LINGUISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS
OF TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS AND OTHER FIXED EXPRESSIONS
THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH
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الأثر اللساني والبيداغوجي لتعليم العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية

وغيرها من العبارات المسكوكة من خلال المقاربة التواصلية

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الملخص

لقد تكشّفت الحاجة الملحّة والماسّة لتدريس العبارات الاصطلاحية وغيرها من العبارات المسكوكة من خلال المقاربة التواصلية في سياق وقائع علمية ذات قيمة بديهية تبيّن أن الهدف الرئيس من تعلّم لغة أجنبية يتمثّل في صقل المهارة التواصلية التي تكمن في قابلية المتعلّمين لفهم لغة وإنتاجها بغرض التواصل تواصلا ناجحا. وتناقش الأطروحة التي بين أيدينا الأثر اللساني والبيداغوجي لتدريس العبارات الاصطلاحية وغيرها من العبارات المسكوكة من خلال المقاربة التواصلية. وقد أظهرت البحوث أن سوء استخدام العبارات الاصطلاحية وغيرها من العبارات المسكوكة هو السبب الرئيس للأخطاء التي يقع فيها المتحدّث عند إنتاج اللغة. ولا مُشاحّة في أن الأخطاء على مستوى العبارات الاصطلاحية والعبارات المسكوكة هما أنسب مؤشرين لتبيّن متحدث اللغة الأصلي من المتحدّث غير الأصلي، وإن كان هذا الأخير يملك مهارة تواصلية عالية في اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، الاستراتيجيات التواصلية، المهارة التواصلية، العبارات الاصطلاحية، العبارات المسكوكة، التلازم اللفظي.

Abstract

The noteworthiness of integrating the teaching of idioms and other fixed expressions through communicative approach has appeared as imperative in the context of scientific fact with an axiomatic value that the main aim of learning a foreign language consists in the formation of communicative competence – the learners' aptness to understand and produce language in order to communicate successfully. The paper at hand discusses the linguistic and pedagogic implications of teaching idioms and other fixed expressions through communicative approach. Research has revealed that the misuse of idioms and other fixed expressions is the cause of the errors committed in the production of language. What's more, the errors at the level of idioms and other fixed expressions are universally recognized as the most appropriate indicator of distinguishing amongst natives from the non-native speakers even if the later have a high level of communicative competence in English.

Keywords: EFL (English as a foreign language), communicative strategies, communicative competence, idioms, fixed expressions, collocations.

Introduction

The use of a language encapsulates a range of actions performed by people who, as individuals and social actors, require the development of a set of general competences but above all, a communicative competence based on the exploitation of linguistic means. As the linguistic experience of an individual in his cultural context extends from the language used in the family to the communication language of a social group, then to other social groups, he develops a communicative competence that builds upon all his linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge.

The English language has become the world's language, it is the language of communication between people with different first languages; as a result, the English language is a high-demand subject of instruction and is given priority over other languages in many Expanding Circles where English is taught as a foreign language. Moreover, the demand for learning English is also growing in the Inner and Outer circles where English is taught as a second language for reasons such as immigration, employment, etc.   The English language is heavily idiomatic. Besides, it includes copious amounts of collocations and other fixed expressions. Native speakers of English use abundantly idiomatic expressions, collocations, and other fixed expressions in their everyday communication, as well as in mass media, literature, and commerce etc., which, if used in the inappropriate context can cause annoyance or lead to misapprehended messages. Breakdowns in communication may sometimes arise even between native speakers of English themselves, or non-native speakers of English who have different cultural backgrounds, either because they hail from a different zone of the same country or different parts of the world.

According to Gelbrecht, in the context of intercultural communication, non-native speakers interact with each other and often make use of idioms and other fixed expression as 'the colorful side of language', because they are used to it from their usual communication in their first languages. Consequently, communication between non-native and native speakers does not always run smoothly when idiomatic language comes into play (Gelbrecht, 2011, p. 1). To effectively communicate in a foreign language means not only knowing certain linguistic structures, but also having the ability to persuade, to express your thoughts and emotional states, to intelligibly inform and correctly decode the significance of the message.

From this perspective, the aim of studying a foreign language is to develop a communicative repertoire, in which all the linguistic means are involved, including the idiomatic expressions. It is agreed upon the fact that idiomatic expressions represent the most difficult part of learning a foreign language even at an advanced level because they represent conventional expressions characteristic to a particular community, are fixed to a great extent and have a non-compositional meaning. Hence, it becomes imperative for teachers to find suitable ways to expose students to massive amounts of comprehensible input encapsulating different types of fixed expressions that act as single lexical units, thus assisting the learners to recognize and decode them effortlessly. It is also advisable for the teachers to try to use every opportunity to get learners to use these expressions, therefore accustoming them to encode idioms and other fixed expressions in their speech naturally, fluently and accurately.

Idioms versus collocations

The difference between collocations and idioms is one of the biggest issues discussed in linguistics. Both, idiomatic expressions and collocations are considered to be confusable phrases for the English language learners and learning them may turn sometimes into a great burden. While some linguistics (Avram M., Dumitrescu F., Robuu V., etc) consider the terms synonymous, Coltun Gh. differentiates between the two terms defining collocation as a group of words (at least two words) from amongst which one is notional, and the other are not notions (for the adjectival and adverbial collocations) and idiomatic expressions as a fixed group of words made of at least two notional words (Coltun, 2000). Makkai, on the other hand, includes the collocations in the framework of idiomatic expressions. As stated by Gredhill (2000, p. 7) 'for many linguistics, collocations are related to a range of commonly recognized multi-word phrases in language, including catchphrases, clichés, fixed expressions, formulae, free and bound collocations, idioms, lexical phrases, turns-of-phrase and so on'. In Benson's words (1989, p 85) 'collocations are fixed recurrent combinations of words in which each word basically retains its meaning'(cited in Gledhill, 2000, p. 9). According to Cambridge Advanced Learner dictionary, collocations are 'combinations of words formed when two or more words are used together in a way that sounds correct to people that have used the language all their lives but might not be expected from the meaning. In the phrase 'a hard frost', 'hard' is a collocation of 'frost' and 'strong' would not sound natural'. Therefore, collocations are fixed expressions in English and their meaning

cannot be derived from their constituent parts, likewise idioms. According to the same dictionary, 'an idiom is a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word understood on its own. To 'have bitten off more than you can chew' is an idiom that means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you'. Analyzing the aforementioned definitions, it is obvious that the two terms come under one big umbrella, that of fixed phrases.

Developing Communicative competence – the main goal of learning a foreign language

The number of English learners around the globe is increasing on a daily basis. There are a variety of reasons behind the need of embarking in this process. We live in a globalized society and the need to know a foreign language that enables us to communicate with people who do not share the same first language becomes imperative. Linguistics, curriculum designers, methodologists, and researchers in the field of ELT univocally agree that the main purpose for learning a language is to be able to communicate with other fellow beings and reach social goals.

Communication is a complex process, a superior intellectual activity which can establish or abolish new rapport between the initiator and recipient. As the initiator's aim is to send a message, the formulation has to be conceivable, and to this regard, the words are selected depending on the linguistic rapports. As revealed by K. Aswathappa (2005, p. 414-417), communication may be understood as the process of exchanging information, and understanding among people. It involves people, at least two – one to transmit the message (initiator) and another to receive the message (the recipient).Traditionally, the focus was on the initiator and his or her communication skills for effective communication. Of late, the role of the receiver and his or her listening are being underlined as requisites for making communication effective. The author deems that communication is best described as a process, because it is active, continuous, reciprocal and dynamic and it can play and essential role in changing people's attitude. Chandler R. Munday (2011), defines communication [latin communicare 'to share'], as 'a process of interaction through messages or signals among or within humans, animals, machines, or plants'. The author distinguishes between communicative competence and communication *competence*. Communicative competence in Mundays' words is:

> A speaker's knowledge of sociolinguistic rules, norms, and conventions for a particular language. The concept derives from Hymes. It is broader than Chomsky's purely grammatical notion of linguistic competence, including, for instance, knowledge of genres, media, and appropriateness.

Communication competence or interpersonal communication is, according to Munday:

> The ability to choose a communication strategy that is appropriate and effective in a given situation or context; the degree to which a communicator's goals are achieved through effective and appropriate interaction (a sender-oriented approach); the ability to communicate effectively with people of different backgrounds and cultures (a receiver-centered approach). This includes being responsive to the social and linguistic characteristics of a particular audience.

From this perspective, developing communicative competence - knowledge of the language system as well as the ability to use the language within the vast diversity of communicational circumstances - becomes the main goal of learning a foreign language as it empowers people to reach their goals in social life. Therefore, in order to be able to communicate effectively, one should have knowledge about the language and knowledge about how and when to use the language.

Linguistic and pedagogical determinations of expanding the learner's vocabulary in the form of fixed expressions

Theoretical research reveals that idiomatic meanings form a commanding part in the English spoken on a daily basis, either formal or informal, and the correct understanding of the meaning of these expressions leads to successful communication. Therefore, gaining an understanding of how to correctly decode and encode idioms and other fixed expressions becomes imperative. Insufficient

knowledge of idiomatic language may lead to message misinterpretation and to difficulties in understanding the interlocutor. Hence, the importance of teaching idioms and other fixed expressions must not be belittled especially at advanced levels taking into consideration that the use of idiomatic expressions in communication constitutes the indicator of a high level of language proficiency. As early as 1933, H. Palmer emphasized the fact how native speakers reach the 'natural' in their speech through the use of 'conversational phrases', as well as the need for students to memorize such material, given the fact that idiomatic expressions give special expressiveness of the written and oral language.

Other statements regarding the importance of the idiomatic expressions in teaching a foreign language are made by Granger S. (1998) who opts for teaching a language through the 'pre-fabricated language', namely the fixed expressions. Vizental (2008, p. 17) considers that the learning of a language is based, first of all, in learning words and larger lexical units (phrases, idioms), alleging then that the figurative meanings have a major impact in the process of communication. Littlemore argues that students most often interpret the metaphors from the literary point of view, a fact which leads to the incorrect decoding of the message produced by the university teacher (Littlemore, 2001, p. 333-349). Moreover, it is necessary for the students to possess knowledge to differentiate between the use of idiomatic expressions of their mother tongue and the idiomatic expressions of the target language which can be successfully accomplished by exposing the students to copious amount of target language input incorporating idioms and other fixed expressions. Research shows that the way foreigners communicate in the English language is most often considered to be close to the children's level of communication. It is believed that one of the shortcomings of non-native speakers of English is the use of a small number of idiomatic combinations in the communication process. In recent years, the dominance of the communicative approach in teaching English as a foreign language has tended to emphasize the ability of students to use creative vocabulary resources, in order to [negotiate meaning' spontaneously, and proponents of this approach, therefore, have little interest for the study of the prefabricated language. Significantly, however, Widdowson (1978, p. 128-134) in a reconsideration of the theory of linguistic competence, recognised the implications of phraseology for language learning. Biskup Gabrys (1992, p. 87) suggested that 'the errors at the level of idiomatic expressions constitute a high percentage from the errors made by students during English classes'. The idiomatic expressions are the cause of the errors committed when producing the language, a concern identified earlier by Channell in the classification of the types of lexical error: the student has understood the basic meaning of the word, but he/she doesn't know the word groups that can be formed with it, i.e., to put up a company (Channell, 1981, p. 115). Therefore, the primary means of interpreting the meaning of the idioms and other fixed phrases is the phrase itself and not the individual words.

It was ascertained that the errors at the level of idiomatic expressions are universally recognized as the most appropriate indicator of distinguishing between native English speakers from non-native English speakers even if the later boast a high level of communicative competence in English. This aspect is also developed in the recent works targeting the integration of idioms in the teaching of foreign languages (Vizental, 2008; Cowie, 2001; Wray, 2002). Comparisons between native and non-native speakers have shown that there are a number of non-nativeness traits in the use of sentence units. Nesselhauf (2004, p. 141) suggests that the lack of pragmatic units for trainees are most likely responsible for the number of deviant expressions which are used to structure an essay, for example, only have to look at; if you have a look at; the first argument I want to name for this.

Methodological opportunities for optimizing the teaching of idioms and other fixed expressions through communicative approach

Idiomatic expressions exist in a lot of languages. It is a fact that learning to understand and use idiomatic expressions is not an easy task. They represent the most difficult part of learning a foreign language because they are conventional expressions characteristic to a particular community, but also because of their fixed form and metaphorical meaning. Idioms are expressions that are considered

unique because the meaning of the expression is different to the individual meaning of its component parts.

Over the years, foreign language teachers have observed two ways to learn a foreign language: implicit and explicit. Fixed expressions are mostly learnt implicitly, these combinations being met unconsciously and several times in the same context. The more these word combinations are met, the easier is to understand and to memorize them.

Throughout the years, researchers in the field of ELT have tried to solve the puzzle in order to find out which teaching method works best when it comes to developing learners' communicative language ability which involves both linguistic competence (knowledge about the language system) and linguistic performance (knowledge about when and how to use the language system). Machael Lewis is one of advocators of the Lexical approach to language teaching. The author believes that 'a major decision facing teachers on a daily basis is how best to use the limited time available in class. Although many teachers rely heavily on course books to provide a basic framework, there are always questions of what to concentrate on, omit, or expand. The Lexical Approach suggests more time devoted to multi-word items, and, as we shall see, to awareness raising receptive activities and efficient recording of new language; this does not mean ignoring attention to form, traditional grammar or undervaluing novel and creative use of language. The choice of basic materials is sometimes not the teacher's, but every teacher introduces supplementary materials and directs learners' attention to some parts or feature of the materials rather than others. Such decisions need to be based on lexical, as well as grammatical principles.

Hence, devoting time to teach language in the form of idioms and other fixed expressions becomes indispensable given the fact that learners usually find idioms difficult to understand. Decoding idioms accurately generates successful communication. On the other hand, the lack of idiomatic expressions in the learner's vocabulary could also be a sign of not being acquitted with the cultural aspect of the target language.

The notion of idiom represents a linguistic concept referring to extended lexical units or stable word combinations, this being a solid argument for the development of the student's repertoire to reach a high level of proficiency through this linguistic component. Idioms and other fixed expressions can be considered linguistic means, the valorization of which could develop the communicative repertoire of the student, respectively, communicative competence. Since linguistic competence includes lexical, phonetic, syntactic and other dimensions of a language system, the lexical unity, expressed by 'idioms', is directly related not only to the field and quality of knowledge, but also to the cognitive organization, the way of storage in memory, the accessibility of this knowledge. Communicative competence in any foreign language, although based on the linguistic component, also fueled by the sociolinguistic components which refer to the knowledge and skills necessary to capitalize the social dimension of the functioning of the language, and the pragmatic component, expressed by knowing the principles according to which the messages are organized/adapted, is used to perform the communicative functions segmented according to certain interactive and transactional schemes.

Teaching English idioms and other fixed expressions can be successfully accomplished by performing the functional communicative (productive and receptive - oral and written) and social interaction (interactive and behavioral) activities stipulated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, based on the sociolinguistic and pragmatic components, the linguistic component being achieved with a higher share at the stage of pre-communicative activities.

In the light of the above, a successful methodology for teaching idioms and other fixed expressions should focus on the following:
   a) Correlating the theoretical aspects with the practical aspects of the formation of communicative competence in a foreign language;
   b) Training the students to recognize, understand and use idioms and other fixed expressions based on a methodological approach focused on a system of communicative strategies;

c) Correlating the communicative competence objectives in a foreign language with the application of communicative strategies for the teaching of English idioms and other fixed expressions;

d) Determining the stages of communicative activities based on the quality indicators of teaching / learning / evaluation of idioms and other fixed expressions.

e) Reorienting the teaching / learning methodology of idioms and other fixed expressions from the perspective of the integration of communicative activities.

The table bellow briefly suggests possible strategies for teaching idioms and other fixed expressions.

Indicators	Strategies	Objectives
Identifying idioms and other fixed expressions	Meaning focused input activities: listening to stories; reading stories/passages and underlining the idioms and other chunks, etc.	Recognize
Decoding (understanding a group of words as a semantic unit)	Explaining the meaning of idiom; getting the meaning from the teacher/context; dictionary use; finding the lexical synonym; deductive discovery;	Understand
Identifying the semantic equivalent in L1	Comparing the L2 and L1 idioms; inductive discovery, translation, etc.	Analyze
Using idioms and other fixed expressions in written or oral communication	Meaning focused output activities: role-play/real play, simulations, pair/group discussions (4/3/2 technique, split information, rehearsed talks, picture description); scaffolding, writing formal and informal emails; etc.	Apply

Table1.Communicative strategies for teaching idioms and other fixed expressions.

Communicative activities should therefore not only be interpreted as a way of remedying a language deficit or communication error. The efficiency of organizing the educational process from a communicative perspective consists of the didactic-pedagogical orientation towards building efficient teaching and learning strategies that attempt to answer the questions such as: How to ensure the integration of idioms and other fixed expressions in EFL courses? What are the effective strategies that lead to acquiring the English language in general, and idioms and other fixed expressions in particular? Which features of English communicative competence are indicators of the knowledge of English phraseology? How could knowledge of English idioms and other fixed expressions be tested?

Therefore, the scientific teaching principles are respected if various elements of pedagogical strategies involving favorable learning situations are connected, effective teaching methods are used and if there is an attempt to differentiate and individualize the pedagogical process. From this perspective, communicative strategies for teaching idioms and other fixed expressions should be divided into two categories: pre-communicative activities and communicative activities. The pre communicative activities give learners the opportunity to revise their linguistic system, develop their vocabulary and find out about the target language culture. Such activities include different grammatical exercises and situational dialogues. Communicative activities, on the other hand, give students the opportunity to use the language in a social context by simulating different real-life situations through simulation activities and role-play. The communicative activities should focus on all four skills: activities to develop productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (reading and listening) skills. Therefore, there should be a substantial amount of meaning-focused input activities followed by

meaning focused output activities. The aim of meaning-focused input activities is to expose learners to a great amount of language as understanding a language precedes production.

Conclusion

The communicative strategies used in teaching-learning-evaluation of a foreign language imply activities that should stimulate real life situations, explicitly determining the use of idioms and other fixed expressions in speech production. The general objective of using communicative strategies to teach a foreign language is the development of communicative competence. The development of the four dimensions of language teaching (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is achieved by expressing the roles of the teacher as a facilitator and manager of student activity as well as a partner in their interaction. Transforming the student from a simple English language recipient into an English-language initiator who can produce the language effortlessly, becomes the basic objective of using the communicative strategies in the learning process. Communication in a foreign language depends on the individual's knowledge of the language system and his ability to use this knowledge in a variety of contexts.

In this sense, as a means of instruction, the communicative strategies involve an educational activity that employs the student in a motivated personal effort; is a process of acquiring and transferring knowledge; ensures the participation of all students in the activity envisaged according to the level and the linguistic potential of each one. The purpose of using communicative strategies is the formation of communicative competence involving: syntactic competence; semantic competence; sociolinguistics competence, and cultural competence. Teaching English idioms and other fixed expressions could be successfully achieved through communicative approach using systemic communication activities, designed on the basis of curriculum components (objective, content, strategies) oriented towards the use of English idioms and other fixed expressions reflected in the learners' communicative competence.

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