idioms. Scholars agree on one point: they are multi-word units. So are collocations, which do not cause any serious problems to the EFL/ESL learners in the understanding process (Mackin, 1978). A multi-word unit can be defined as a fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage (Grant and Bauer, 2004). This term encompasses both idioms and restricted collocations (those where it is possible to substitute only one constituent), but not phrasal verbs since they are a separate and independent group that deserves research on its own. According to Fernando (1996), idioms are “conventionalized multi-word expressions often, but not always non-literal.” Gramley and Patzhold (2003) define an idiom as a “complex lexical item which is longer than a word form but shorter than a sentence and which has a meaning that cannot be derived from the knowledge of its component parts.” In the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, we can find the following definition of an idiom: a group of words whose meaning considered as a unit is different from the meanings of each word considered separately. However, the context in which a certain multi-word unit is used is necessary to decide whether we are dealing with a literal or idiomatic interpretation of a multi-word unit. For example, a multi-word unit *to kick the bucket* can have the following meaning: to strike the pail with your foot or to die. It is generally accepted, however, that literal senses of some expressions do not survive alongside their figurative ones in normal, everyday use (Cowie, Mackin and McCaig 1993). The criteria for defining idioms have changed, have been narrowed and modified by lexicographers, Eastern European phraseologists, lexical semantics, lexicologists and vocabulary in language teaching research, and the most generally accepted definition of an idiom is the one describing them as words, whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of their constituent parts (Grant and Bauer, 2004).

3. Types of idioms

Makkai (1972) divides these idiomatic multi-word units into a heterogeneous set of phrase and sentence “types”, the most common of which include lexemic idioms (those can be subdivided into phrasal verbs - *bring up*, tournures - *rain cats and dogs*, irreversible binominals - *coffee and cream*, phrasal compounds - *blackmail*, incorporating verbs - *eavesdrop* and pseudo-idioms - *to and fro*), and sememic idioms (further subdivided into: proverbs - *It never rains but it pours*, familiar quotations - *brevity is the soul of wit*, first-base idioms associated with a national game like baseball - *have two strikes against one*, idioms of institutionalized politeness - *May I ask who's calling?*, idioms of institutionalized greeting - *how do you do?*, idioms of an institutionalized understatement - *I wasn't too crazy about him* and idioms of institutionalized hyperbole - *he won't even lift a finger*). This classification was further extended by different authors. Alexander (1987) adds four more categories to Makkai's classification of lexemic idioms (proverbial idioms - *the land of Nod*, metaphorical idioms - *a hot potato* and idiomatic similes - *as cool as a cucumber*) and McCarthy (1998) adds even more categories - prepositional expressions - *in two shakes of a lamb's tail*, frozen similes - *as keen as mustard*, possessive's phrases - *a king's ransom*, opaque compounds - *a mish-mash*, idiomatic speech routines, gambits and discourse markers - *by the way*, restricted collocations - *breakneck speed* and cultural allusions - *to be or not to be*. Semantically, idioms can be classified into six categories: a) semi-idioms which include at least one word connected to its literal meaning (e.g. *stir up trouble*), b) semi-opaque idioms whose meaning can be guessed, but not easily (e.g. *keep one's head above water*), c) pseudo idioms which include an element that has no meaning on its own (e.g. *spic and span*), d) pure idioms, well-formed idioms, or idioms that have both literal and non-literal meaning (e.g. *spill the beans*), e) full idioms which consist of constituents whose ordinary meanings are not related to the idioms' semantic interpretations (e.g. *toe the line*) and f) figurative idioms that have figurative meanings besides current literal interpretations (e.g. *catch fire*) (Grant 2003). Syntactically, idioms seem to include any type of immediate constituent (they can be further divided into asyntactic idioms - *by and large*, commonly occurring phrase patterns - *in the nick of time*, clause patterns - *foot the bill*, different grammatical types - *keep tabs on someone*). However, such classification provides descriptions rather than definitions (*under the water*, *blow the gaff*). As far as functional classification of idioms is considered, it appears that the function of idioms varies with the spoken (making complaints or for topic transition) or written genre. No matter which classification is considered, they seem to exhibit discursal (Moon, 1998a) and pragmatic functions as well (Simpson and Mendis, 2003). Lontas (1999, as cited in Lontas, 2017) claims that there are at least three relevant dimensions to any given idiomatic expression: the semantic opacity dimension (also known as transparency), the structural dimension, and the conventionalized pragmatic dimension. Semantic opacity or transparency is “the extent to which an idiom's meaning can be inferred from the meanings of its constituents” (Glucksberg,

2001: 74). When the structural dimension is taken into account, they interpreted as are memorized configurations which are identified when those word configurations become unique to the idiomatic expression in the minds of language learner (Glucksberg, 2001).

4. Importance of idioms

It is a well-known fact that learning the words individually results in a number of problems. It takes a lot of time to retrieve the words from the learners' memory and to make proper sentences. Thus, learning the words in chunks and different combinatory possibilities of words contribute to developing proficiency in a foreign language. A successful language learning mastery includes a crucial component of learning formulaic sequences such as idioms, collocations, and compounds (Wray, 2000). Apart from that, learning idioms and other formulaic sequences results in making the learners familiar with the foreign language culture and customs. It is roughly estimated that native speakers of English use approximately 7,000 idioms per week, although these numbers have yet to be corroborated by empirical data (Hoffman, 1984, as cited in Liontas, 2017). That is the reason why idioms should be included in the curriculum and should be presented to learners according to the frequency of usage, which is a topic covered by applied and corpus linguists who take into accounts the frequencies and patterns of idioms in order to give priorities in teaching and learning contexts (Liu, 2003). While designing the teaching materials, the teachers can group the idioms according to themes, which creates the possibility of better retention since these topics and themes present a framework and organization for the random lists and make it much easier for the learners to grasp them more deeply (Boers, 2000). There is a wide range of idioms related to nature, animals, body parts, sports, food, etc. It just remains for the teachers to check and decide which idioms out of these groups are used most frequently. Another, so-called, non-semantic approach to teaching is to provide the idioms one by one and quite incidentally through the materials. The importance of formulaic sequences is also emphasized by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) who point out their usefulness in teaching conversation and developing fluency. Promotion of communicative competence, proficiency, fluency and familiarization with the target language seem like convincing arguments emphasizing the importance of idioms (Wray, 2000; Wood, 2002; Schmitt, 2004; Thyab, 2016). That is the reason why idioms should find their place in teaching materials and curriculum.

5. Methodology

For corpus analysis, two written activities were administered to thirty 1st year graduate students of the faculty of food technology. These students have been studying English for 15 years. That is the reason why the receptive (in the first activity) and productive (the second activity) knowledge of idioms was tested. In the first activity, the students were asked to connect twenty-two food idioms with their meanings. The second activity was designed to check the productive knowledge of

idioms since the students were asked to use idioms from the previous activity in the sentences containing gaps. It is generally accepted that most of the idioms are not intelligible to students, but the activities were so designed (starting from the easier) to enable students to fulfil their tasks without any difficulties (in the first activity, they could have matched the idioms they are familiar with their meaning and the meaning of the rest of the idioms could have been guessed). The other reason why this research was conducted on the 1st year graduate students is the fact that they have been studying English for quite a lot of time and there may be students who are advanced (or proficient) users of English who can recognize and use idioms related to food.

6. Results and discussion

The results of this research were attained from the corpus which consisted of 22 idioms. In the first activity, the students had to match idioms with their meanings (Table 1). The students were very successful since the accuracy percentage shown in Table 3 was very high (77 %). They had most problems with matching the idiom *to go pear-shaped* with its meaning since the accuracy percentage was only 33 %. The idioms *full of beans* and *to put all one's eggs in one basket* were correct in 50 % of cases, whereas they were well-familiar with the idioms *a piece of cake* and *a big cheese* (accuracy percentage 97%), followed by *to take something with a pinch of salt* and *to be as alike as two peas in a pod* (accuracy percentage 90 %). Generally speaking, the students showed good receptive knowledge of idioms, which was checked in the first activity. The next step was to use the idioms from the 1st activity in the corresponding sentences, so as to check the productive knowledge of idioms (Table 2). The results obtained in this case were slightly below the score from the previous activity. Namely, the accuracy percentage, also shown in Table 1, was 71 %. The idiom they had the most problems with was *to go pear-shaped* as in the first activity. However, they were more successful in the actual application of the idiom in a sentence, the accuracy percentage being 40 %. It was also difficult for them to use the idiom *hot potato* in a sentence (53 % accuracy). Interestingly, they had less problems with the usage of idioms *full of beans* and *to put all one's eggs in one basket* in a sentence (63 % and 67 % accuracy, respectively). Their score was, again, very high for the idiom *a piece of cake* (97 %), followed by the idiom *carrot top* (90 %). As expected, the students were less successful in the second activity since they were confronted with a more difficult task although there were students whose score was 100 %. However, the results do not deviate much from the previous activity so the next goal was to check whether there is a positive correlation between these two tasks. It was tested by Pearson's correlation coefficient. The score obtained was 0.7 which indicates a positive correlation between these two activities, meaning that it is very likely for the students who failed to match the idiom to its meaning to make the same error while using the same idiom in the corresponding sentence. The low scores obtained in some cases are a signal that some idioms (*to go pear-shaped*, *hot potato*) are not known to students and they show us that they should be practised and taught more in the future. The possible reasons why the students are not familiar with these idioms might be due to

the contextual factors, meaning they were not exposed enough to these idioms and could, therefore, not foresee their meanings although the idiom *hot potato* is used very often and it is not clear why it is not familiar to the students. Out of all the above-mentioned idioms, the idiom *in a nutshell* is the most frequently used (Rafatbakhsh and Ahmadi, 2019) with the usage of 1.18 per million and this research showed that this idiom was used correctly in 80 and 70 % of cases, respectively. So, one of the methods of teaching idioms could be to present them to students according to their frequency of usage and to organize them according to different themes conveyed by their meaning. Previous research on idiom learning strategies revealed that the most frequently used strategies were guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context, discussing and analysing the idiom, using the literal meaning of an idiom, repeating and paraphrasing idiom, using background knowledge, referring to an L1 idiom, imagining an actual situation in which the expression could be used, a meta-analysis about the nature of idioms, using an L1 equivalent, group discussion, retelling and rephrasing (instead of ‘repeating and paraphrasing’), and figuring out the meaning of individual words in order to guess the meaning as a whole (Cooper, 1999; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016). An additional strategy which could be applied is using various media and different kinds of texts to encourage the students to explore authentic L2 language materials themselves (Pucelj, 2018). Furthermore, some studies were also conducted to establish the relationship between the participants’ attitudes and the idiom learning strategies they employ while acquiring new idioms (Liontas, 2002; Ababneh, 2016). There seems to be a positive correlation between these two variables, meaning the more positive the attitude a student has, the more strategies he or she will use to learn new idiomatic expressions. Very high scores obtained in the present study showing that the students possess good knowledge of idioms could be explained by the fact that Croatian students do have an overall positive attitude towards English, regardless of their education level (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007; Batur, 2016; Badžoka, 2017). Furthermore, the studies conducted in Croatia also show that there is a small statistically significant positive correlation between the participants’ academic achievement and the attitudes towards acquiring new idiomatic expressions. It implies that the learners that have a higher grade in the course also possess a more positive attitude towards learning idiom (Pucelj, 2018). Overall, it can be concluded that the students show positive attitudes towards learning new idioms and that they already possess good knowledge of idioms; it is only up to the teachers to find the most efficient way of teaching them and create the materials that would best suit their students’ desires and wishes.

Table 1. Idioms and their meaning (1st activity)

Idiom	meaning
1 to egg someone on	earn the income
2 a big cheese	very relaxed

3 to bring home the bacon	very important person (VIP)
4 to butter someone up	person with red or orange hair
5 carrot top	be extra nice to someone (usually for selfish reasons)
6 cool as a cucumber	be pregnant
7 full of beans	have a lot of (silly) energy
8 hard nut to crack	rely on one single thing
9 hot potato	use your brain
10 in a nutshell	do not be upset about making a mistake, since you cannot change that now
11 it's/there's no use crying over spilled milk	don't consider sth 100% accurate
12 a piece of cake	to become irrational or crazy
13 to put all one's eggs in one basket	difficult to understand (often a person)
14 to take something with a pinch (grain) of salt	a controversial or difficult subject
15 use your noodle	in summary
16 to know one's onions	to redden in the face (blush)
17 to go pear-shaped	reveal the truth
18 to be as alike as two peas in a pod	to be very similar
19 to go bananas	to fail or fall apart
20 to go red as a beetroot	to be very knowledgeable or skilled in some area
21 to spill the beans	very easy
22 to have a bun in the oven	to urge someone to do something

Table 2. Idioms in a sentence

idiom	sentence
full of beans	The kids are always _____ after sleeping.
bring home the bacon	My husband has had to _____ ever since I lost my job.
carrot top	I bet my future child will be a _____. Red hair runs in my family.
to go pear-shaped	The project was very successful at first, but then it _____. Everything went completely wrong.
go bananas	Robert _____ when he found his wife had crashed his car. I've never seen him so angry.

egg someone on	The gang tried to _____ us _____ but we didn't want to fight.
cool as a cucumber	When the fire broke out everybody panicked, except Tom. He stayed _____. He stayed completely calm.
as alike as two peas in a pod	Paul and his father are _____. It's incredible - they're completely identical.
red as a beetroot	Brian went _____ when he realized that we'd overheard what he said. He was so embarrassed.
to know one's onions	If you want to know about the pros and cons of GMO, ask William. He really _____. It's a field which he's expert in.
to have a bun in the oven	I don't think she will come to the bar because she has a _____. I wonder if it's a boy or a girl.
to take something with a pinch (grain) of salt	Take everything you read on the Internet with a _____ and you'll be okay.
a big cheese	I thought I was just going to interview the secretary, but they let me talk to the _____ himself.
butter someone up	We'll have to _____ Anne _____ before we tell her the news about the broken plate.
hard nut to crack	The spy we captured is a _____; he hasn't said a thing since we began the interrogation.
hot potato	Another _____ in US politics is whether or not to keep abortion legal.
in a nutshell	I don't want the long version— just tell me what your point is _____.
It's no use crying over spilled milk	I know that you really wanted to pass that exam, but you didn't study enough. There's _____. It will be better next time.
a piece of cake	Studying English is _____ for me. It is very easy and I don't have to prepare at home at all.
to put all one's eggs in one basket	I applied to several colleges so I _____ in one basket.
to use one's noodle	You're going to have to really _____ on this crossword puzzle. It's an extra difficult one.
to spill the beans	There is a surprise party for her on Saturday. Please don't _____.

Table 3. Accuracy percentage (1st and 2nd activity) and Pearson’s correlation coefficient

idiom	% accuracy (1 st activity)	% accuracy (2 nd activity)	Pearson’s correlation coefficient
1 egg someone on	83 %	63 %	
2 a big cheese	97 %	80 %	
3 bring home the bacon	83 %	70 %	
4 butter someone up	80 %	73 %	
5 carrot top	90 %	90 %	
6 cool as a cucumber	87 %	83 %	
7 full of beans	50 %	63 %	
8 hard nut to crack	83 %	80 %	
9 hot potato	57 %	53 %	
10 in a nutshell	80 %	70 %	
11 it's/there's no use crying over spilled milk	93 %	63 %	
12 a piece of cake	97 %	97 %	
13 put all one's eggs in one basket	50 %	67 %	
14 take something with a pinch (grain) of salt	90 %	83 %	
15 use your noodle	93 %	63 %	
16 to know one's onions	63 %	57 %	
17 to go pear-shaped	33 %	40 %	
18 to be as alike as two peas in a pod	90 %	87 %	
19 to go bananas	63 %	70 %	
20 to go red as a beetroot	80 %	80 %	
21 spill the beans	83 %	83 %	
22 to have a bun in the oven	63 %	63 %	
	77 %	71 %	0,7414

7. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to determine whether the 1st year graduate students who have been learning English for 15 years are familiar with the idioms related to food, i.e. to check if they can match the idioms with their meanings and then use them in sentences. The results revealed that they possess good knowledge of idioms because the accuracy percentage was 77 % and 71 %, respectively. Furthermore, there were even two students who made no errors, their score was 100 % in both activities. The meaning of the idiom *a piece of cake* was well-known to them and they were able to use it correctly in the corresponding sentence. The idioms they mostly struggled with were the idioms *to go pear-shaped* and *hot potato*. The obtained results will be a good starting point for teaching as it is clear that more time should be spent explaining and

teaching the above-mentioned idioms since they lead to more fluent speaking and writing. Idioms can be taught in various ways: explaining their meaning or by demonstrating the meaning of a certain idiom through a context, by discussing and analysing the idiom, using the literal meaning of an idiom, repeating and paraphrasing idiom, using background knowledge, imagining an actual situation in which the expression could be used, a meta-analysis about the nature of idioms, group discussion, retelling and rephrasing (instead of 'repeating and paraphrasing'), and figuring out the meaning of individual words in order to guess the meaning as a whole. Finally, idioms can be translated and compared to their equivalents in the mother tongue. To check whether a certain idiom is acquired, the students can be asked to match idioms with their meanings or they can be offered several different meanings of an idiom (a multiple-choice question) and they should circle the correct one. Furthermore, foreign language learners can be asked to use idioms in sentences or to replace the demonstrated meaning with the corresponding idiom. To conclude, teaching materials should contain more idioms and special emphasis should be put on their active usage since prefabricated chunks help learners to improve fluency, especially in spoken language and lead to native-like proficiency. Thus, their importance should not be neglected because they are means by which the foreign language learners can express very complex thoughts through very few words.

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