

TEACHING IDIOMATIC ENGLISH IN ESP CLASS

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Abstract. More and more researches illustrate a great role of idioms in foreign language education. While a great deal of these researches focuses on the positive impact idioms play in learning foreign languages, there is a need for more empirical research aimed at teaching idiomatic language, which requires effective teaching techniques. The authors of this paper made an attempt to meet this challenge. In this study, the research objective defined by the authors is to prove that humorous stories (anecdotes) promote the acquisition of idioms easily and efficiently. The leading research method was a three-stage experiment. To successfully conduct the experiment, there was compiled a list of ninety frequently used English idioms. Twenty two MA students volunteered to participate in this experiment. The obtained results indicated that the linguistic phenomena are “well-digested” when they are presented in the appealing way in the classroom. The paper discusses issues and practices of the techniques implemented in this study for teaching idiomatic English in ESP class and offers general recommendations for foreign language educators.

Keywords: effective teaching techniques, frequently used idioms, humorous stories (anecdotes), idiomatic English, idioms acquisition, ESP class, positive impact of idioms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Idioms and idiomatic language are some of the most interesting and creative vocabulary terms to learn in any language. How can foreign language teachers assist English language learners to understand idiomatic language? “I think I can get good mileage out of this idea” – we love idiomatic expressions and idiomatic phrases in English, don’t we? From a language-learner’s point of view, they are the ‘icing on the cake.’ But how do we remember what they mean and how to use them?” (Ball, n. d). These questions brought to the authors’ minds an idea to conduct an experiment to prove that humorous stories (anecdotes) promote a better acquisition of English idioms. Although a great many language educators (Schmitt, 2000) (Nation, 2001) (Nation & Meara, 2002) (Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002) (Skovorodnikov, 2004) (Grant & Nation, 2006) (Boers, 2008) (Boers, Píriz, Stengers, and Eyckmans, 2009) (Khalikova, 2012) (Chen & Lai, 2013) (Rodriguez & Winnberg, 2013) claim the positive impact idioms play in learning foreign languages, not many original and effective techniques on teaching idiomatic language have been offered so far. And there hardly can be found any suggestions on teaching English idioms in ESP class.

In this study, anecdotes are suggested to assimilate idioms on the topics “Labour”, “Education”, “Good manners”, “Nurture”, “Friendship”. There were selected 90 idiomatic expressions, e.g. *He that would eat the kernel must crack the nut; Jack of all trades is a master of none; Idleness rusts the mind* etc. Anecdotes are read easily because they are short, simple and comical. Moreover, a humorous context doubles the vividness and expressiveness of an idiom.

To elucidate the question, the authors carried out a three-stage experiment. At the ascertaining stage, MA students’ input knowledge in idiomatic phrases was checked. At the formative stage, there were offered a good many tasks aimed at developing MA students’ language proficiency in using idiomatic expressions through anecdotes and humoresques. At the control stage, the updated test, which included twice more idioms, assessed MA students’ output knowledge in using idiomatic expressions in ESP class.

The approbation of the materials, thoroughly selected by the researchers for this study, allows them to prove their hypothesis that the authentic humorous stories help learners to sort out and use particular

idioms relevant to the situation, thus improving their knowledge of idiomatic English.

The teaching technique how to teach idiomatic English in ESP class proposed by the authors showed itself effective and positive. The practical output of the research consists in the possibility of the usage of approbated materials in ESP class and language training courses.

2. STUDY MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Site

Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication of Kazan (Volga region) Federal University (Russian Federation).

2.2. Students’ Background

Number, age and gender characteristics: 22 students, 21-22 years old, females.

Students’ status: MA students.

2.3. Research method

The leading research method in this study was a three-stage experiment. In accordance with the set objectives of the study, the experiment was conducted for MA students during two semesters: Fall 2016 and Spring 2017.

The experiment consisted of three stages: I.

Ascertaining experiment.

II. Forming experiment.

II. Control experiment.

I. At the ascertaining stage, MA students were offered a multiple-choice test containing 30 idioms to reveal their initial knowledge in idiomatic phrases. Those idioms were selected by the following two criteria:

- Frequently used idioms singled out from contemporary dictionaries, e.g. Linda and Roger Flavell “Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins”, Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004), Richard A. Spears “NTC’s Thematic Dictionary of American Idioms” etc.

- Ranked by the following topics:
- a) "Labour"
- b) "Education"
- c) "Good manners"
- d) "Nurture"
- e) "Friendship".

2.4. Sample

1. Let's have a party at the beginning of the year. It will help to **break the ice / mold / air**. *(to make people feel more friendly and willing to talk to each other)*
2. You've really **made a name / title / place for yourself**, haven't you? *(to become well known, famous and / or respected)*
3. He said that he had missed his lecture because he had to visit a sick relative, but I don't really think he was **on the air/ ground / level**. *(being honest and telling the truth)*

II. The formative stage of the experiment consisted of several steps:

1. MA students were offered a piece of a humorous extract to read and find out idiomatic expressions:

Sweet words

A husband is in hospital after a serious operation and he's just regaining consciousness. His wife is sitting at his bedside. All of a sudden, his eyes flutter open, and he murmurs, "You're beautiful". Flattered, the wife continues her vigil while he drifts back to sleep. Later, the man wakes up again and says, "You're cute".

And the woman responds angrily, "Hey, what happened to "beautiful"? To which he replies, "The drugs are wearing off".

2. Working with the context in which the idioms are presented. Idioms that appeared in a context were easier for students to understand since they could make use of previous information to interpret the figurative meaning.

3. Grouping idioms according to a theme. It could be a) according to the main word they

contained, such as verbs or b) according to their underlying metaphorical themes.

4. Accomplishing matching tasks with pictures describing a particular idiomatic expression etc.

III. The control experiment was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of anecdotes and humoresques in practice as a means of MA students' awareness and proficiency in using idiomatic expressions in ESP class. At this stage, there were offered 60 idioms; they were included into the updated output test.

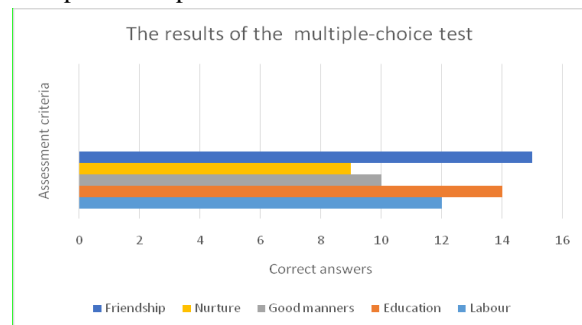


Figure 1. Results of the multiple-choice test at the ascertaining stage

3. RESULTS

The multiple-choice test helped to identify the gaps in idiomatic language knowledge and proved the importance of anecdotes and humoresques inclusion into the learning process that served the base of the following experiment. The results of the multiple-choice test at the ascertaining stage are shown in Figure 1.

All these data were taken into account during the experiment for the organization of the educational process at the formative stage where various drilling and communicative tasks developing language proficiency, i.e. speech fluency and accuracy of using idiomatic expressions through anecdotes and humoresques were implemented in EFL class.

The updated output test of the control stage was aimed at revealing students' knowledge on the above mentioned issues. The results of the updated output test are shown in Figure 2.

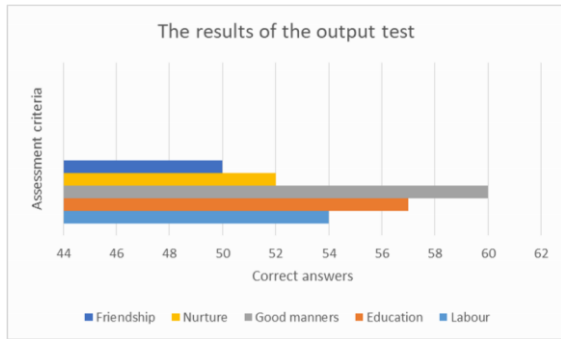


Figure 2. Results of the output test at the control stage

Comparing the results of both (ascertaining and control) stages, we obtained discrepant results. Overall, they confirmed the positive trend in the improvement of MA students' knowledge in using idioms. Significantly, the quality of MA students' knowledge in the English language increased that, to some respect, can prove the formation of educational abilities and skills.

4. DISCUSSION

Idioms are an important part of acquiring a language and often indicate a proficient learner. Another important part of idiom acquisition is that these figurative expressions make a language more vibrant. They are useful when decorating the language or when searching for new ways of expressing oneself (Rodriguez & Winnberg, 2013). However, the ability to understand and use idiomatic language is considered to be the largest barrier to fluency in the target language. This is why teaching idiomatic expressions in the classroom plays a great role in foreign language education.

It is estimated that there are over 10,000 idioms in English, some relatively recent and some that have been used for more than 2,000 years (Brenner, 2011). In this study, there were suggested 90 most frequently used and useful idioms on the topics "Labour", "Education", "Good manners", "Nurture", "Friendship" to be assimilated in ESP class.

There is a great deal of research available concerning vocabulary learning. According to Cooper (Cooper, 1998), the following approaches to consolidating new idioms can be offered:

- choosing idioms – it is important to find those that are frequently encountered in everyday situations that are not grammatically complex and have transparent figurative meanings

- Discussing idioms – learners often lack the knowledge to comprehend an idiom, simply because they do not know what figurative language is

- Defining idioms – after the initial discussion, the teacher should "present the new idiom within the larger context of a short paragraph or a dialogue"

- Dividing idioms into categories – for the student can study them as groups composed of elements that have common features rather than as lists of unrelated expressions to be memorized

- Drawing idioms – the relationship between the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom can be illustrated by using pictures, for example, creating a dictionary of idiomatic sayings

- Dramatizing idioms – since misinterpretations of idioms can easily lead to humorous situations, these can be acted out

- Retelling exercise – students retell a story made up by the teacher, using as many idioms as possible

- Add-on story – the teacher starts the narrative by using one of the idioms written on the board, after which each student adds a sentence including one of the idioms

- Discuss idioms from newspaper comic strips – each student selects a comic strip containing an idiomatic expression with a further discussion

- Idioms in cartoons – the teacher collects samples where the literal meaning and the figurative meaning are used to achieve humorous situations and discusses it with the students

- Idioms from TV shows – running lists of idioms can be compiled from TV shows, shows can be shown in class and the idioms discussed

- Paragraph completion – students complete a paragraph or dialogue with the appropriate idiom and can be shown that they were able to use the correct one because of the context provided

- Interview classmates – by interviewing native speakers learners can be taught the meaning and appropriateness of certain idioms in specific situations

- Idiom-of-the-day mobile – mobiles created by the students with idioms can be hung from the ceiling
- Idiom board game – the suggestion is that students create a game using idiomatic expressions and clues connected to their meaning. For example “*How do you say you’re really happy? Hint: You’re high in the air! Answer: I’m in seventh heaven or I’m on cloud nine.*”
- Idiom jazz chants – students can create the chants and even lead the class in the practicing.

However, very little research focuses specifically on learning idiomatic expressions through anecdotes and humoresques. In this paper, we have outlined a research question: Do anecdotes and humoresques contribute to the consolidation of idiomatic expressions in acquiring a foreign language?

According to the university curriculum, in the subject of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), MA students should acquire certain knowledge and skills. Some of these are definitely connected to MA students’ comprehension of idioms.

This paper suggests that idioms need to be learned so that learners can fully understand the target language. Learning idiomatic language develops a learners’ verbal ability to implement communicative intentions in order to express their evaluative opinions. The question remains, though, if idiomatic expressions should be taught explicitly or could be learned incidentally (Rodriguez & Winnberg, 2013). This question opens the door to new researches.

This study helped our MA students to consolidate new idioms through humorous texts. We have much evidence to suggest that MA students benefit from activities aimed at learning idioms through anecdotes and humoresques. The experiment allowed us to come to the conclusion that knowledge of idiomatic language greatly facilitates the communicative process and helps overcome the language barrier to reach a new level of communication.

The findings of the study can serve as guidelines for English teachers and English language learners.

5. CONCLUSION

So, the ultimate aim of this study was to show whether it is possible to acquire idiomatic expressions through anecdotes and humoresques in

ESP class. The analysis of the preliminary diagnostic test at the ascertaining stage of the experiment showed that all students during the use of idioms do have problems with accuracy. The findings went hand in hand with the simultaneous processing hypothesis which proved that humorous texts help MA students to assimilate idiomatic expressions relevant to the situation of communication, thus elevating their idiomatic language awareness.

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