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***The Representation of idiomatic Expressions in digital Literature and its
Role in Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence***

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Abstract:

This paper highlights the role of idiomatic expressions as represented in the digital literature in promoting intercultural communicative competence. Nowadays, one of the most crucial goals of teaching English throughout the world is to foster learners' intercultural literacy, cultural awareness and critical thinking in order to promote learners' intercultural communicative competence. Certainly, idiomatic expressions are considered an integral part of language because they represent its culture. English literature as an authentic source of language and culture, certainly, encompasses a huge number of idiomatic expressions and it is a good way to acquaint learners with the social and the cultural knowledge of the society. More recently, the widespread of digital literature, positively affects the learning of idiomatic expressions for the sake of developing interculturality as it becomes more enjoyable and easier.

Key words: idiomatic expressions, digital literature, intercultural communicative competence, multimedia technology

1. Introduction:

As is known, mastering a foreign language (FL) offers a wide opportunity for an individual to boost his or her standard of living in today's society. This process involves learning not only the four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also its culture. With the advent of modern technology and multimedia, the learners' reliance on digital literature has become observable. Nowadays, learning idiomatic expression of English culture has become compulsory for developing the learners' communicative competence. Given the fact that digital literature with its different characteristics has become an authentic and a rich source for leaning idiomatic expressions, the main focus of this study is to examine the role of the idiomatic expressions as presented in digital literature on

developing learners' intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the paper first defines key aspects such as an idiom and digital literature, and explains what kind of idiomatic expressions digital literature incorporates and how it contributes to the development of learners' intercultural communicative competence.

2. Definition and importance of Idiomatic Expression in English Language Learning

Idiomatic expressions are important linguistic units for EFL learners as they provide them with the knowledge required for building their communicative competence and more significantly their intercultural communicative competence if they understand them and produce them properly. Certainly, language and culture are closely interconnected and any language must have several devices to convey and perceive cultural aspects and ideas of its native speakers and how they should communicate properly with each other. Indeed, an idiom is a major device which has acquired a significant place in language teaching and learning, especially with the increase of the need of intercultural communication between people around the world. As a global language, English has become a language of 'idiomaticity' because it is very rich in figures of speech, metaphors, similes, phrasal verbs which are called "idiomatic expressions" (Adil Ali : 2019, p. 1). The word idiom has received several definitions as researchers have not agreed on how to define it. To mention a few, in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, an idiom is viewed as "a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word" (2012, p. 870). Larsen (1984) maintained that an idiom is a "string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (p.23). Cruse (1995, p.37) reported that "a traditional definition of idiom runs roughly as follows: an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts." Indeed, many researchers have based their definition on the idea of non-compositionality. In addition, Carter (1998) referred to idioms as "restricted collocations which cannot be normally understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up" (231). Similarly, Mitsis (2004) viewed an idiom as a continuous of "non-literal expressions." More recently, applied linguists consider idioms as standardized multiword (such as collocations and idiomatic expressions), discussed as 'lexical phrases', 'multiword units', 'formulas', 'prefabricated chunks', 'ready-made utterances', and so forth (Boers et al.: 2006, p. 246). Linguistically speaking, idioms operate

on three interrelated aspects of language: form, meaning and usage. This means that like any other part of speech, they can be understood according to their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions (Adil Ali: 2018, p 2).

As far as the importance of idiomatic expression (“formulaic expressions,” and “lexical expressions”) and collocations are considered significant aspects of language learning (Amer, 2014: p.286). On this point, Pawley and Syder(1983) thought that “fluent and idiomatic control of a language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of ‘sentence stems’ which are ‘institutionalized’ or ‘lexicalized’” (p. 191). Moreover, Boers et al.(2006) viewed that there are three reasons why a command of idiomatic expressions are beneficial for language learners. First, given the fact that multiword expressions are unpredictable by ‘grammar rules,’ and its sentence structure, the mastery of the idiomatic dimension can help learners achieve perceived native-like performance. Second, since formulaic sentence are retrieved from memory holistically as “ready- made chunks,” this helps learners produce fewer hesitations: “We rely on such chunks to ease processing problems, using them to ‘buy’ processing time while other computation proceeds, enabling us to plan ahead for the content of what we are going to say, as well as the linguistic form”(Skehan, 1998: p, 40 as cited in Boers 247).Third, formulaic sequences, especially those which are correctly committed to memory facilitate fluent language production in real life situations. Therefore, learning idiomatic expressions by second language learners is very important for those who want to communicate appropriately with the native speakers of English (Boers: 2006, 247).For these reasons and others, it is believed that the creation of digital literature can help second language learners in mastering idiomatic expressions of English.

3. The representation of idiomatic expressions in the digital literature

Integrating technology in language teaching has increased more recently as researchers and scholars have recognized its pivotal role in developing learners communicate competence and intercultural communicative competence. In this respect, González(2009) insisted on the importance of technology in creating an authentic context for learners by stating “technology promotes socially active language in multiple authentic context due to its accessibility, flexibility, connectivity and independence of methodological approach” (p. 62). This means that the instructional technology enhances language teaching culture and it leads to effective pedagogical practices. Thus, the integration of technology in our curriculum is the

appropriate way to teach culture. A good case in point, (Dema et al.:2012) mentioned that “one of the alluring benefits of technology is that it provides authentic environment that facilitates the teaching of culture” (P. 82). Technology creates an “open ended” environment of learning that encourages the learners to benefit from different web resources, enrich their language and enhance their cultural understanding (Dema et al.: 2021, P. 82). Thus, teachers and students are allowed to “go beyond quick and superficial stops on the information highway and establish meaningful interactive learning scenarios” (Hellebrandt: 1996, p. 263).

In the 1980s, literature has regained its position into the language curriculum through the new evolution in Applied Linguistics and Literary Theory. Experts in stylistics and discourse analysis have urged for the use of resource materials which contain interesting and stimulating content and experiences for language learners. Literature with its special qualities has been singled out as a perfect resource material that could offer more opportunities for learners to promote their language learning (Abdullah et al.: 2007, p. 13). Accordingly, the use of digital literature as an authentic source for teaching culture and idiomatic expressions is very beneficial. Multimedia consist of a variety of media-text, graphics, photographs, animations, sound and video in which users can interact using computer or iPhone.

In order to communicate effectively a given message, the learner must acquire the ability to interpret and understand discourses in their entire social and cultural context. Knowing that literature is a best example of language use and a context for language use, current research has proven that focusing on literature as a discourse can greatly contribute to the development of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. At the same time, it can help learners appreciate deeper the nature of literature as literature. So, researchers have recognized its usefulness with the condition that they should be used in “innovative and appropriate ways” (Durant: 1995, p. 9). The emergence of the computer and multimedia technology aids in the development of a platform that makes multimodal composition, circulation and consumption. The latter are unreachable through printing texts. Bimbola Idowu-Faith (2018) maintained that digital literature can only be accessed through computer screen because it is written for it. In multimodality, communication of meaning is not solely centered on language but there are other communicational modes and representations including image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, and posture (172). As pointed out, digital literature is “written for and read on a computer screen [and] ...pursues its verbal, discursive

and / or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetics and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (Bell et al.: 2010 as cited in Idowu-Faith: 2018, p.173). Given these issues, it is not surprising that digital literature is characterized by its experimentation and creativity that are not possible to obtain in print culture (Idowu-Faith: 2018, p.173). Because the digital texts exist only on the screen as virtual codes, theorists characterize them as “unstable, decentred, multiple, fluid and ergodic” (Idowu-Faith: 2018, p. 174).

Other theorists also classify digital literature based on some issues. The most famous classification is suggested by Hayles(2007). According to him, digital literature includes: First, hypertext fiction (types of narrative which is characterized by linking structures); network fiction (diversified forms of hypertext fiction). Second, interactive fiction(it is characterized by its variety of narrative components and contains more games; it is known by its use of literary narrative devices including idiomatic expressions, for example, the work of *Emily Short* relies more on the concept of literary metaphor). Third, locative narrative (it represents a revolution in the hypertext by moving from three dimensional spaces to actual one; it can be played at audio tapes or keyed to GPS technologies, such as *The Missing Voice* by Janet Cardiff). Fourth, generative art(it uses algorithm to re-create texts and or visual components, for example, *Regime Change* by Noah Wardrip-Fruin; it also includes flash poems and sequential screens).

However, the incorporation of e- literature is not an easy task as there is no effective method of analysis. In fact, there are some aspects of digital media that are relied on while analyzing e-literature. Unlike printed literature, the hypertext narrative is not necessary linear because it may “flow” differently while being experienced by the reader. Also, it offers readers multiple points because it does not necessary adhere to the traditional plot structure. Moreover, a reader of print media is supposed to finish reading a text by reading all the pages. However, the connectedness of the digital media does not allow its reader to reach an end as he is involved in a labyrinthine web of hyperlinks which seem to be endless. However, this aspect of connectivity has the ability to trigger the readers’ sensory experiences and stimulations because the reader has to learn how to “watch” and how to “hear” a video (Wright: 2009).

Furthermore, as opposed to the reader of the printed text, the user's interaction with the hypertext depends on the number of the participants. Snyder (1996, as cited in Wright: 2009) stated that “a print bound text is the result of many individual choices made by its author from among several available alternatives... a hypertext consists of many virtual texts which may be the work of different writers. Each reader makes one or more of these virtual texts an actual text when choosing which links to follow and which to ignore.” This means that the uses of hypertexts can experience the sensation of moving from one virtual text to another freely and independently without being restricted as is the case with the printed text.

The last important aspect of digital media is contextuality. What distinguishes the electronic text is its reliance on images, videos, audio and other types of media. The task of reading online allows the readers to understand the media that it is incorporated within the text. Because digital literature encompasses different social, cultural and historical aspects, the users and the teachers have to engage in the domain of culture analysis in order to comprehend the hypertext and develop critical perspectives accordingly.

Indeed, the idiomatic expressions stand as a cultural aspect that the learners have to master so as to develop their intercultural communicative competence. To reach this goal, digital literature which has become accessible via different devices including mobiles and computers can be very helpful if it is well-explored. In an empirical study, Piekot (2013) concludes that although idioms are represented in all different types of new media texts, they generally dominate in digital literature and they are translated into visual language (figurative visualization or literal visualization). Hence, idioms encompass non-literal or figurative expressions, such as metaphors, metonymies, similes, and proverbs, and belong to the broad category of formulaic language. In fact, they co-exist in the text to help the users understand the cultural and social aspects where the text is created. It is also believed that idioms can greatly contribute to the overall understanding of literary texts as they add richness to its refined language. For this reason, it is advocated that fiction can be a fruitful source for idioms and their cultural meanings. Idioms which are highly incorporated in literary text and which attract the attention of users are those which are linked to the thematic concern of work of fiction.

The researcher suggests that idiomatic expression use has increased in digital literature works because the writers attempt to imitate real life speech. To argue, there is a multimodal

analysis of two famous works which appear in different historical periods: *Afternoon, a Story* (1987, 1990) by Michael Joyce; *The Imaginary 20th Century* (2016) by Norman M. Klein. In both works, the writers resort to idiomatic expressions which are translated into visual language. They are used in dialogues because they are considered a mimesis of actual speech. They both rely on visual images and codes making up the shot in order to help the readers decode the pragmatic complexity of idiomatic expressions. By counting the number of idiomatic expressions in these two works, it is found that there is an increase of its use in more recent works. This proves that the writers have become more aware of the importance of imitating real speech in their fiction and their great interest to promote English language features including idiomatic expressions.

4. Enhancing intercultural communicative competence through digital literature

Intercultural communicative competence is considered an established situation between individuals who belong to different linguistic and cultural. This idea is taken from the following general definition: “communication is the active relationship between people through language, and intercultural means that this communicative relationship is between people of different culture, where culture is the structured manifestation of human behaviour in social life within specific national and local contexts, eg. political, linguistic, institutional, and professional” (“Intercultural Communication”). Indeed various definitions are provided to the notion of intercultural communicative competence. Perhaps, the most famous definition is that of Byram and Buttjes (1991) who clarify that it is the “ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations representative of foreign cultures” (p. 137). Put differently, this indicates that the learner needs to comprehend the stances and the behaviors of new foreign culture while switching from his own culture. It means that in order for EFL learner to communicate effectively in authentic context, he must be equipped with the cultural and linguistic knowledge of English. The roles and the conventions which govern the behaviour of a given speech community should be acquired and understood by the learner so as to avoid cultural misunderstanding when he or she needs to communicate in an authentic situation (“Intercultural Communication”).

Knowing that idioms are important linguistic aspect of any language, its ignorance will certainly hinder intercultural communication. They generally confuse beginners who must encounter their complexity while learning the language. Adil Ali(2019) maintains that idioms “might cause not only linguistic but also cultural and technical problems to non-English speakers who learn English as an L2, and these problems may jeopardize communication”(Thawabteh, 2011 as cited in Adil Ali, p. 2-3). This prompts researchers to consider knowledge of idiomatic expressions as inevitable for English proficiency and fluency. Certainly, learners’ exposure to idiomatic expression has very important as Yorio (1989) pointed out that the use of idiomaticity in communication denotes second language proficiency. Put differently, the learners’ proficiency level can be assessed on the basis of his mastery of idioms of the language. In the view of Guduru (2012, p 540), such idiomatic knowledge is “cognitive processes, complex relationships, and abstract concepts, which are difficult to see, point to, touch, or act out.” According, EFL learners must be equipped with the knowledge of idiomatic expressions not only for academic purposes but also to build their intercultural communicative competence. Guduru (2012) proposed techniques for learning idiomatic expressions: the first, memorization, a technique which strengthens learners’ idiom learning through association. Second, the keyword method which is used to learn meaning of idioms; third, the use of idiom notebook in which learners can rely on idiom notebook to write idiom definitions and use them whenever necessary. Fourth, learning through conversation is an important technique for learners to grasp idioms. They could be encouraged to role play in which they practice using what they have learnt.

In fact, the above mentioned techniques of learning idioms can be incorporated into a literature classroom in which the learners can watch or read a digital novel or drama and search for the idiomatic expressions and learn them while applying these techniques. As digital literature is motivating because learners enjoy visual and figurative representation of idioms, learning idioms will become easier and more enjoyable. Besides, given the fact that teachers can expose learners to digital literary books which can belong to different cultures in the classroom or they can easily get access to them themselves from their computers or mobiles, they can easily develop their intercultural communicative competence by chatting with each other using idioms or discuss what they have learnt. In addition, computer based classroom enhance cooperative learning and makes learners more active as they work

collectively. While learning collaboratively, they consciously or unconsciously exchange cultural and linguistic knowledge, thus, they enhance their intercultural communicative competence. The visual and aural elements of digital literature and more specifically that of idioms that the learners try had to find and understand support diverse learning styles and increases the learners' motivation and involvement.

5. Conclusion

This paper deals with the representation of idiomatic expressions in digital literature and sheds some light on how this representation can enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence. It is shown that idioms are important linguistic aspects of English language that the learner has to grasp if he or she wants to communicate effectively and appropriately with native speakers or in an authentic situation. More recently and with the development of multimedia technology, the appearance of digital literature with its distinct features makes the learning of idioms more enjoyable and easier. Whatever its type- visual or figurative- the existence of idioms in digital literature has increased during the last century, thus, revealing the awareness of writers and authors of the importance of incorporating them in their texts in order to achieve native speakers' likeness in their conversation and dialogues. Using different techniques to teach idioms which are represented in the digital literature is an effective method to enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence as it encourages collaborative learning and makes learning motivating and enjoyable.

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