TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

Azizakhon Zulfikorova

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Idiomatic phrases are integral to the mastery of English language fluency. They enrich communication, express cultural values, and enhance learners' pragmatic skills. However, idioms can be challenging for non-native speakers because their meanings cannot be interpreted literally. University students, even with their advanced proficiency, still encounter obstacles in understanding and utilizing idioms in appropriate contexts. This article explores the significance of idioms in English language learning, outlines challenges faced by students, and evaluates pedagogical approaches for teaching idioms effectively at the tertiary level. Through classroom observations and survey responses from undergraduate English majors, the study finds that contextualized teaching methods, integration of multimedia, and task-based learning activities enhance higher levels of idiomatic competence. The article concludes by recommending a systematic incorporation of idioms into the university curriculum to improve both linguistic and cultural skills.

Keywords: idioms, figurative language, English teaching, university students, pedagogy

Introduction

The mastery of a foreign language requires more than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; it also demands familiarity with idiomatic expressions that are deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts. Idioms constitute an essential part of everyday communication, literature, and media. For learners of English as a

_____

Foreign Language (EFL), idioms represent both a linguistic challenge and an opportunity to achieve near-native fluency (Liontas, 2015).

University students, particularly those majoring in English, are expected to use idioms competently in academic discourse, creative writing, and professional communication. Nevertheless, idioms are often overlooked in traditional teaching curricula, where the focus remains on grammatical accuracy and lexical development. This creates a gap between students' academic knowledge and their practical language use (Liu, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges faced by university students in learning idioms and to propose effective pedagogical strategies for enhancing idiomatic competence in higher education.

Literature Review

Research in second language acquisition emphasizes that idioms are a crucial component of figurative language and pragmatic competence (Gibbs, 1994). Idioms present difficulties for learners due to several factors:

1. Non-literal meaning – Idioms such as kick the bucket cannot be interpreted literally, which confuses learners.

2. Cultural references – Many idioms are culture-specific (e.g., sports idioms in American English), making them inaccessible without cultural knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

3. Low frequency in teaching materials – Standard textbooks rarely devote sufficient attention to idioms (Liu, 2008).

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory suggests that idioms are grounded in metaphors, which connect abstract ideas to concrete experiences. This theoretical perspective has influenced teaching practices that encourage learners to explore idioms through metaphorical mapping rather than rote memorization.

Previous studies suggest that contextualized learning, where idioms are taught within authentic situations such as conversations, films, and literature, enhances retention and comprehension (Boers, 2000). Task-based learning has also proven effective, as it engages students in active problem-solving and collaborative activities involving idiomatic expressions (Ellis, 2003).

_____

Despite these findings, idioms remain underrepresented in university syllabi. This highlights the need for more systematic integration of idioms into language teaching practices.

Methodology

The study was conducted at Tashkent state university of economics, involving 50 students majoring in MBA. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Participants: 50 second-year MBA majors (aged 19–22).

Instruments:

Pre-test and post-test on idiom recognition and usage (30 idioms). Questionnaires assessing students' attitudes towards idioms. Classroom observation notes.

Teaching Intervention: A three-week program was designed, focusing on idioms through:

1. Con textual teaching: Dialogues, literary excerpts, and news articles.
2. Multimedia resources: short films, songs, and social media content.
3. Task-based learning: Group role-plays, storytelling, and idiom games.

Results

The pre-test revealed that while 70% of students could recognize idioms when given multiple-choice options, only 25% could correctly use them in original sentences. This highlighted a significant gap between passive recognition and active usage.

After the three-week intervention:

Post-test scores improved significantly, with 68% of students accurately applying idioms in context.

Student feedback indicated that role-play and film-based learning were the most engaging methods.

Persistent difficulties were observed in idioms tied to historical or culture-specific references.

_____

Discussion

The findings align with previous research suggesting that idioms are best acquired through contextualized and interactive teaching approaches (Boers, 2000; Liontas, 2015). Students demonstrated greater confidence in using idioms after exposure to authentic materials and collaborative tasks. The cultural dimension of idioms remains a challenge, consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that idioms are conceptually grounded in cultural metaphors. This indicates that idiom instruction should not be isolated from cultural education. Teachers must provide background knowledge, explain metaphorical origins, and encourage students to compare idioms in English with equivalents in their native language.

Moreover, integrating idioms into everyday classroom communication—such as using them in instructions, comments, and feedback—can normalize idiom usage and help students internalize their meanings.

Conclusion

Teaching idioms to university students is essential for developing linguistic fluency and cultural competence. The study demonstrates that contextual, multimedia-based, and task-oriented approaches significantly enhance idiomatic competence.

However, the study was limited by its short duration and small participant group. Future research should focus on long-term effects of idiom instruction and explore how idioms can be integrated across disciplines beyond English language majors.

A systematic inclusion of idioms in university curricula would bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical communication, preparing students for global interactions in academic and professional settings.

References

1. Boers, F. (2000). Enhancing metaphoric awareness in specialised reading. English for Specific Purposes, 19(2), 137–147. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(98)00017-9

_____

2. Ellis, R. (2003). Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford University Press.

3. Gibbs, R. W. (1994). The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding. Cambridge University Press.

4. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors we live by. University of Chicago Press.

5. Liontas, J. I. (2015). Developing idiomatic competence in English as a second language. TESOL Quarterly, 49(1), 91–117. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.162

6. Liu, D. (2008). Idioms: Description, comprehension, acquisition, and pedagogy. Routledge.