

An Investigation into the problems of Understanding and Using Idiomatic Expressions among Sudanese EFL University Students

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Abstract:

This study aims at investigating the problems of understanding and using idiomatic expressions that face Sudanese 3rd year EFL students majoring in English language at Sudan University of Science and Technology.

The study follows the descriptive analytical method and data have been collected via two instruments, a test for the students, beside a questionnaire for a group of EFL teachers, both of them have been classified and analyzed thoroughly via SPSS Accordingly.

The study concludes too many findings and provides some recommendations and suggestion.

The study has reached the following results: there are notably problems facing EFL Sudanese university students understanding and using idiomatic expressions. Idiomatic expressions helps improving EFL students' proficiency, idiomatic expressions enhance students' ability of expression and develop their receptive and productive skills. Finally, the study in the light of the findings, has suggested some recommendations and further studies.

Key words: EFL, FLL, idiom

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades figurative language (idiomatic expressions) has received a great deal of attention; because idioms have become inseparable part of everyday language and language use. This study sheds the light on the problems that face Sudanese EFL students' understanding and using idiomatic expressions and collocations it also gives a considerable account to the importance of idioms and collocations in foreign language learning, and how colorful the language will be when it is encapsulated with idiomatic expressions and collocations. Most of the studies done in the area of lexis argue that vocabulary should be placed at the centre of language teaching because language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar. Lewis (1993) argued that, the lexical approach is a shift in language teaching from grammar to vocabulary teaching, as ' language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks' Lewis (1997). These chunks include idioms, collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions. These chunks are also called 'formulaic language'. Schmitt (2000) argued that 'Formulaic language occupies a crucial role in facilitating language; it is the key to fluency and motivates the learner'.

STATEMENTS OF THE PROBLEM:

Idiomatic expressions and collocations learning has been a matter of wide- ranging debate among educators for some years. Idiomatic expressions usually put non-native speakers in a hot water both in written and oral context and so, it does to students. On the other hand, material writers and language teachers find it difficult to develop effective materials and teach them effectively so that they relegate idioms to have a

subsidiary place in syllabus. Also owing to unconvincing research findings in this area of study and lack of clear answers as to how to teach and learn idioms, addressing the question of whether using computer programs would lead to better retention compared with conventional methods may shed some light on the ambiguities (Collis,1987). All in all, to resolve, at least partly, the above-cited problems, in the present study the researcher has developed a test consisting of idioms and collocations to have insight into the problems investigated as well as a questionnaire for ELT teachers at different universities who have enough experience to be asked about such problems.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY:

This study tries to find answers for the following questions raised:

- 1) To what extent are EFL students aware of understanding and using idiomatic expressions?
- 2) To what extent are EFL students aware of understanding and using collocations?
- 3) To what extents are EFL students have problems of understanding and using idiomatic expressions and collocations?
- 4) What are the reasons behind the difficulties of understanding and using idiomatic expressions?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY:

H 1 To some extent Sudanese EFL students are not aware of using idiomatic expressions.

H 2 To some extent EFL students are not aware of using collocations.

H 3 There are some problems that encounter students understanding and using idiomatic expressions and collocations.

H 4 EFL learners' L1 may affect students' use of appropriate collocation.

METHODOLOGY

The study follows the descriptive analytical method. This section describes the methods used for data collection. It particularly presents the target subject, study instruments and procedures for data collection. Then it goes further to present tools, reliability and validity. It also illustrates the steps used in the study and concludes with a summary. In order to collect the data the study uses both a test and questionnaire (for EFL teachers) to examine a random sample of the 3rd year students majoring in English at Sudan University of Science and Technology, faculty of Education and faculty of Languages.

Population of the study

The population of this study is students of the 3rd year in the department of English Language. Subject's data which this study used to analyze were collected from 200 students from both gender of English language Department at Sudan University of Science and Technology, faculty of Education and faculty of Languages. English Department is one of the largest departments in the university. The students are chosen randomly without any knowledge of the study about them, so that the finding can reflect the real situation. Most of the subjects in the department at age of sixteen to eighteen and graduated from high school all over the Sudan. They are about the same age and both genders. Because most students in this university are female, the number of females as subjects in this study is more than of males. However, most of them had

studied English for 7 years or more before being enrolled at the university. They are from various backgrounds as coming from different parts of Sudan, so some of them had got the local dialect which relatively affects their English speaking and pronunciation. However, Their exposure to English language and culture seemed to be very limited. When this study was conducted, all of them had been studying in English department 6th semester.

The Sample of the study:

The total number of students included in the test was one hundred. The experiment sample amounts to 200 students in the first level who are randomly chosen to undergo a test measuring their intercultural awareness. The study choose 120female students because of their large number to reach an equal representation for both gender. They were classified as pre-intermediate EFL learners.

Instrument for Data Analysis

In this study, two types of tools are used to gather the required data and information from the subject of this study. These two tools are: a test for the students and a questionnaire for teachers to enhance the overall outcomes. Both the test and the questionnaire processed through the statistical package of Social Sciences (SPSS) to conclude to the findings.

What is an Idiom?

Idioms are defined as non-literal phrases (e.g., kick the bucket) whose figurative meanings (here, to die) cannot readily be derived from the literal meanings of their individual words (here, kick and bucket) (Brinton, Fujiki, & Mackey, 1985). Using idioms helps students go deeper into the language. It is a way of getting more in touch with the culture and tradition.

It is not always possible for listeners or readers to recognize that an idiom exists, and they may assume the literal meaning. Second, it is unusual to be able to substitute one word for another and provide a translation into non- idiomatic English. So without having access to a good dictionary providing examples for idioms, an idiom cannot often be understood or translated.

The importance of idioms in FLL

Idioms are important in foreign language learning. Using figurative language is one of the main features of native like language and idiomaticity is a nature of proficiency as well as fluency that language learners are expected to achieve.

The importance of idioms has been emphasized by linguists and language teachers in recent years. Bortfeld (2003) believes that the increasing number of idioms in Dictionary of American Idioms (Boatner, Gates, & Makkai, 1975-1995) is indicative of the essential role idioms play in daily language use. In this regard, Moreno (2011) refers to three main reasons why it is so crucial to teach idioms arguing that because of their high frequency, special attention should be paid to idioms and language teachers should not relegate them to a secondary state in the curriculum:

First, frequent use of idioms makes language learners fluent speakers, and figurative competence in a foreign language is a sign of communicative competence. Moreover, idiomatic expressions which give language variety and character help learners penetrate into culture, customs, and lifestyle of the target language. Secondly, cognitive linguistic studies have demonstrated the crucial role of memory in learning fixed expressions such as idioms. Hence, the teachability and learnability of idioms and their pedagogical aspect should be taken in to account. Finally,

many idioms are constantly changing over time, in order to find out their underlying essence, we have to resort to cultural factors and adopt a diachronic view of the language (such as etymological elaboration).

Difficulty of Idioms; Comprehension and Usage

No doubt, L2 learners encounter difficulties during the acquisition of the English language. Understanding idioms is one of these difficulties. According to Cooper (2012), L2 learners would encounter idioms in all kind of discourse; news, lectures, movies, books and daily conversations. Furthermore, Chuang (2013) denoted in her research study that mastering these multiword units or language chunks is not easy for language learners since the meanings of these texts cannot be determined through the analysis of their individual word meanings. Therefore, idioms represent a hindrance in the linguistic development of L2 learners. Because of the difficulty of understanding idioms, this section looks into reading processes to see how idioms are comprehended. Generally, language receptive organs transmit data to the brain to be processed and the brain performs what is known as comprehension. Data, in this context, refers to language in either form written or heard. Therefore, comprehension is defined as the process of understanding that requires mental operations. These operations are divided into two levels; the low-level and high-level and they take place simultaneously. Two well-known models depict reading processes: the text model and the situational model. For details about reading comprehension processing, check Grabe (2009).

With regard to idiom comprehension, Holsinger and Kaiser (2013) stated that it is less clear how comprehenders arrive at the idiomatic interpretation. They wondered whether literal processing is necessary to reach the idiomatic interpretation. They found that context clues have an essential

role to play during reading processes. The results of their research study revealed that when readers expect a literal interpretation in a situation where the sentence turns out to be idiomatic, real-time processing is disrupted more than if comprehenders are expecting an idiomatic interpretation and the sentence turns out to be literal. Their study revealed that idiomatic texts consume more time to be comprehended than literal ones.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Test

The test of idioms and collocations was given more emphasis because the students were the major target of the study and the investigation of their knowledge, problems of understanding and using idiomatic expressions and collocations were the vocal objectives of the present study. The researcher adapted for this purpose, a 50 item test in which 25 items on idiomatic expressions and 25 items on collocations.

The test was widely selected to assess the student's knowledge of idiomatic expressions and collocation. The questions were meant to cover the different levels of English idioms and collocations such as lexical, semantic and syntactic levels. Some of the tests' questions try to trace the impact of the students' native idiomatic expressions on their understanding of the English idiomatic expressions. Contextual clues were given with some idiomatic expressions while, some idiomatic expressions provided without contextual clues in order to test student's knowledge of idiomatic expressions.

Cranach's alpha method: -

Where reliability was calculated using Cranach's alpha equation shown below:

$$\text{Reliability coefficient} = \frac{n}{N-1} * \frac{1 - \text{Total variations questions}}{\text{variation college grades}}$$

Cranach alpha coefficient = (0.77), a reliability coefficient is high and it indicates the stability of the scale and the validity of the study.

Validity coefficient is the square of the islands so reliability coefficient is (0.88), and this shows that there is a high sincerity of the scale and that the benefit of the study.

The questionnaire:

The aim of the questionnaire used in this research was to find out about the teachers' views regarding teaching and learning of idiomatic expressions and collocations, and it is also relevant directly to the questions and hypothesis of the study. It was administered to a total sample of 40 ELT teachers at some Sudanese universities. It consisted of two parts the first part contained personal information about the participant. The second part contained 15 statements related to teachers' views about idiomatic expressions and collocations, problems of understanding and using them,

The scale used in the questionnaire was five-point Likert scale to show the expected responses from participants, five codes were given to the statement as follows:

- 1=Strongly Agree,
- 2=Agree,
- 3=Neutral,
- 4=Disagree
- 5=Strongly Disagree,

The table below illustrates chi-square test results for respondents' answers about the statements

NO	Statements	Chi-square value	df	Sig	Median	Interpretation
1-	Idioms are important for EFL learners in communication context.	41.000	3	0.000	5.00	strongly agree
2-	Grammatical and syntactical restrictions of idioms may affect the degree of idiomaticity of lexical items.	31.400	3	0.000	4.00	agree
3-	Using idiomatic expressions helps EFL learners to achieve the expected level of proficiency in English language.	36.500	4	0.000	5.00	strongly agree
4-	EFL students are not aware of using contextual pragmatic clues to understand idioms whose meaning can't be inferred from the individual word meaning.	12.600	3	0.000	4.00	agree
5-	Idioms knowledge has crucial role in EFL students' level of proficiency in receptive and productive skills.	38.250	4	0.000	5.00	strongly agree
6-	Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of the cultural background behind the idiom.	45.200	3	0.000	5.00	strongly agree
7-	Using and understanding idioms are difficult for EFL learners at university level.	34.250	4	0.000	4.00	agree
8-	Idioms are difficult because they are not well taught in classes.	34.250	4	0.000	4.00	agree
9-	Collocations play an important role in the process of language learning and teaching.	10.400	2	0.000	4.50	agree
10-	Collocations help improving EFL learners' fluency.	23.800	3	0.000	4.00	agree
11-	Having knowledge about collocations is very important for EFL learners.	19.800	3	0.000	4.50	strongly agree
12-	EFL learners' L1 may affect students' use of appropriate collocation.	13.050	2	0.000	4.00	agree
13-	Only teachers who have a clear understanding of different kinds of collocation can help learners understand and use collocations.	15.600	2	0.000	4.00	agree
14-	EFL learners should be equipped with skills that enable them to develop their collocation knowledge independently.	23.000	3	0.000	4.00	agree
15-	Collocations are effective in improving EFL students' multi-cultural competence.	10.850	2	0.000	5.00	strongly agree

The results of table (4.67) above were interpreted as follows:

1. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Idioms are important for EFL learners in communication context was (41.000) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
2. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Grammatical and syntactical restrictions of idioms may affect the degree of

idiomaticity of lexical items was (31.400) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.

3. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Using idiomatic expressions helps EFL learners to achieve the expected level of proficiency in English language was (36.500) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
4. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement EFL students are not aware of using contextual pragmatic clues to understand idioms whose meaning can't be inferred from the individual word meaning was (12.600) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
5. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Idioms knowledge has crucial role in EFL students' level of proficiency in receptive and productive skills was (38.250) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
6. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of the cultural background behind the idiom was (45.200) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value

- (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
7. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Using and understanding idioms are difficult for EFL learners at university level was (34.250) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 8. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Idioms are difficult because they are not well taught in classes was (34.250) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 9. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Collocations play an important role in the process of language learning and teaching was (10.400) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 10. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Collocations help improving EFL learners' fluency was (23.800) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 11. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Having knowledge about collocations is very important for EFL learners was (19.800) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the

- level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
12. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement EFL learners’ L1 may affect students’ use of appropriate collocation was (13.050) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 13. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Only teachers who have a clear understanding of different kinds of collocation can help learners understand and use collocations was (15.600) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 14. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement EFL learners should be equipped with skills that enable them to develop their collocation knowledge independently was (23.000) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.
 15. The value of chi – square calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals of the study for the statement Collocations are effective in improving EFL students’ multi-cultural competence was (10.850) with P-value (0.000) which is lower than the level of significant value (5%) These refer to the existence of differences statistically.

CONCLUSION

Findings:

From the primary and secondary sources of the study the researcher concludes to the following:

1. Many students are not aware of using idiomatic expressions.
2. Students have serious problems regarding understanding and using idiomatic expressions and collocations.
3. Idioms can play a vital role in improving students' communicative skills.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

1. Teachers should use different techniques for teaching idiomatic expressions.
2. Language vocabulary specifically idiomatic expressions should be given good care when teaching English.
3. Necessity of concentrating on figurative language.

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