Different Strategies Omani EFL Learners Use to Decode English Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

This research project was undertaken to further explore how Omani students experience and learn English idiomatic expressions. English major students at Dhofar University were selected to fill out a rating scale questionnaire for the purpose of identifying the strategies they employ to learn English idiomatic expressions. Based on the prevailing results, the responses given by the sample of the present study were compared to the responses given by other Arab EFL learners as reported in similar previous studies. By identifying the most common strategies used by the students included in this research, English language teachers would be able to identify which strategies should be encouraged among students to use and what strategies they should avoid using within the context of the study.

Keywords: English, learning, EFL, idioms, strategies, Omani students

INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic expressions are an essential part of the system of any living language. English, which is the L2 for the sample of the present study, is full of idiomatic expressions which are used daily by native speakers in spoken and written forms in specific cultural contexts. However, L2 learners face difficulties in understanding and using English idiomatic expressions. For example, when one of my native speaker colleagues at the Salalah College of Technology (SCT) said to me that "he is like a dog with two tails", I did not realize that he meant he was happy. I thought he wanted to leave the school at that time, so I felt discombobulated about how to respond. That situation has made it clear that to be proficient in English you must possess a good knowledge of its common expressions as well as their cultural associative meanings. Acquiring English idioms is highly required by L2 learners in order to be competent in the reception and production of the spoken English language. However, it was ostensibly true from my own personal observations that Dhofar University (DU) students do not seem to have much experience and knowledge with the learning and/or acquisition of the English language idioms in their classrooms. Based on that general hypothesis, I intend to discover the possible strategies that English major students at DU use to learn and understand the English language idioms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores up-to-date studies related to the acquisition of English idiomatic expressions by some EFL learners. It highlights some common difficulties different groups of EFL learners encountered and their most frequently used strategies in learning and understanding English idioms.

Alhaysony (2017), for example, investigated why Saudi university students were not using idiomatic expressions properly. In his article, he argues that improving L2 idiomatic knowledge helps learners become more proficient. He further points out that Saudi EFL students faced difficulties in understanding English idioms because of the lack of cultural background being taught alongside those English idioms. The researcher emphasizes the importance of teaching the cultural context of the English language along with the necessary vocabulary that has clearly been influenced by the cultural context. Moreover, the article confirms that there is a positive significant relationship between an individual student's vocabulary level and the type of strategies the learner used in learning English idiomatic expressions. Even though the study discusses some useful idiom-learning strategies, it does not account for how EFL textbooks should present idioms or what kind of appropriate teaching materials should be used in teaching English idioms. In the same vein, Al-Kadi (2015) investigated how Yemeni EFL undergraduates recognize, comprehend and use English idioms. Three idiom tests and a questionnaire were administered to 63 sophomores at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Taiz University. The most commonly used strategies by the students in that study, were using key words, understanding the context in which idioms occur and taking part in conversations. The author recommended further studies that might expand the scope of his investigation by including more possible factors concerning the use of English idioms.

Al-Khawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-Momani and Bain-Khair (2016) investigated Jordanian undergraduate students' perceptions of the importance of learning idioms, the most frequently used idiom learning strategies and the difficulties faced when learning idioms. A total sample of 150 undergraduate English language learners at the Hashemite University in Jordan participated in the study, completing a questionnaire and a test. Three major findings can be extracted from their study. First, Jordanian students showed a poor level of competency in understanding, producing and using idiomatic expressions given in disappointing contrast when also taken into account their overwhelming desire to learn them. Second, the major difficulties that hindered Jordanian students from learning idioms were the lack of cultural background knowledge existing behind the use of English idioms and the seeming general ignorance of the importance in the inclusion of idioms in courses' syllabi. Third, the most frequently used idiom learning strategies among Jordanian students were figuring out an idiom from an equivalent one in Jordanian Arabic, guessing the meaning of idioms through the context and translating the literal meaning into their L1. The authors recommended further research to delve deeply into the difficulties associated with the acquisition of English idioms and the strategies adopted by learners to learn them.

Ali and Al-Rushaidi (2016) studied the difficulties that Omani undergraduate students majoring in English encountered when translating idiomatic and culturally-bound expressions from English into Arabic, and the strategies they used to handle such challenges. A translation test along with a short survey questionnaire, were administered to 60 students from the final year at the Department of English Language and Literature, Rustaq College of Applied Science in the Sultanate of Oman. The results of the study showed that Omani students faced four major difficulties in translating English idioms: "inability to find a suitable equivalent, misinterpretation of the meaning of the idiom, using literal translation which does not convey the meaning or omitting the whole or some parts of the idiom" (p. 196). The most common strategies used by students to handle such difficulties were paraphrasing, literal translation and translation by omission. The authors recommended that paraphrasing and literal translation techniques should be avoided as much as possible, and that students should instead be trained on how to use effective strategies for translating idiomatic expressions, and finally, that cultural studies should be taught to undergraduate students.

METHODOLOGY

As far as I know, no studies have been conducted in Dhofar on the acquisition and/or learning of English idiomatic expressions. Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate how Dhofari students experience and learn English idiomatic expressions. English major students at DU were asked to fill out a rating scale questionnaire (see Appendix A) to address the most effective strategies they use to learn English idiomatic expressions. Based on these findings, the responses of the students were compared to the responses given by other Arab EFL learners in similar studies mentioned in the preceding section. By identifying the most common strategies used by DU students, teachers can identify which strategies should be encouraged among students to use and what strategies they should avoid using.

Participants

The participants were 30 randomly selected male and female English major students from the Department of Language and Translation at the DU in the Sultanate of Oman. Technically, 20 participants were females and 10 were males. Their ages ranged from 22-24 years old at the time when the study was carried out.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire has been developed to investigate the strategies that students use to learn English idioms. The learners' strategies of learning idioms are elicited on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = frequently; 5 = always. At the beginning of the research process, a pilot study was run for my intended research instrument on five DU students to determine whether the sample of the study would be able to successfully respond to the eleven items of the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As Figure 1 shows, only ten participants (33%) said they always guess the meaning of unfamiliar idioms from the context (strategy 1). Ten other students said they frequently guess the meaning from the context. Six (20%) of the participants stated that they sometimes guess the meaning from the context. Two of the students (7%) admitted that they seldom use the guessing strategy, and the other two participants do not use this strategy at all.

Eight (27%) of the participants said that they always use keywords (strategy 2); seven (23%) of the participants said they frequently use keywords to understand English idioms. The responses of the other 15 participants were diverse: seven (23%) students said they sometimes use keywords, four students (13%) said that they seldom use keywords, and the remaining four said that they never use strategy 2.

Strategy 3 is literal translation; 15 participants (50%) said that they always use this strategy. Of the other participants, ten students (33%) said they frequently use literal translation, two students (7%) said they sometimes use it, and another two students said they seldom translate idioms literally. One student never uses this strategy.

For strategy 4, paraphrasing, participants' responses were evenly distributed among the first three scales on the questionnaire ("always," "frequently," and "sometimes"). Six (20%) of the participants indicated that they always paraphrase idioms, six participants frequently do so, and six participants sometimes use this strategy. Interestingly enough, seven (23%) of the participants said they seldom use paraphrasing, and the remaining five (17%) said that they never use this strategy.

For strategy 5, a large subset of 11 participants (37%) said that they never figure out an idiom based on an equivalent one in their L1. Only five (17%) of the participants always use this strategy to decode idiomatic expressions in English. Five students said they sometimes use this strategy; another five seldom do so. Only four students said that they frequently figure out the meaning of an idiom from an equivalent one in their L1.

Nine (30%) of the participants said that they frequently look up unknown idioms in the dictionary (strategy 6). The responses of the other 21 students (70%) were divided almost equally across the other four options on the questionnaire; 5 students, i.e. 17% chose each of the remaining options.

Almost half of the participants, 13 students (43%), said that they always use strategy 7, asking their teachers for help with idioms. Nearly as many, nine (30%), said that they frequently ask their teachers for help. Only 20% of the participants said that they seldom ask their teachers for help. Two students said they seldom do so; another two said they never do.

For strategy 8, 33% of the participants said that they always discuss idioms with classmates. Responses of "frequently" and "sometimes" were evenly divided for this question: 30% of the participants said that they frequently or sometimes discuss idioms with classmates. Only 7% of the participants said they seldom discuss idioms with classmates, and another 10% said they never do.

Strategy 9 is ignoring unfamiliar idioms; 37% of the participants said that they always use this strategy. Another 23% indicated that they frequently ignore unfamiliar idioms. A similar number of students, seven, said that they sometimes ignore unfamiliar idioms. Three students said they seldom ignore unfamiliar idioms, and another three never do.
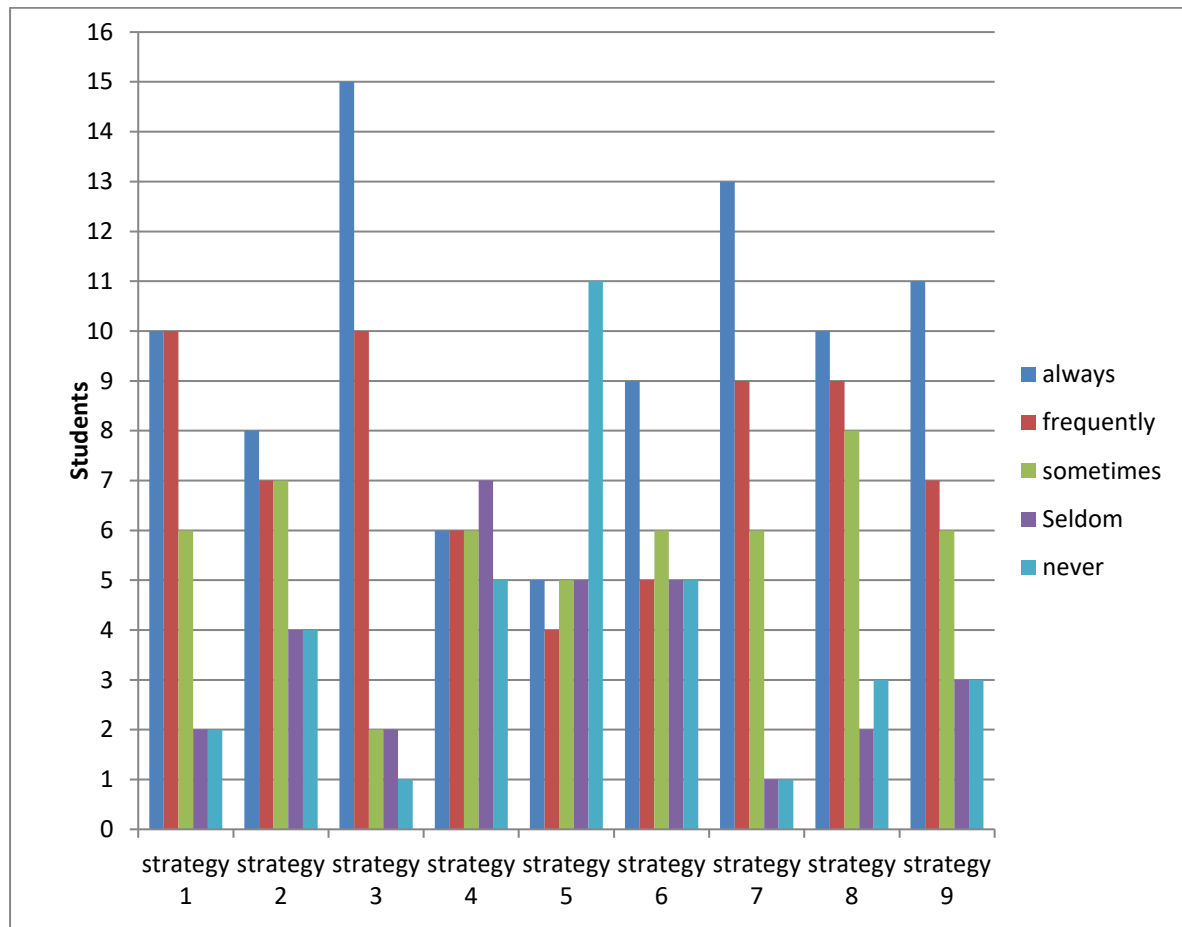

Figure 1. Frequency of strategies for learning English idioms

The participants added two more strategies to the idiom-learning strategies listed in the questionnaire: memorizing new idioms or using Google Translate or another web-based translation program such as GlobalLink or Text United. When asked which strategy they use the most and why they prefer that strategy, participants' responses varied. Ten students in the sample prefer using idiom dictionaries because they believe that these dictionaries are precise and provide good explanations. Another nine participants prefer to guess the meaning of idioms from context because they think this strategy encourages critical thinking and speaking competency. Another six students prefer to use keywords to understand idioms and to figure out idioms from equivalent ones in their L1.

CONCLUSION

Students in Oman, and particularly in the Dhofari region, struggle to understand and use English idioms, as they fail to understand the importance of learning these specialized set phrases, due to the manner in which English is being introduced and taught in Omani elementary as well as secondary schools. As a former senior teacher in Rabkout Secondary School, I have observed that English idioms were not properly addressed in

the existing curricula for any of the school levels; and teachers rarely use them in their classes. Furthermore, many of our students never have an opportunity to interact with native English speakers, which could help validate or invalidate the body of idiomatic vocabulary that students learn. This is especially important because, for most language learners, the ultimate goal and motivation for learning idioms is surely to communicate more effectively and fluently with native speakers, and in some cases with non-native speakers.

This study investigates the strategies students use when they encounter new idioms. Since students have different learning styles, they tend to use different strategies to learn the meanings of idiomatic expressions in English. Therefore, teachers must identify these differences and recommend the most effective strategies for learning English idioms. The findings of this study reveal that DU students' preferred strategies are guessing the meaning of idioms from context, looking up unknown words in the dictionary, figuring out an idiom from an equivalent idiom in their L1, and paraphrasing idioms. Teachers should expose students to a variety of strategies so the students can identify the ones that work best for them. In addition, students learning English as a second language should be given as many opportunities as possible to practice targeted idiomatic expressions with one or more native English speakers from different countries. This could function as a kind of a post-test and would allow students to prove to themselves, as well as to others stakeholders involved in the teaching and preparation of applicable idioms and vocabulary, that the time they have invested in committing idioms to memory has been well worth the effort. Further research is needed to explore which strategies are most effective in this region.

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APPENDIX

Name (optional) …………………… Specialization ………………………

Year at college …………………… Gender …………………………….....

If you encounter an idiom e.g. *I feel blue*

What **strategies** do you use to decode the meanings of idioms?

No	Frequency of strategies for learning English idioms	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
1	Guessing the meaning from the context					
2	Using key words					
3	Translating the literal meaning into my L1 (first language)					
4	Paraphrasing an idiom					
5	Figuring out an idiom from an equivalent one in my language					
6	Looking up unknown idioms in the dictionary					
7	Asking teacher for help					
8	Discussing an idiom with classmates					
9	Ignoring unfamiliar idioms					
10	Other strategies (please be specific) ……… ………					
11	Which strategies do you use the most? And why? ……… ………					