

Exploring Idioms and Proverbs to Practise ‘Guessing the Meanings of Words from Context Strategy’ in Study Skills Setting.

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Received. 07/03/2024

Accepted 24/06/2024

Abstract:

The University students usually strive hard to solve vocabulary deficiencies they encounter in the study skills classroom. Simultaneously, teachers try to do their best to make of study skills setting an occasion for students to use Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) in different contexts to learn and expand vocabulary. In this area of vocabulary teaching/learning, figurative language mainly idioms and proverbs proved to be beneficial in training students in some vocabulary learning strategies, especially strategies that are mostly used by students like ‘Guessing the meanings of words from context. The present paper summarizes the main findings of an experiential study held with 1st year EFL students at Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen (Algeria). It seeks to illuminate the invaluable benefits of integrating idioms and proverbs to teach guessing meanings from context strategy in the study skills classroom where students are supposed to learn and practice essential skills that guarantee university success.

Keywords:

Idioms-Proverbs-Practise-Guessing-Meanings-Context-Strategy-Study Skills- Setting.

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1.Introduction:

The importance of vocabulary in the EFL classroom made it empirical for practitioners in higher education mainly teachers and students to use whatever available resources to teach/learn, improve and expand vocabulary. Vocabulary learning strategies represent one of these resources which if well explored may yield satisfactory outcomes in terms of language and vocabulary improvement. An investigation in the benefits of idioms and proverbs exploration in the study skills session to practise guessing meanings from context strategy by 1st year EFF university students is the major aim of this paper. Some research questions are therefore formulated as follows:

- 1- Do idioms and proverbs help 1st year EFL University students practise guessing meanings from context strategy in the study skills classroom?
- 2- What are the benefits of idioms and proverbs exploration in the study skills classroom?

In order to answer these research questions we hypothesized the following:

- ✓ Idioms and proverbs may help great deal 1st year EFL University students to practise guessing meanings from context strategy in the study skills classroom because they are very rich of words which are most of the time not frequent to students; something that ignite their curiosity to know the meaning and learn the figurative expression at the same time.
- ✓ The exploration of idioms and proverbs in the study skills classroom may be very beneficial for 1st year EFL students in practicing some VLSs, particularly guessing strategy. Students may also expand their vocabulary, enhance language skills, increase communicative competence and even know about the foreign language culture through indirect language.

2. The Importance of Figurative Language in EFL Teaching

Figurative language is a good source for vocabulary learning. It represents an umbrella term for words and phrases that are used with another meaning than the literal one, in order to create different effects (Mc Arthur, 1998). A simple definition of figurative language from (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 1992, p475) is: figurative adj (of a word, phrase, meaning, etc.) used in some way other than the main or usual meaning, to suggest a picture in the mind or make a comparison. Figurative language include: similes, metaphors, alliteration, personification, hyperbole, idioms, proverbs and adages.

In the area of vocabulary teaching, a shift of concern has been put on teaching 'chunks' of language such as idioms, proverbs, phrasal verbs instead of teaching 'isolated words'. The combination of words in a form of collocations and expressions makes the speech more fluent and the user of language more natural. Indeed, all languages are full of idioms (Boers, 2008) and the English language is not an exception: "English is rich in multi-word lexemes, such as idioms, proverbs, and other fixed expressions that might be a stumbling block for English as foreign language learners" (Akbarian, 2010, p1).

It is a reality, unfortunately, that figurative language especially idioms and proverbs is highly neglected in our university English teaching though they reflect the foreign language culture which is part of language itself: "nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language,

and the element of language that best encapsulates any culture's values and beliefs is its proverbs" (Ababneh, 2015, p191). In this view of things, an important factor to consider before dealing with figurative language in the classroom is to teach students what idioms and proverbs are so that they can deal with them appropriately.

2.1. Idioms and Proverbs Defined

Idioms and proverbs in English are sets of words that have specific meanings, draw out the essence of the English culture (Worth, 2019). In this part of the work detailed definitions of idioms and proverbs are provided.

2.1.1. Definition of Idioms

Expressions like: '*a drop in the ocean*' or '*a shot in the dark*' are referred to as 'idiom'. They are also known by fixed expressions (Moon, 1998) and formulaic sequences (Shmitt, 2004). In defining what an idiom is, it is crucial to bear in mind that it is not at all easy to understand the implicit meaning of an idiom from first glance or to be really accurate about what it is targeted for in the foreign language. Therefore, students may be familiar with the meaning of the different words that make an idiom but totally wrong when they come to deduce or fix the whole meaning of the same idiom as it is the case for most EFL university students. On his part, (Kövecses, 2010, p330) argues that "many, perhaps, most idioms are products of our conceptual system and not simply a matter of language".

Traditionally, idioms were seen as non-compositional in terms of meaning, i.e., the meaning of the idiom cannot be deduced from the meaning of its individual constituents of words. However, a more recent view (Nunberg, 1978; Wasow *et al*, 1983; Kövecses, 2010) argues that the meaning of most idioms is partly defined by the meaning of the constituents words, i.e., what is known as 'compositionality'. Thus, the study of figurative expression is important for EFL Teaching and learning.

There are three main categories of idioms as put forward by (Palmer, 1976, pp 98 -99), these are: "Phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and partial verbs". Nevertheless, (Fernando, 1996, pp35-36) grouped idioms into: "pure idioms, semi idioms and literal idioms". In spite of the different categorization of idioms, these figurative expressions are culturally-based. Idiomatic knowledge are necessary for EFL students, especially to achieve fluency in communication when interacting with native speakers. Idiomatic competence, if neglected may result in communication break-down as it represents according to Liontas (2017) one of the marks of a competent speaker that every language learner wants to reach. For this reason instructions should not ignore idioms if they opt for a natural and more comfortable use of the foreign language.

Thus, EFL students have to take the challenge of understanding and using figurative expressions to know more about the foreign language culture and why not to compare what they have learnt to similar contexts in their own native culture.

2.1.2. Definition of Proverbs

Proverbs such as *'an apple a day keeps the doctor away'* and *'beauty is skin deep'* are more common in the EFL classroom. An expressive definition of proverbs is the one of (Mieder, 1993, pp5-24) stating that a proverb is generally: "short and known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals ... and which is handed down from generation to generation". Proverbs serve different functions that make their implementation in the language classroom a necessity: "proverbs play an important role in language teaching as a part of gaining cultural knowledge, metaphorical understanding and communicative competence" (Hanzén, 2007, p1). The benefits of proverbs are well documented, for example, MacDougall (2004) argues that the study of proverbs can provide cultural insights and stimulate communication, as learning the proverbs of the target language gives foreign language learners an opportunity to practice and develop their oral communication. Learning proverbs can also provide a chance for learners to acquire some information about the culture of that language (Çakir, 2010, p7 in Ababneh, 2015, p190).

For all the already mentioned benefits and others, proverbs should be part of every EFL classroom. Simply put: "proverbs should not be neglected during the learning process, and every language learner has to be prepared to deal with real language in different contexts as it is true to say that such expressions frequently take place in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio broadcasts, and television programmes" (Ababneh, 2015, p191). Last and not least, a crucial fact is to raise EFL teachers and learners awareness about the paramount importance of figurative expressions and their necessity in language learning in general and vocabulary improvement in particular.

3. Vocabulary and Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSS)

Vocabulary learning is one of the most important ingredients in foreign language learning and sine-qua-non for students' success at the university. Every foreign language learner should know that vocabulary is "the total number of words which make up a language; and a range of words known to, or used by, a person" (Hornby *et al.* (1984), cited in Parsa *et al.*, 2013, p115). Considerable investigations have argued the importance of vocabulary for foreign language learners compared to other components of language (McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Wilkins, 1972). For example, (Wilkins, 1972, p111) states that: "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed", i.e. for a learner to communicate effectively, the morphology and syntax of a word is not enough, meaning is more important.

In the same area of vocabulary importance and compared to many other aspects in communication, vocabulary reigns the thrown being listed as a primordial element for effective communication: "vocabulary is basic to communication. If acquirers do not recognise the meanings of the key words used by those who address them, they will be unable to participate in the conversation. And if they wish to express some ideas or ask for information, they must be able to produce lexical items to convey their meaning" (Krashen and Terrell (1983), cited in Benson, 1995, p185).

Due to the important role of vocabulary in shaping students' language learning, teachers in different EFL classrooms get resource to vocabulary learning strategies to enlarge students' repertoire and improve their lexis, instead of introducing lists of words in isolation (word

memorization) as it used to be decades before. VLSs are strategies used by students (who are supposed to know and be trained at) to deal with vocabulary problems they may come across during the leaning process. Broadly defined, (Schmitt, 2000, p132) states that: “one approach of facilitating vocabulary learning that has attracted increasing attention is vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs)”. Eventually, EFL learners apply VLSs differently because a strategy that works well for some students may completely fail with others. That is why the great job needs to be done in the classroom where students are expected to be instructed in VLSs and trained in these strategies intensively under the teachers’ coaching then independently on their own.

4. Guessing Meanings from Context Strategy

Whatever the denomination is: ‘contextual guessing’, ‘inferring meaning from context’, ‘inferencing’ or ‘guessing meaning from context’, this refers to: “one of the most useful skills learners can acquire and apply inside and outside classroom” (Thornbury, 2002, p202). Contextual guessing or inferring involves “creating a schema for the unknown word, based on world knowledge and the previous experience, both of the world and the text, it means drawing conclusions as to word meaning[...].” (McCarthy, 1990, p125). In short, guessing is asking students to find the meaning of words by focusing on some clues and without dictionary interference.

Hence, in order for students to understand new words by contextual guessing strategy and make correct guessing, they can use several clues, because “enabling students to derive meaning with the help of context clues is an effective approach to increase vocabulary and reading comprehension” (Ying, 2001, p1). Contextual clues are generally defined as “the clearly stated or implied words or phrases which help to comprehend unfamiliar words in context because they can activate the corresponding context to clarify the contextual meanings of the words concerned” (Sun & Zhou, 2005, p49). Context clues include the following eight types: “definition”, “explanation”, “example”, “synonymy”, “antonymy”, “hyponymy”, “relevant details” and “word structure” (Zhang, 1997, pp157-159).

Concerning the factors that influence guessing strategy, an overview of related literature revealed that many aspects should be taken into account when guessing meaning from context such as “contextual richness”, “context clues”, and “unknown-word density” (Chern, 1993; Goodman, 1965; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Li, 1988; Liu & Nation, 1985; Mondria & Wit-de Boer, 1991; Nassaji, 2003). In this context, Clark and Nation (1980) as cited in (Nation, 1990, p162) have specified ways of practising the strategy of guessing meanings from context in four steps which include: determining the part of speech of the word, looking at the immediate grammar, studying the wider context and guessing the word and checking the guess.

Many scholars argue the importance of guessing strategy being the most useful strategy especially to learn vocabulary and a key to comprehend reading. In this context, Carton (1966) states that guessing or inferencing is at the crux of the second language learning process. Moreover, (Cook, 2008, p59) finds that “guessing is a much used strategy in language”. Similarly, (Read, 2000, p53) claims that “the most important strategy is inferring the meaning from information available in the text itself”.

Last and not least, guessing meaning from context remains the most widely used strategy employed by students when they have no access to alternative resources (Nattinger, 1999). It was proved that guessing strategy enjoys the highest popularity among L2 learners in contrast with other strategies which were used at a lower percentage (Lin, 2006; Tao, 2008; Zhou, 2008). Thus, guessing strategy is an effective way to help students overcome many of their vocabulary, reading comprehension and language problems.

5. Method

Study skills is a session during which students are supposed to learn, practise and use different skills and techniques that are necessary for study success. Idioms and proverbs were introduced in this session to practise guessing strategy for these particular aims:

- 1- To practise guessing strategy directly using idioms or proverbs in order to optimize students' vocabulary knowledge and help them develop strategy knowledge too.
- 2- To attract students' interests in idioms and proverbs themselves so that they will recognize the importance of figurative language in learning EFL in general and not only in literature studies or oral expression.
- 3- To get them accustomed to idioms and proverbs by explaining their importance in EFL learning, vocabulary improvement, communicative competence and also to know about the foreign culture.
- 4- To make them discover the charming beauty of idiomatic expressions in making the study skills session a new setting where learning can happen in pleasant and tension-free environment.

In the study skills classroom, 1st year EFL students usually receive instruction in specific techniques that are important in facilitating learning. Vocabulary is one of the major aspects teachers focus on during this session because most students comment having not enough vocabulary to communicate effectively in English. By making student bear in mind that "good language learners do many things such as use a variety of strategies, structure their vocabulary learning, review and practise target words and so on" (Schmitt, 2000, p133). Making them learn and use idioms and proverbs to practise guessing and enrich their vocabulary was added to the many things students can do.

5.1. Steps and Procedures

When encountering new words, most 1st year EFL students feel anxious about which strategy to use and they generally opt for one of the following strategies "ignoring unknown words", "consulting a dictionary", "writing them down for further consultation with a teacher" and "attempting to infer their meanings from context" (Fraiser, 1999; Sanaoui, 1995).

Dealing with guessing meanings from context in EFL is usually done through reading where students are exposed to texts of different size and difficulty and are asked to read and use whatever available clues (See 4) in order to guess the exact meanings of words. It is seldom that teachers introduce figurative expressions to teach this strategy in study skills

setting. The experience started by exposing students to idioms and proverbs (See appendix A) to make them familiar with figurative expressions and mainly natural everyday situations in which native speakers use them to communicate. Then, some vocabulary learning strategies were introduced to students who received reinforced instruction in guessing strategy using different texts; as learning strategies are “readily teachable” (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p291) and the time spent in strategy instruction was not wasted because students’ practised the same strategy using idioms and proverbs.

When introducing figurative language in the study skills classroom for the aim of practising guessing strategy, the researcher used the following steps in implementing guessing strategy:

- 1- Explaining guessing strategy to students through examples
- 2- Presenting the list of idioms and proverbs to students for reading
- 3- Students are asked first to guess the meaning of difficult/new words
- 4- With the teacher’s help the students try to fix the exact meaning and compare their answers to the ones of their mates
- 5- Students are asked to use the original words in sentences
- 6- Open discussions are made about similarities and differences between the studied idioms and expressions and the students native context.

5.2. Results

The main outcomes of this experience is that students enjoyed using idioms and proverbs to practise guessing strategy, they learnt new vocabulary and they also believe that in this way they can better memorize the idioms or proverbs dealt with and be able to recall them for use in suitable situations. Using figurative language in the study skills session also motivated students to learn new words and their meanings not by rote learning but by guessing meanings from contexts. The experience was not only beneficial in terms of vocabulary learning but also in making students know about some aspects of the foreign language culture through the use of studied idioms and proverbs. The experience is worth trying because it reinforces the idea that ‘a teacher may use any material, trick or strategy to help students learn and improve’.

6. Conclusion

The present paper attempted to shed light on the importance of figurative language mainly idioms and proverbs to practice vocabulary learning strategies in the study skills classroom. It put special emphasis on using idioms and proverbs to practise guessing meanings from context strategy. The experience can be generalized in our university EFL study skills classrooms where we are called-upon to assist students in skills and techniques that lead to language development and positive achievement. Outcomes of these experience were manifold because students did not only benefit from learning how to guess meanings of words but they also expressed joy dealing with something new in the study skills classroom and which was figurative language. They indeed learnt how to implement the strategy, they memorized some idioms to be used in other modules and they learnt about everyday context

in which natives use these expressions. Based on these findings a call is addressed to study skills teachers in particular to introduce idioms and proverbs in their teaching in order to make students benefit in a more special and pleasant way.

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Appendix A: Most Popular English Idioms and Proverbs

Idioms

- a. *She's got green fingers*
- b. *She's been taken for a ride*
- c. *She let the car out of the bag*
- d. *She's a chip off the old block.*
- e. *The gift of the gab*
- f. *A jack of all trades*
- g. *A storm in a teacup*
- h. *A drop in the ocean*
- i. *A shot in the dark*
- j. *Teething troubles*
- k. *The rat race*
- l. *A flash in the pan*
- m. *A fly on the ointment*
- n. *The life and soul of the party*
- o. *A stone's throw.*

Proverbs

1. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*
2. *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.*
3. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.*
4. *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*
5. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

6. The early *bird* catches the worm.
7. Don't judge a *book* by its cover.
8. Don't cross the *bridge* till you come to it.
9. New *brooms* sweep clean.
10. *Business* before pleasure.
11. You cannot have your *cake* and eat it too.
12. Don't count your *chickens* before they're hatched.
13. Spare the rod and spoil the *child*.
14. Every *cloud* has a silver lining.
15. First *come*, first served.