



EFL University Students' Awareness of the Translation and Usage of some Cultural Expressions (Idioms as a Case in Point)

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ABSTRACT

The current research attends to the investigation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) University students awareness of idioms translation and usage. It has theoretically tackled the topic in the first place by paving the way in terms of presenting different definitions of translation and its relation with language and culture , the definition of idioms, their classification, interpretation and usage. The research then moves to the practical part of the study which focus on examining the role of context in helping students being aware of the meaning, correct translation, and usage of idioms. To analyze the data resulted in this part of the research, different statistical tools have been used, like percentages of correct answers, mean scores, standard deviation, and t-test for a single group. The research ends with discussing the results obtained which prove that students' awareness of contextualized idioms is quite satisfactory because an idiom is largely related to the situation that gives it a special meaning. The conclusions and recommendations of the research highlight the main points that have been so far probed and highlighted.

Keywords: EFL, students' awareness, translation, cultural expressions, idioms.



1. Introduction:

Understanding idioms is one of the most difficult tasks for English as foreign language (henceforth EFL) students. The main problem is to recognize idioms, understand them and distinguish between idiomatic and non-idiomatic usage. In order to investigate the recognition and comprehension problem, and then deciding on the correct translation of idioms by EFL students, this research has two main parts. The first part is theoretical in nature, giving a detailed background about idioms, such as their definition, classification, and interpretation and usage. Following the direction of this research, this part includes also talking, in brief, about language, translation, and culture and how they are related to idioms.

The second part of the research includes the practical side which is centered around the extent to which EFL students can recognize idioms, understand them, and following this translate them into Arabic. It presents the methodology used to investigate the validity and achievement of the hypotheses posed and the aims raised, respectively.

2. Problem of the Research:

Among the problems reported often is the one focusing on the difficulty of mastering idioms by EFL learners being figurative speech which do not convey what they literally mean. As such and in order to develop learners proficiency level in the foreign language, it is important to give a place for teaching idiomatic expressions. Moreover, learners' mastery of such figurative language lead them to acquire native-like command of language. However, EFL teachers skip idioms from their curriculum to simplify things for their students. Following this, figurative expressions, i.e. idioms are going to be given less attention than is required, and this is where the problem lies.

3. Hypotheses of the Research:

This research hypothesizes the following:

- 1- There is a statistical significant difference between EFL university students' mean scores as far as their awareness of the translation of idioms is concerned.
- 2- There is a statistical significant difference between EFL university students' mean scores as far as their awareness of the use of idioms is concerned.

4. Aims of the Research:

Since idioms have been treated with great importance, and understanding them, being part of the figurative language, pose many difficulties, the basic aim of this research is examining the kind of difficulties students of EFL face in comprehending idioms and trying to find solutions and strategies that may help in limiting or avoiding these



difficulties. Among such strategies is the use of context that may have a great effect on solving students' problems in finding the appropriate translation and usage of idioms.

5. Some Definitions of Translation:

According to Bruce, Anderson, and Brislin, (1976:1), translation is " the process by which thought and ideas are transferred from one language to another". Seleskovitch (1976: 92) states that " translation means substitution of a sequence of symbols from one language by a sequence of symbols in another, entailing the transference of source language meaning into the target language symbols". As for Newmark (1982: 7) following other authors, translation is defined as " a craft which attempts to replace written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language".

Aziz (1998: 80) points out that translation means re-writing the original text. Such re-writing involves a number of shifts in the ideology of the source language text and the target language text which belong to two different cultures.

6. Language, Culture and Translation:

One of the most recent development in translation theory is the introduction of culture as a factor in the process of translation. Any community uses language as a means of expressing its ideas, thoughts and norms,...etc. However, cultural problems are created from the cultural overlapping between languages.

Both concepts of culture and language are inseparable in spite of the implications for translation and despite the differences in opinion as to whether language is part of culture or not. An equal importance is given by Nida (1946: 130) to linguistically and culturally difference between the source and target languages. He concludes that "differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure".

As for language and translation, Newmark (1988:94) defines culture as " the way of life and its manifestation that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language and its means of expression". Thus, the fact that each language group has its own culturally specific features is acknowledged. In this realm of thinking, Adelnia and Dastjerdi (2011) claim that different languages have different cultures. Such kind of disparity among languages causes problems for the translator in transferring the message from one language to another. Among the linguistic troublesome concepts in translation is the transference of idioms meaning as a culture-specific expression.

The discussion so far presented makes it necessary to include, in what follows, some space for discussing the definitions of idioms as well as their interpretation and use.



7. What is an Idiom?

Idioms are treated as being among the most important aspects of English. The situations in which idioms are used are frequently wide, ranging from friendly conversations and business meetings to more formal and written contexts. They notoriously difficult to define, and therefore, identifying and interpreting their meaning is challenging.

Larson (1984:20), for example, gives a definition which deals with an idiom as " a string of words whose meaning is different form the meaning covered by individual words". Following the same line of thinking, Baker (1992) treats idioms as frozen patterns of language that allow no variation in their form. As such, five conditions should be followed when deciding on whether a certain stretch of speech is an idiom or not. They are namely: " 1- the order of words within an idiom cannot be changed, 2- the words in an idiom cannot be deleted, 3- no extra words can be added to an idiom, 4- no words in an idiom can be replaced by another word, and 5- the grammatical structures of an idiom cannot also be changed".

What we can infer from what have been discussed so far, is that the translation of idioms cannot be changed literal since their meaning doesn't equally represented the meaning of their parts. If you say to a native speaker of English, visiting a place in England for the first time, " How did you find Stratford?" you will get the response "great, I loved it, or didn't like the place at all". But if you ask a non-native speaker the same question, the response may be " how did I find Stratford? The train took me there. Here 'find' is used idiomatically. This example shows that native speakers can easily understand idioms, but non-native speakers find a lot of problems in recognizing and using them.

8. Interpretation and Usage of Idioms:

One of the most difficult tasks for EFL students is to understand idioms. In addition to replacing lexical and grammatical items between languages, this task involves also dispensing with linguistic elements of the source language text. While understanding idioms, difficulties arise. Among such difficulties is students' awareness to differentiate and recognize idiomatic from non-idiomatic usage (ibid.:65).

One of the reasons behind difficulty in recognizing idioms is when they are used as part of sentences, i.e. being spread over a clause in a discontinuous manner, in comparison to those used by themselves. Easily recognized idioms are formed out of expressions which flout truth conditions, such as: "it's raining cats and dogs; throw caution to the winds; storm in a tea cup; jump down someone's throat". Among such idioms also are those ill-formed expressions which violate the grammatical rules of the language, like for instance: "trip the light fantastic; blow someone to kingdom



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come; put paid to; by and large". Other expressions which should be interpreted literally are those that starts with 'like' or what is called (like structure-simile), as "like a bat out of hell; like water off a duck's back". This amounts to saying that when an expression is more difficult to be introduced and has less sense to give in a certain context, is more likely to be recognized as an idiom by students (ibid.).

Building on this fact, an investigation of EFL students' awareness to recognize and understand the meaning and usage of idioms correctly in certain contexts and hence rendering them into Arabic in an accepted way, will be presented in detail.

9. Methodology:

9.1 The Population and Sample of the Research:

The population of this research included (60) male and female fourth year students majoring in EFL. They were selected on purpose because they were supposed to have been exposed to an amount of the English language that enables them to recognize and identify the meaning of idioms.

The sample of the study were (25) student selected randomly from among the population mentioned above to participate on a voluntarily basis. Their average age was (23).

9.2 Instrument and Procedures:

To investigate the hypotheses posed in this research and bring about the aims, an achievement test was designed. It was formed out of two parts. The first part, composed out of ten situations which included, in turn, ten idioms. Students were asked to read these situations one by one and decide on the correct translation, of the idiom, presented right away after completing reading the situation by circling the correct choice.

The second part of the test was also based on the same situations but focuses on the use of idioms. That's why students were required to select between two options in relation to idiom usage either to be used by itself or as part of a sentence.

9.3 Validity of the Test:

In order to consider a research tool as accepted and approved, it must be valid. Validity means that the tool used for investigation, in our research attest, is relevant to what it is supposed to measure. Moreover, it aims at improving the content of the research tool before administering it to the sample (Lado, 1961: 321). Two important points need to be looked at when considering the validity of a certain test, namely face validity and content validity. The former is concerned with the extent to which a test covers the items it is meant to measure, while the latter is related to prove whether the items of the test are appropriate or not.



As such, an early version of the test was administered to a panel of jurors specialized in applied linguistics. They judged both face and content validity of the test by making any necessary modification of the test items. The test was proved to be valid and suitable for the sample under investigation by jurors and hence ready to be administered for the pilot study.

9.4 Reliability of the Test:

Reliability refers to the consistency of a method in measuring something. In other words, a certain measurement is treated as reliable if it achieves the same result using the same method under similar circumstances (Middleton, 2019). To achieve the reliability of the test used in this research, the test-retest method was used. The test was presented to (15) students recruited from the same population of the research but not within the sample on two occasions within a time interval of 2 weeks. Pearson Coefficient Correlation factor was used for this concern. The correlation between the two tests was calculated and it was found to be reliable having a score of 93%. This means that the test is reliable and approved to be used.

9.5 Statistical Means and Data Analysis:

Using the SPSS program, a quantitative analysis of the data was performed. Students' responses were calculated depending on the frequency of correct answers for each situation. These frequencies were used, in turn, to get the percentage of correct answers of each situation. The mean scores, standard deviation, and t-test for a single group were the statistical tools used in analyzing the data gained.

10. Discussion of the Results:

In order to check the validity of the first hypothesis which reads: " there is a statistical significant difference between EFL university students' mean scores as far as their awareness of the translation of idioms is concerned", a t-test for a single group was conducted. This test compare between students' results in both cases of idioms utilization, i.e. contextualized and de-contextualized. The results of this test are presented in table (1) which shows that the calculated-t (5.860) is higher than the tabulated-t (2.262). This indicates that this hypothesis has been verified.

Table (1) T-test of students' scores in relation to their awareness of idioms translation

No.	Mean score	Std. deviation	t. calculated	t. tabulated	Sig.
10	0.3800	0.20505	5.860	2.262	0.000



In situation number (10), for example, " I think George and Lisa would make a great couple. We should try to hook them up.", the context included was of great assistance for students to find out the correct translation of the idiom. Simple words and structures with quite clear meaning enabled students to achieve high percentage of correct answers which reached 80%.

As for the second hypothesis which states that " there is a statistical significant difference between EFL university students' mean scores as far as their awareness of the use of idioms is concerned", a t-test for a single group was also done. To achieve this test, a comparison was made between students' scores when idioms were decontextualized with their results when idioms were contextualized. The results of this test are shown in table (2) which clarify that the calculated-t value (10.8015) is greater than the tabulated-t value (2.262). This confirms that the second hypothesis of the research has been also verified.

Table (2) T-test of students' scores in relation to their awareness of idioms usage

No.	Mean score	Std. deviation	t. calculated	t. tabulated	Sig.
10	0.5320	0.15555	10.8015	2.262	0.000

The context in situation number (1), "Tom told Andrea that giant turtles had escaped from the city zoo and were eating only left-handed people. It was not until she saw the smirk on his face that Andrea noticed he was just pulling her leg.", has also played a crucial role in students' choices. It was quite easy for students to decide, depending on the context that the idiom (pulling her leg) is part of the sentence since the word (pulling) is part of the main verb and (her leg) functions as the object of the verb. Building on this fact, students got 84% as percentages of correct answer of this situation.

The results discussed so far show the fact that the context of situation is of great importance and have a valuable effect on EFL students' awareness of the translation and usage of idioms. This fact is clearly confirmed through the observation that students rely on a neutral translation when the meaning of those idioms are rather vague and the context is rather difficult.



11. Conclusions:

This research is concerned with investigating idioms awareness by EFL students. The results show that the difficulties faced by students lies considerably in deciding on the suitable meaning of idiomatic expressions without context. Their knowledge and awareness of the English idioms is low to some extent. This is because of their limited ability to interpret unfamiliar idioms. This result is mirrored in the fact that idioms meaning is not quite clear from the meaning of its parts. So, the best way to understand and interpret an idiom is to see it in context. To facilitate the correct recognition and translation of idioms, students must rely on the social context in which these idioms appear. As such, Students' awareness of de-contextualized idioms is rather unsatisfactory because and idiom, as simple, is largely related to the situation that gives it a special meaning.

12. Recommendations:

Based on the abovementioned results, it can be recommended that both theoretical and practical issues of teaching idioms translation and usage should be focused on. As such, teachers need to help EFL learners to practice translating idioms as fixed expressions. Under the same umbrella, teachers should also pay a great attention to the strategies of teaching/learning of idioms among other fixed expressions. These strategies are namely: understanding, analyzing, and applying idioms in contexts. This requires, of course, the use of visuals and pictures to help learners remember idioms as well as compare the differences between English and their language when translating idioms.



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