Teaching Idiomatic Expressions in Context through Focus

on Form Techniques

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Abstract

A great deal of attention has been paid to the role of idiomatic language in learning a second language. It has been recently recognized by some second language researchers (e.g. Danesi, 2003) that second language speakers may sound unnatural if their speech is devoid of idiomatic language. This article is an attempt to see how the acquisition of idioms can be achieved on the part of EFL students through focus of form techniques. At the end, a number of exercises are provided that are thought to expedite the process of the acquisition of this ubiquitous part of language.

Keywords: Idioms, Focus on Form, Explicit FonF, Implicit FonF

1. Introduction

1.1. Idiomaticity

Idiomatology, idiomaticity, idiomtics, phraseology and perhaps a number of other terms have been used to refer to the same concept (Kavka & Zybert, 2004). This multitude of terms and terminologies may be taken as evidence that the area to be dealt with is a questionable one. The fact is that scholars are expected to state precisely and unambiguously what they mean by the terms they choose. Kavka & Zybert argue that the term phraseology does not signify the vast domain of our interest since in common understanding it refers to lexis. Idiomatic expressions, on the other hand, are based on semantic rather than lexical grounds (Kavka & Zybert, 2004).

Kavka and Zybert (2004) go on to argue that as for the terms idiomaticity and idiomatology, it may be justifiable to regard idiomatology as a truly linguistic discipline. The reason is that linguists have traditinally spoken of 'phonology', 'morphology', and 'philology' as fields of science. They can, by the same token, come to speak of idiomaticty as a full-fledged science in its own right. Idiomaticity refers to a quality derived from an attribution of, say, constituting or containing idioms.

Reichstein (1974, cited in Kavka & Zybert, 2004) somewhat complements Kavka and Zybert's definition of idiomaticity stating that "the term idiomaticity is used for semantic and structural irregularity of phrasal idioms". Understanding the term in its broader sense, it can be stated that an expression is idiomatic (or has 'proper idiomaticity') if it is judged intuitively by native speakers as usual, natural, and commonly acceptable.

1.2. Idioms

Idioms have traditionally been defined as expressions whose meanings are non-compositional, that is, their meanings are not the functions of the meanings of their individual parts (Chomsky, 1980 & Fraser, 1970). The figurative interpretation of shoot the breeze (to have an informal chat), for instance, cannot be determined through the analysis of its individual word meanings. Some writers are of the opinion that idioms are dead metaphors –expressions that have lost their metaphoricity over time and now exist as frozen semantic units, perhaps in a special phrasal lexicon (Gibbs, 1993).

On the other hand are other scholars like Nunberg et al. (1994), who are against the non-compositional view of idioms and have taken the position that idioms enjoy a kind of internal semantic structure which demonstrate that idiomatic meanings have much to do with the constituents of which the idioms have been made up.

1.3. Proverbs

Proverbs have been defined by Gibbs (1994) as short and snappy sayings that express social norms or moral

concerns. He goes on to argue that proverbs, like idiomatic expressions, give significant insights into the poetics of mind because they reflect how our metaphorical conceptualization of experience bears on particular social situations (Gibbs, 1994).

Most proverbs are overtly metaphorical in that everyday objects and events are used to characterize abstract situations in terms of more immediate physical images. Each proverb, in fact, presupposes a discrepancy between something in the world such as "two birds" in *kill two birds with one stone* and one's intentions, purposes, etc.

1.4. Slangs

Slang is often associated with idiomatic expressions. Although slang is usually seen as having a shorter life span within a language than idioms do and is used only by certain groups of individuals or communities (Spears, 1982), it is sometimes difficult to differentiate slangs from idioms. Slang metaphors often convey certain attitudes or feelings of the speakers that idiomatic expressions do not. For instance, the expression *He is on a trip* (meaning he is taking drugs) can suggest that a speaker is aware of certain social norms and attitudes about drugs and the drug culture (Gibbs, 1994).

1.5. Focus on Form

An increasingly well-established line of work has underscored the role of attention and awareness in SLA (Schmidt, 1990, 1995). Moreover, more emphasis has been placed on the importance of drawing learners' attention to certain linguistic features which might otherwise go unnoticed (Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993). In fact, SLA research has increasingly established the legitimacy of a FonF approach to language teaching (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Proponents of FonF approaches claim that the best way to learn a language is not by treating it as an object of study, but by experiencing it meaningfully as a tool for communication with certain target structures physically highlighted and embedded within communicative activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993, 1994).

Much of the early SLA research has focused on naturalistic L2 learning, motivated in part by the claims that L2 learning would normally occur in language classes if teachers stopped interfering in the learning process. In fact, it was suggested that learners should be left to learn an L2 in the same way as children acquire their mother tongue. Over the past decades, however, researchers have turned to studying the effects that instructions of various kinds may have on L2 acquisition. This latter mainstream of research has been motivated in part by a desire to address issues of general theoretical interest to SLA research, and also by a desire to improve the general efficacy of language teaching. Along the same line of research, formal instruction has gained considerable popularity in the field of SLA.

Formal instruction involves some attempts to focus learners' attention on specific properties of the L2 so that learning will be facilitated. Formal instruction can be inductive or deductive in nature. Inductive formal instruction involves providing learners with structural input designed to help them learn a rule or item. On the other hand, deductive formal instruction aims at giving the learners explicit information about a rule or item. Moreover, Ellis (1994) distinguishes between formal instruction directed at cognitive goals, where the focus is on developing linguistic or communicative competence, and meta-cognitive goals, where the focus is on the use of effective learning strategies.

1.5.1. The Efficacy of Formal Instruction

One of the first researchers who focused on the question of whether formal instruction leads to better L2 learning is Long (1983). Long (1983, p.374) contended that "there is considerable evidence to indicate that SLA instruction does make a difference." He claimed that instruction was advantageous: (1) for children as well as adults; (2) for both intermediate and advanced learners; (3) for acquisition, irrespective of the means of measurement (integrative vs. discrete-point tests); and (4) in acquisition-rich as well as acquisition-poor environments. Long's conclusion was further supported by other researchers (Weslander and Stephany, 1983; Spada, 1986).

By far the most rigorous, review of empirical studies which has sought to determine the overall effectiveness of L2 instruction, as well as the relative effectiveness of different types of instruction, has been carried out by Norris and Ortega (2000). In a statistical meta-analysis of the literature published from 1980 to 1998, they concluded that the answer to the overall research question is in the affirmative: second language instruction does make a difference, and the difference is significant.

2. Teaching Idiomatic Expressions through Focus on Form Techniques

The fact that there is a surge toward the idea of catching the learners' attention in one way or another, and that of having more accurate students leads us to rethink the whole tradition of the instruction of idioms.

It seems that in most of the language textbooks, there has been an overemphasis on the importance of fluency at the

expense of accuracy, perhaps as a result of our rush toward the Communicative Language Teaching and its byproducts, e.g. Task-based Language Teaching. In the remainder of the article an attempt has been made to see what FonF has to offer to bring about a remedy for one of the important parts of every human language, i.e., idioms.

As idioms are fixed expressions the constituents of which cannot be replaced by similar words, it seems that a combination of both implicit and explicit techniques would be the best recipe for EFL learners. It also seems that an inclination toward the explicit end of the continuum can be more productive, because there is no regular pattern to idioms, that is, the words in an idiom cannot be changed.

Of course, the emphasis on the explicit instruction of idioms should not be taken to mean that the implicit techniques are not effective. It would certainly not go amiss if material developers drew the learners' attention to the target language forms through highlighting, underlining and italicizing. This way, they would provide the grounds for implicit instruction to come about. Including tips on the etymology of the idiomatic expressions in question and a having a sufficient number of exercises involving the constituent parts of the idioms in question, on the other hand, could also dramatically strengthen the acquisition of this most ubiquitous component of language.

It seems that the fact that idiomatic language and proverbs are so semantically opaque can be taken into account by having them included in a problem-solving approach which would call for the explicit attention of the students. FonF can act as a potential problem-solving technique, especially one of a combinatorial nature in which both strands of FonF can be detected.

Idiomatic expressions can also be incorporated into games so that they are acquired faster and so that they become more interesting to capture the attention of students. In this regard, the cards game introduced by A'lipour and Ketabi (2010) is a good candidate.

The exercises presented below are intended to be purely indicative of the approach in line with the FonF techniques that can conceivably be used by language teachers and materials developers, and if used judiciously, it may act a recipe for success.

Sample Exercise:

Exercise 1:

Try to work out the meanings of these idioms. Do you have idioms in your own language which have the same meaning as some of these?

A storm in a teacup   To have your heart in your mouth

TO have a bone to pick with someone.....To drink like a fish

To kill two birds with one stone.............Once bitten, twice shy

This exercise can be done in groups. The teacher would also do well to make sure that the learners know the literal meaning of these idioms. The effort to see if there is any native-language counterpart may automatically draw the learners' attention to the expression in question. The caveat to be borne in mind is that there are sometimes false friends, that is, expressions which might look the same in terms of structure and vocabulary but vastly different in terms of the meanings they convey.

Exercise B:

Complete the blanks below with the correct word:

Words: good, clumsy, kinder, optimistic, serious, depressed, wait

Hold your horses. This means: ....a moment.

Every cloud has a silver lining. This means there is some...........in every

bad event.

His bark is worse than his bite. This means he is ....than he looks.

She is down in the dumps. This means she is..................

Don't count your chickens before they are hatched. This means don't be over.............

He is like a bull in a china shop. This means he is very......................

He couldn't keep a straight face. This means he couldn't keep his face........

The above exercise seems to be best done individually. After the learners are finished with filling in the blanks, they can join in class discussions trying to see if there are any equivalent idioms in their native language.

Exercise C: Express the meanings of the underlined expressions below with language which expresses the same meaning more or less:

Example: I was feeling a bit under the weather the other day.

I was feeling a bit depressed the other day.

I was feeling a bit under the weather the other day because my grandma had kicked the bucket a week earlier. Of course, after a week of crying my heart out, I was gradually trying to come to terms with what had happened. I was about to go to my workplace when one of my friends phoned me out of the blue and told me that he had good news for me. When I asked him to give me the lowdown, he said he wouldn't say anything unless I promised to treat him to his favourite pizza. When I gave my two thumbs up to what he had asked for, he told me that I had finally got the job I'd been looking for so long. I was tickled pink and wanted to paint the town red.

This kind of exercise seems to be suitable for group work. Learners should be encouraged to use the context for meaning clues rather than puzzling over the surface meaning of the idiomatic units devoid of context. The passage has been deliberately contrived in such a way that it can provide lots of semantic clues. For example, if one's grandmother has died a week ago, one is more likely to feel depressed than elated, or if one is given a piece of good news, one is more likely to feel happy than sad. Thus, a proposed approach which would be in line with the findings of this study is for the teacher to take the learners through a reasoning process by which meaning would be inferred from context by paying attention to anaphoric, cataphoric and exaphoric reference. This would be well in line with the finding that explicit instruction of idioms seemingly has an edge over their implicit teaching.

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