

EFL Students Attitudes towards Idiom-based Listening- Speaking Activities

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Abstract: Idioms are regarded as one of the most outstanding challenges facing English learners. Accordingly, more concern should be focused on improving students' ability to understand and use these expressions. Hence, this paper aims at investigating EFL students' motivation and attitudes towards learning and using idiomatic expressions in listening and speaking activities during listening comprehension and oral production sessions. For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire is conducted with a sample of 40 students of the 1st year BA programme at the department of English, University Centre of Maghnia. The findings of the study revealed that the students have strong positive attitudes towards the use of idioms in listening and speaking activities and are aware of the importance of these expressions in achieving effective communication.

Keywords: EFL students, Idiomatic expressions, Listening activities, Speaking activities, Students' attitude

Introduction

Fluent speakers of any foreign language must have a good command of its vocabulary which is the most important factor that helps enhance all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Vocabulary is the foundation on which we build our knowledge of language. Underlining the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt emphasizes that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (Schmitt, 2000, p.55).

Most studies in the area of lexis argue that vocabulary should be placed at the centre of language teaching because with a rich vocabulary learners develop their ability to communicate more effectively. As the British linguist David A. Wilkins stated, "without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111). Hence, vocabulary is one of the essential aspects of language competency because without vocabulary learners cannot understand others or express their own ideas.

However, it is worth noting that the focus of teaching vocabulary has shifted from teaching separate words lists to teaching whole chunks of language, as "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis, 1997, p. 3). These chunks include collocations, fixed expressions, formulaic utterances, sentence starters, verb patterns, catchphrases and idioms.

Learning such lexical chunks is beneficial for EFL students as it facilitates the fluent processing and provides them with the necessary raw material to develop their language learning. Thus, lexical language chunks in general and idioms in particular occupy a crucial role in facilitating language learning; they are regarded as the key to fluency and motivate the learners.

Giving more importance to idioms in an EFL classroom proves to be significant as the students come across a great many idioms when they listen to or read English. So, it is important to encourage them to learn about idioms and how they are used to help them recognize and

produce high-frequency expressions. According to McDevitt (1993), idioms are often used in everyday situations and can be an indicator of a speaker's native-like mastery of the target language which is the goal of all language learners. Moreover, these expressions reflect cultural aspects of the target language which is an advantage for the students as being argued, "The use of chunks can help students to be perceived as idiomatic language users, disposing of a relatively impressive lexical richness and syntactic complexity" (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2009, p. 37)

I. Literature Review

There are different studies that attempted to investigate the importance of idioms learning in EFL classroom shedding light on the students' attitudes towards such learning. For example, Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) conducted a study to investigate the attitude of the Iranian EFL learners towards learning and producing idioms. The results of the study revealed that participants have a very high positive attitude towards learning idioms. In a similar vein, Ababneh (2016) carried out a study about Attitudes of Jordanian EFL Students towards Learning English Idioms. The findings of the study showed that the majority of the participants have positive attitudes towards learning English idioms and believe that these idioms play an important role for achieving effective communication in English.

Al-Houti and Al-daihani (2018) investigated Kuwaiti EFL learners' attitudes towards idiom learning, sources of difficulties, and their preferred learning strategies. The findings of the study indicated that students have strongly positive attitudes towards the importance of English idiom learning. In another study, Pucelj (2018) conducted a master thesis about Attitudes towards idioms and idiom learning strategies and found that that the majority of the participants have a positive attitude towards learning idioms and tend to employ a variety of different learning strategies while acquiring new idioms.

A. Definition of idioms

Idioms are the most frequently encountered figurative expression in both written and spoken language. Idioms can be defined as "fixed expressions whose meaning is not immediately obvious from looking at the individual words in the idiom" (McCarthy, p.4). According to Crystal's definition an idiom is,

"a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically or syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words do not often permit the usual variability they display in other contexts." (Crystal, 1991, p.170)

An idiom is a phrase or expression whose meaning is difficult or impossible to guess from the sum of its individual words. For example, the idiom drive somebody round the bend means make somebody angry or frustrated (McCarthy, p.6), but it is impossible to guess this meaning just by looking at the words. In the same regard, Baker (1992) in Alhaysony defined idioms as "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form, and in the case of idioms,

often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (Alhaysony, 2017, p. 71).

There are different types of idioms according to their form. Most idioms have fixed forms, and cannot be change or varied. Sometimes, however, there may be slight changes in grammar and vocabulary. Thus, we can find the following forms (McCarthy, p.4):

- Verb+ object/complement (and/ or adverbial): e.g. Kill two birds with one stone.
- Prepositional phrase: e.g. in the blink of an eye.
- Compound: e.g. a bone of contention.
- Simile (as + adjective + as, or like + noun): e.g. as dry as a bone.
- Binomial (word + and + word): rough and ready.
- Trinomial: (word + word + and + word): cool, calm and collected.
- Whole clause or sentence: to cut a long story short.

B. Importance of idioms

English is a language rich of idioms. So, it is crucial for its learners to know about these idioms and their different forms and types to help them overcome comprehension production difficulties. Dixon (1994) in Alhaysoni argued that idioms are essential to successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing (Alhaysony, 2017, p. 71). On the other hand, idioms can cause difficulties for English learners with regard to their fixedness and idiomaticity which have a relationship with the capacity of the language user to distinguish ‘those usages that are normal or unmarked from those that are unnatural or highly marked’ (Pawley and Syder, 1983, p.194).

It is worth noting that non-native speakers of English face difficulties in dealing with such expressions whose meanings are unpredictable from the usual meaning of their constituent parts. Carter pointed out that idioms cause difficulties since “they are restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up”(Carter, 1998, p.65)

Teaching idioms to EFL students is very important and necessary since it helps them cope with some linguistic and sociocultural aspects of the language and develop their communicative competence. Within this regard Liantas stated some reasons behind teaching idioms to second language learners thus,

“Among the compelling reasons to teach idioms to learners of second languages are that doing so increases learners’ lexical and etymological knowledge, their knowledge of grammar and syntax and, even more importantly, their knowledge of usage (i.e., of the formal properties of idiomatic phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems) and of the use of idioms in communicative situations. Perhaps the best reason of all, however, is the unique opportunity to teach both language and culture from a multitude of sociocultural perspectives,

leading to learners' development and attainment of idiomatic competence.”
(Liontas, 2017, p.7)

So, idioms help students gain deeper knowledge of the working of human language and its creative and figurative expressions. Moreover, teaching idioms can raise the students' awareness about the importance of the context in the understanding of language.

II. Methodology

To achieve the goals of the study, we adopted a questionnaire of 14 items from Ababneh (2016) about Attitudes of Jordanian EFL Students towards Learning English Idioms. The questionnaire applied in this study consists of two parts: the first part provides information about the gender, age and the participants' level in English; whereas the second part contained 14 statements regarding the students' attitudes towards the use of idiom in English oral sessions. The participants were asked to indicate the degree of their agreement with a statement as follows: 1 – I strongly disagree, 2 – I disagree, 3 – I agree, 4 – I strongly agree.

1. Participants

The subjects of the study included 40 male and female students of the 1st year BA programme at the department of English, University Centre of Maghnia. The reason behind targeting L1 students is that it is the only level that exists in the department of English. English is the medium of instruction in the Department and the students have been studying English for a whole semester during the academic year 2020-2021. Their age ranged between 18-22 years old except 4 students who are over 30 years old. Most of the students of the section filled the questionnaire which was originally designed to identify their attitudes towards learning English idioms in listening and speaking activities.

Participants' Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	10	25 %
Female	30	75 %
Total	40	100 %

Table 1: Numbers and percentages of the participants

2. Data collection

This study was carried at the department of English, University Centre of Maghnia. The department was created during the academic year 2020-2021 with a number of 60 students. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the students were informed of the goals of the study and were requested to credibly respond to the statements. Moreover, the questionnaire was completed in oral sessions after 12 weeks of study during which the students learned an important number of idioms in listening activities and were asked to use them in their oral presentations. The students were also told that their responses will be analyzed in confidentiality.

3. Data analysis procedures

Before revealing the results drawn from the questionnaire, I should admit that the sample was not really representative regarding the number of the participants, but the main concern of the study is to open the scope for more investigation and research. The table below summarizes the results of the questionnaire and presents them in percentages as the responses were categorized into four main categories: 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' for negative attitude and 'agree' and 'strongly agree' for positive attitude

III. Results and Discussion

Table 2: percentages of student's negative and positive attitudes

Statements	Negative attitude %	Positive attitude %
1. It is important to encourage English language learners to learn idioms for effective communication.	0%	100%
2. Learning English idioms is an important part of English language learning experience.	0%	100%
3. Learning to use English idioms is necessary for achieving effective communication.	5%	95%
4. Learning to use English idioms in oral communication is necessary for developing my speaking skills.	5%	95%
5. Knowing English idioms is necessary for me to understand the everyday language better.	0%	100%
6. Knowing English idioms is important for me to understand the target culture better.	0%	100%
7. Learning English idioms is important for me to get familiar with the English figurative expressions.	5%	95%
8. The study of idioms should be accompanied by authentic audio/ video recordings.	5%	95%
9. Knowing English idioms is important for me to comprehend the listening activities better.	5%	95%
10. I will definitely teach English idioms when I become an English teacher.	10%	90%
11. We might need to recognize and understand English idioms when we have to communicate in English outside the classroom.	5%	95%
12. I think English idioms should be a part of the English language curriculum at schools.	10%	90%
13. Using idioms when I give oral presentations in English will make my speech more effective.	10%	90%
14. Knowing English idioms is important for me to perceive the cultural differences and similarities better.	5%	95%

- The students' responses to four items of the survey were very striking in that all of them believe that it is important to encourage idioms learning as a part of the English language learning experience for effective communication and better understanding of the target culture and everyday language.
- The students' responses to seven other items come to emphasize the first assumption and serve as a clear indicator that the learners have a high positive attitude towards idioms learning. Thus, 95% of the students perceive that learning idioms is necessary for achieving effective communication, identifying the cultural differences and similarities and enhancing their speaking and listening skill, mainly if accompanied by authentic audio-video recordings.
- Another significant finding shown in the students' responses is that 90% of them agree that idioms should be part of the English language curriculum and tend to use them in their oral presentations for a more effective speech.
- The results of this study have been expressed in percentages and are in line with other studies based on statistical analyses like that of Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014), Ababneh (2016), Al-Houti and Al-daihani (2018) and Pucelj (2018).

IV. Implications

Today's classroom research puts more focus on the learner being the central element in the learning process. That is why it is essential to shed light on the learners' attitudes and motivation towards English language learning in general and idiom learning in particular. This study set out to open the scope of research into this area because there is a relationship between students' attitudes towards idioms and their academic performance in English learning. Moreover, identifying students' attitudes may influence their achievement in terms of vocabulary learning and raise their awareness of the linguistic and the cultural differences between languages.

The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the students have a strong positive attitude towards idioms learning and believe that idioms play an important role in effective communication as well as in developing their speaking and listening skills. Consequently, this field could be very fruitful for future research and investigation as most of the students are interested in learning idioms but their limited linguistic competence hinders them from understanding non-literal expressions.

In this endeavor, teachers are supposed to facilitate this learning by finding efficient ways of teaching idioms and choosing materials that suit learner's needs and desires to help them become competent foreign language users.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the attitudes of 1st year BA students of English towards the use of English idioms in listening and speaking activities. The results of the study indicated that the students of English at the university centre of Maghnia have a high positive attitude towards the use of idioms and are aware of the importance of learning and producing idioms for effective communication. Hence, it is obvious that the students of English endeavor to produce

natural and native-like language and reach a good level of proficiency. However, this proficiency tends to be defective if they ignore these language chunks which have cultural and figurative aspects. Within this regard, it is necessary for the teachers to include idioms in their programmes since the first year to encourage the students and enable them to have a good grasp of such expressions.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire about EFL Students Attitudes towards Idiom-based Listening- Speaking Activities

Dear students,

This questionnaire is a part of a study that attempts to investigate your attitudes towards the use of idioms in listening and speaking activities. We would be very grateful if you answer the following questions. Your responses will be analyzed in confidentiality and will not be used for any other purposes.

*Thank you for your participation.

* obligatory

1. Gender*: Male Female

2. Age*:

- 18-22

- 22-30

- Over 30

3. How do you consider your level in English?*

- Very good

- Good

- Average

- Less than average

4. Please read each statement carefully and circle the number (1-4) that best indicates to which extent you agree or disagree with the statement.

Scale: 1 = I strongly disagree 2 = I disagree 3 = I agree 4 = I strongly agree

Statements	1	2	3	4
1. It is important to encourage English language learners to learn idioms for effective communication.	1	2	3	4
2. Learning English idioms is an important part of English language learning experience.	1	2	3	4
3. Learning to use English idioms is necessary for achieving effective communication.	1	2	3	4
4. Learning to use English idioms in oral communication is necessary for developing my speaking skills.	1	2	3	4
5. Knowing English idioms is necessary for me to understand	1	2	3	4

the everyday language better.				
6. Knowing English idioms is important for me to understand the target culture better.	1	2	3	4
7. Learning English idioms is important for me to get familiar with the English figurative expressions.	1	2	3	4
8. The study of idioms should be accompanied by authentic audio/ video recordings.	1	2	3	4
9. Knowing English idioms is important for me to comprehend the listening activities better.	1	2	3	4
10. I will definitely teach English idioms when I become an English teacher.	1	2	3	4
11. We might need to recognize and understand English idioms when we have to communicate in English outside the classroom.	1	2	3	4
12. I think English idioms should be a part of the English language curriculum at schools.	1	2	3	4
13. Using idioms when I give oral presentations in English will make my speech more effective.	1	2	3	4
14. Knowing English idioms is important for me to perceive the cultural differences and similarities better.	1	2	3	4

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