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THE INFLUENCE OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS ON ENHANCING TERTIARY LEVEL
STUDENTS' WRITING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent of influence of idioms on university students' writing. Learning a new language requires the study of the three major levels of linguistic analysis; that is, vocabulary, grammar and phonology. As the study of idioms falls within the scope of meaning; the researcher saw it appropriate to conduct a thesis on the above mentioned topic. English without idioms becomes a language empty of content. This study aims at familiarizing Sudanese university students with idioms; therefore the researcher designed a course that contains many types of idioms. The means for collecting data (a test and an interview) have been chosen as primary tools for the analysis due to the fact that their contents are closely related to the topic. The main concern of the study is to shed light on an important aspect of English which is commonly; either completely or partially ignored by teachers. The results have shown that, the significant value (0.05) for the pre-test, and (0.41) for the post-test proves the hypothesis of the study; that is, university students are unfamiliar with English idioms.

Introduction

It goes without saying that many of the none-natives who write or speak English fluently tend to avoid certain aspects of English either because their culture background is limited or those characteristics do not exist in L1, such as proverbs, tag question and of course idioms, etc. such avoidance makes one's English dull and void of spirit; even though their writing and speaking is generally comprehensible, the above mentioned defect has prompted the researcher to consider it as an important characteristic of English that needs to be explored in order to fill up the gap and hence to set up the subject matter of this paper. Thus, this study aims at investigating the problems that affect students' performance when they come across English idioms.

The study will adopt the following methods

1. The descriptive and analytic approaches have been adopted for collecting the relevant data for the study.
2. A diagnostic test and an interview have also been used as tools for data collection.

3. The sample consisted of 80 students studying at Quran University Omdurman and five university lecturers from different universities in Sudan.

Aims and scope of the study

A major concern of this study is to prove the reasons behind the tendency of university students of English to avoid and neglect English idioms in their writings, and to propose solutions to the problem.

This paper aims at finding out the roots of the above mentioned problem, and to show the extent to which tertiary level students' of English language tend to avoid using idiomatic expressions? And to what degree do they have positive or negative attitudes towards dealing with them.

The researcher intends to come up with reasonable solutions that might help students to bridge the gap and unravel the complexity of multi-word verbs, prepositions, adverb, collocations, and idiomatic expressions.

Theoretical Background

General Views of the Topic

Idioms are vital components of English; they may be defined as expressions peculiar to a language. They play an important part in all languages. Many verbs, when followed by various prepositions, or adverbs acquire an idiomatic sense; as,

Rust has **eaten away** (corroded) the plate.

He is ready to **dispose of** (sell) his car.

Students of English realize very early on their learning career that particles collocate with verbs without any clear rules or logic, this particular complexity poses an obstacle to learners, the thing that discourage them from using idioms.

Another complexity is that, students who have not had a thorough knowledge of idioms; usually do not understand what is being said, and consequently become very embarrassed and might give up studying. An example of such situations where lack of knowledge of idioms makes a misunderstanding is the following extract from a comedy sitcom (A teacher complains about not knowing the results of the students because the headmaster usually '**keeps them in the dark**, i.e. did not notify him', a student asks, she **switched off the lights**? One, whose knowledge of idioms is limited, would not laugh for the joke.

Another similar situation in the same sitcom: A teacher blames students for their failure in the exam, and advised them to exert more efforts the next time, the teacher said; "you must pull up your socks this time" which is parallel to the Arabic proverb (Shamrow un sawaidkum), one of the students puts up his leg on a desk and started to pull up his socks literally. Many such situations occur with students who lack proper knowledge of idioms in different forms of course.

Problems with Pinning Down Word Meaning

Cooper (2004) claims that, idioms are the colorful integral part of the symbols used while side of language, they are People communicate their thoughts and feelings. They are used to give life and richness to the language by combining the existing words in order to generate a new sense and creating new meaning. Unlike original phrases idioms are recalled as integral units. Most native speakers and writers frequently use these units in their daily life as they are very important part of any natural language. Cooper ascertains that the figurative meaning of idioms is easier to comprehend than their literal meaning. Natives may understand only to figurative meanings of Words or of particular word combination that make up an idiom. For example, the native speaker recognizes the meaning of the idiom 'hold your tongue' as figurative expressions that should not be interpreted literally even though such expressions may have literal meaning. Saeed, (2009. 59) argues that, the meaning of a word is problematic, different native Speakers have different definitions, while they feel that they know the meaning of the word, native speakers might have only the vaguest feeling for

other words to the extent that they have to check the meaning in a dictionary. Some of this difficulty arises from the influence of context on word meaning. Cowie (1998: 52) claims that Collocations, though Considered as a part of idiomatic expressions, differ from idioms. While collocations have a figurative meaning that takes in only part of the phrase as in 'deliver a speech' where 'deliver' is figurative and 'speech' is literal, in an idiom the figurative shift extends over the entire phrase Example: 'spill the beans'. It is clearly that the shift extends over the whole - parts of the idiom. Both 'spill' and 'beans' have figurative meaning. Halliday (1966; 21) compares between the Collocation patterns of two adjectives 'Strong and powerful' which appear to have similar meanings both adjectives can be used for Some items, for example: 'strong argument' and 'powerful argument', yet strong Collocates with tea rather than powerful, while powerful collocates with Car, a powerful car rather than a strong car.

Different Views in Identifying Idioms

Many linguists view idioms, agreeing to some degrees with some scholars, and disagreeing with others, yet the matter remains debatable. Saeed (2009: 60) defines an 'idiom' as words collocated in a form that became affixed to each other until metamorphosing into a fossilized term. This collocation of words is commonly used in a group Saeed re-defines each component word in the word-group and becomes an idiomatic expression: 'the words develop a specialized meaning as an entity, as an idiom. McCarthy (2010: 49) defines idioms as follows: an idiom is an expression unique to a language, especially one of which sense is not predictable from the meanings and arrangements of its elements, such as 'kick the bucket' which means has nothing obviously to do with kicking or buckets. The meaning of the idiom kick the bucket is 'to die' in linguistics the term idiomaticity refers to nature of idioms and the degree to which a usage can be regarded as idiomatic. Some expressions are more holophrastic and unanalyzable than others, for example: 'to take steps' is literal and non-idiomatic in 'the baby took her first step' it also could be figurative grammatical open and semi- idiomatic in "They took some steps to put the mat right", and the phrase is fully idiomatic and grammatically closed in "She took steps to see that was done". These examples demonstrate a variety of meaning and use that is true for many usages. No such continuum exist; however, between 'He kicked the bucket out of the way', and 'He kicked the bucket' last night, died. Such idioms are particularly rigid, and not passivized. McCarthy (2008: 84) states that certain vocabulary such as idiomatic expressions is very important in organizing discourse. But he believes that learners of English find such vocabulary difficult, boring and demotivating. They are the texts that are hardest to unpack. Many researchers have complained that such vocabulary produces a 'lexical bar', a serious obstacle, to progress in education, even for children learning their first language. So difficulties faced by second language learners should not be underestimated, particularly those who do not come from a Romance or Germanic language background. The new International Webster College Dictionary defines an idiom as 'an expression not readily analyzable from its grammatical construction or from the meaning of its component parts'.

Categories of Idioms

Many scholars have different views about the issue of the categories of idioms. Most of them have agreed on the two prominent types (transparent and opaque idioms), as stated by Cain et al (2005). But some other scholars do not agree with the above mentioned types; and in fact introduced other types. Elkilic (2008: 31) identifies four types of idioms:

- a. Non.-compositional (for example: by and large) which by definition are idioms which are not transparent.
- b. Compositional opaque (for example: kick the bucket).
- c. Compositional transparent (for example: spill the beans).
- d. Quasi-metaphorical (for example: skating on thin ice).

However, Cain et al (2005) mention two types of idioms; transparent idioms and opaque idioms. Elkilic (2008:29) maintains that transparent idioms are figurative expressions of which meaning can easily be understood. Kavka, Zybert (2003: 60) and Katz and Postal (1963) claim that, idioms are dealt with, within

transformational generative grammar. The most prominent two types of idioms are the lexical and phrase idioms; the first category is described as being syntactically dominated by one of the lowest syntactic (grammatical) categories, namely by noun, adjective, verb. On the contrary, the second category cannot be described like that. Example 1: 'White lie' indicates a lexical idiom while example 2 'how do you do' shows a phrase idiom. According to Kavka and Zybert (2003: 60) these two types include such lexemes as clichés, compounds or even phrasal verbs. Admittedly some linguists exclude compound altogether for example Balint, A (1968) who argues that compounds are not phrases, even though their meaning cannot be arrived at from the meanings of the constituent members, for example, 'bookcase' is not only 'book and case' put together. They are excluded because their number is so high that their addition would increase the titles of idioms to uncontrollable amounts. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that, neither solid nor hyphenated compounds, present problems in syntactic analysis. Ifill (2002:13) presents an additional evidence of transparency; idioms can show variability from a frozen form through modification, which idioms can accept to various degrees. The following example shows a direct adverbial modification. 'He certainly kicked the bucket'. The idiom comprises a complete verb phrase, and the adverb 'certainly' simply modifies the whole idiom. The adverb works the same way on the verb phrase whether the sentence has an idiomatic reading or not. It is quite simple and does not tell anything about the internal structure. Therefore idioms could accept modifications such as the above. Another way for modifying an idiom to serve transparency is through modifying individual words within the idiom. The following example illustrates this type of modification. 'They shot huge holes in my argument'. The modification is certainly not a standard part of these well-known fixed expressions, yet it is so easy to get a sense of what the modified constructions mean.

Collocations

Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (2010: vii) defines collocations as "the way words combine in a language to produce natural sounding speech and writing", for example: strong wind but heavy rain'. Collin Cobuild. English Dictionary defines collocations as 'the way that some words occur regularly whenever another word is used'. Saeed (2006: 59) agrees with both dictionaries; Oxford Collocation Dictionary and Collin Co build English Dictionary in the same point of view about collocations.

Idiom Lexicons

Dobrovol'skj (2006: 251.) states that there are many dictionaries of idioms for all languages covering long literary tradition. The main enquiry that must be explained by idiom dictionaries is regarding the concept of idiom. Lexicographers have to know exactly; when working on such a dictionary, what they understand by the word idiom, or else; they would face a lot of complications when deciding which expressions they should exclude. Though idiom research has quite a long tradition and has become an internationally developed linguistic discipline today, still it is difficult to give a definite and generally accepted answer to the question, what is an idiom?'

The Importance of Idiomatic Expressions

Elkilic (2008: 28) says that, idioms are an important part of any language and may be considered as an indicator of a person's fluency in that language. Therefore, idioms play a significant role in languages, the mother tongue and the foreign language. The foreign learner does not only learn the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but she/he also learns the idioms to help him/her fit in into the culture of the foreign language. Elkilic (2008: 29) states that:

"As English language is rich in idioms, learning the idioms in English language constitutes the soul of the language. Yet the plethora of human situation makes it imperative to reduce them to manageable proportion "

Students learning English are destined to face difficulties in understanding idioms; bearing in mind that, in order to be accepted as proficient; one must acquire sufficient knowledge of idiomatic expressions.

Results and Discussion

Analysis

The course has been conducted before and after teaching the material of the course. The sample which was divided into two groups; controlled and experimental; all sat for the same test as a pretest before teaching the material of the course, and then the experimental sat for same test as a post test in order to measure and compare the change in writing and speaking performance of the students. Cronbach's Alpha scale and method has been used for reliability and evaluation in this study. By using this method; each question in the test is marked and discussed.

Marks were given according to the type of the question, that is, multiple questions were given the highest marks, and short answer questions and the others were given equal marks. The researcher rechecked them by using SPSS program. The researcher aimed at getting answers.

1-To what extent Sudanese university students of English are familiarized with English idiomatic expressions?

2-How does specific; cultural expression elements affect teaching EFL learners?

3-What are the idiomatic expressions taught as a part of the process of teaching and learning EFL?

The Result

Table1: Sudanese university students of English are to a certain extent unfamiliar with English idiomatic expressions.

Value	Mean	Std. Deviation	T test	Df.	Sig.	Scale
Pre	14.65	7.087	-3.663	71	0.00	Significant
Post	17.92	5.087				

Table 1 illustrates the views of the value of t-test(-3.663) significantly value (0.000) which is less than the probability value (0.05) which means that there is the statistical significant difference that means the Sudanese university students of English are to a certain extent unfamiliar with English idiomatic expressions. The weak results of the pre-test prove students' unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions and the improved results of the post-tests confirms the hypothesis

Findings of the Study

When the researcher analyzed both the pre and post tests and the interview, their result realized the assumptions, objectives and questions of the study. The results of the experiment and the responses of the teachers in the interview ensure the following findings:-

1-The results of the pre-test and the post-test show that, there is considerable improvement with regard to the performance of the students.

2-The students marks in the pre-test were low, but after teaching them idiomatic expression, the students sat for the post-test and gained better scores.

3-Culture is an important factor in learning idiomatic expressions as viewed by the interviewees.

Recommendations

Students liked idiomatic expressions and their associated task because it gives them a chance to decorate their style in written and spoken English, students can find much of the idiomatic expression in their syllabuses, the problem that students usually face; is their inability to recognize idiomatic expression by themselves. Therefore the researcher recommends the followings:-

1-Language instructors may be able to upgrade L2 learners' everyday language by introducing different idiomatic expressions that serve various functions, and by raising L2 learners' awareness of the importance of this language phenomenon.

2-Syllabus designers and material developers could compile a basic list of idiomatic expressions to serve as a basis for teaching and learning these expressions as far as their important role for EFL learner is agreed upon by the majority of the linguists.

3-Although teaching idioms is not an easy task, but students need to be familiarized with them.

Suggestions for further studies

This study is about using idiomatic expressions to enhance EFL written and spoken English. It focused on a particular area in the field of developing writing and speaking skills by the use of idiomatic expressions. This makes it possible to suggest other areas in the same field for other researchers to study or research about. These include areas like:

1. The effectiveness of using collocation to improve writing and speaking skills.
2. Using opaque idioms extracted from literature to enhance writing skills.

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