



The Effect of Role-Play through Dialogue vs. Written Practice on Knowledge of English Idioms

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Abstract: *Idioms are omnipresent in the world's languages. Despite their pervasiveness, idioms are often a stumbling block to second and foreign language learners. This article has as main purpose to share the results of a small scale project based on guiding students in the use of idioms through dialogues and readings, in order to improve students' communicative skill. The project was applied at Islamic Azad University of Guilan, Iran, with one group of 38 Translation Training students who attend to an undergraduate education program. The selected 38 participants were divided randomly into two experimental groups, namely, conversation and paragraph writing groups. The two experimental groups received different treatments. In one class, idioms were taught and learners were asked to make a conversation practicing the new idioms, and in the other class, they were asked to write short paragraphs using the idioms. In the third class, the control group, the new idioms were presented and then practiced through different written exercises. At the end of the treatment period, the researchers administered an idiom posttest. The data were collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews and reflective writing. The results indicated significant effects of the context in idiom learning when idioms were creatively used in integrated skill tasks. The findings also implied that idiom learning should receive more attention in EFL learning context.*

Keywords: *idiom, role play, EFL, paragraph writing, conversation*

I. Introduction

The need for communicative skills in English has been increasing, both for business and in private life. Raz (1985) also demonstrates that role play is the most effective method in foreign language education, because it has beneficial effects on the learner's communicative competence and motivation. The word idiom originates from the Greek term 'idios', meaning one's own strangle. There is no specific definition for idioms on which all experts in the field unanimously agree. An idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit. (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 1999) In other words, the meaning of an idiomatic expression is not the sum of the individual words. Idiom is a term or a phrase whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions or arrangement of its parts. Idioms are viewed as "expressions whose meaning cannot be derived from their constituent parts" (Irujo, 1986, p.199). Idioms in and outside the classroom are widely believed to help teachers and students promote an innovative environment of communication. The use of idioms has a great influence in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, because it could be one of the ways to give students better conditions to improve communicative skill in the daily context. Moreover, the researcher expresses that the common use of idioms in daily speech for English speakers has brought a necessity in the teaching field to implement the use of this tool in and outside the classroom in order to help students be competitive, increase their vocabulary and the informal way to speak in English.

II. Idioms & Role Play

In the literature, idioms have been defined by many linguists and lexicographers in different ways. Swinney and Cutler (1972, p. 523) define idioms as "a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string." According to Irujo (1986), an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. Similarly, Abel (2003) describes idioms as fixed expressions whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents. Second language acquisition researchers (e.g., Hatch, 1978) have also argued that learners acquire language through conversation. In using conversation to interact with others, learners gradually acquire the competence that underlies the ability to use language. Moreover, Sheppard (2007) considers an

important role for spoken output in second language acquisition. Wu (2008), also, used Readers Theater to help students practice English idioms in order to enhance students' retention. All the above-noted points reveal that idiom acquisition needs to be investigated more in both second and foreign language learning situations. However, no research has compared the impact of using idioms in conversation and paragraph writing on EFL learners' idiom learning. Accordingly, the present study aims to shed more light on this issue by focusing on two techniques of idiom teaching/learning. Investigating the impact of using idioms in the production of EFL learners' idiom learning will enlighten EFL teachers on how to tackle this important aspect of learning a foreign language. If teachers learn about more effective ways of teaching idioms and learners learn about the effective ways of practicing them, learners will not only reach more efficient outcomes but also become more motivated as one of their obstacles for efficient communication will be removed. The majority of research studies in idiom learning have focused on the idioms themselves, on literal meaning, idiomatic meaning or idiom syntax, the frequency of idioms (Lennon, 1998, Grant, 2007, Wray, 2000, Liu, 2003). They are the definitions of idioms, the argument of teaching or not teaching idioms, the selection of idioms in teaching and the methods of teaching idioms. Some scholars focus on teaching idioms by English native speakers (Lennon, 1998, Cooper, 1998, Abel, 2003). Mendis and Simpson (2003), for example, feel that learners should be taught the nature of an idiom first, and then, they should be taught how to guess the meaning from the context. Few studies focus on foreign language users conducted by foreign language researchers and teachers, who are in the expanding circle of English users categorized by Kachru (1985). This is a gap in the literature especially when English is regarded "the world's international language" (Richard, 2008, p. 1). Role-playing is being used as a pedagogical approach for many years, predominantly in sports education, theater, history and other social science disciplines. Utilizing the techniques of drama, role-playing teaching is a holistic teaching method that inculcates the process of critical thinking, instigates emotions and moral values, and informs about factual data. It has been found that role-playing teaching increases the efficacy of the learning experience and makes it more grounded in reality (Pierce & Middendorf, 2008). The most widely adopted pedagogical approach used for conveying knowledge in majority of the construction programs today is the traditional teaching methods that include lectures, seminars, and tutorials to expose the students to different aspects of construction (Sawhney, Mund, & Koczenasz, 2001). In addition to traditional methods, other forms of active learning pedagogical approaches adopted in construction education include construction site visit, site trainings, computer games and simulations, and problem-based learning. Though role-playing is not a popular pedagogical approach adopted in construction education, it has major benefits and potentials for improving students' learning (Bhattacharjee & Ghosh, 2013). Due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders in any construction project, role-playing teaching method that replicates the real life scenario by assigning different roles to the students can prove to be very effective in construction education.

III. Statement of the Problem

English is a language particularly rich in idioms - those modes of expression peculiar to a language (or dialect) which frequently defy logical and grammatical rules. Without idioms English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing. The background and etymological origins of most idioms is at best obscure. This is the reason why a study of differences between the idioms of American and British English is somewhat difficult. But it also makes the cases, where background, etymology and history are known, even more interesting. Most of the learners show serious problems in learning and comprehending idioms. This issue can be partly due to the lack of linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, and lexical knowledge. In the past foreign language teachers just focused on grammar and writing. Speaking and listening received inadequate attention; therefore, students did not have chance to speak and to express their ideas in English. Later, in the 2000s English started to be taught in light of the skill-based teaching approach. Students have, consequently, learnt four skills separately, that is, speaking, listening, reading and writing. In spite of the advantages of this approach, the biggest drawback is the undervaluation of word power such as fixed phrases, formulaic expressions because of the heavy emphasis on skills. On the other hand, this crucial problem may come from the lack of idiomatic phrases in teaching and learning English whereas idiomatic expressions are of great popularity in English in use. In fact, Idiom Acquisition Research has uncovered a number of strategies that have pedagogical implications for idiom instruction. Most of the researchers, according to McCarthy (1998), have focused more on teaching idioms in context and have concluded that idioms are best learned contextually.

IV. Significance and Purpose of the Study

Idioms are an important part of acquiring a language and often indicate a proficient learner. Although all the above-mentioned researchers have focused on the role of input for second language acquisition, others have drawn attention to the role of output (active use of the language resulting in the production of language). They have argued that understanding new forms is not enough; the learner must be given the opportunity to produce the new forms. What follows is a brief review of the related literature on the topic in question. Apparently, the majority of language users nowadays are from this expanding circle. This study focused on idiom learning in Guilan, Iran, a foreign language context, therefore, could fill in the gap in the literature on idiom teaching and learning. Nippold

and Taylor (2002) claim that, “idiom understanding begins in early childhood and gradually improves throughout the school-age years, adolescence, and well into adulthood” (p. 384). But as the results of this study indicated, part of this problem can also be due to the absence of effective teaching strategies that can help students learn idioms in context. The finding of this study suggested that for the purpose of encouraging idiom learning, using idioms in conversation and paragraph writing is preferable to asking students to do different written exercises. In this article, we assume that habituation to oral presentation in front of the class would be the best method to handle the anxiety of speaking in public. The present study aims to solve all above problems. The aim of the researcher is to investigate the effect of two different techniques named role-play and dialogue technique on learning idioms by Iranian high school EFL learners. Actually the major objective of the study was to compare the effectiveness of two techniques for learning idioms and if there is any interaction between the two instructional techniques. Selected techniques may help learners to remember the idioms in a longer time. In other words, the researcher aims to recognize any differences between these two techniques in improving idiom learning of Iranian high school learners.

V. Methodology

Since 38 students comprised the entire sample of intermediate students at the aforementioned language school, the selection of the participants was based on convenient non-random sampling and thus the design of the study was quasi-experimental. Idiom instruction was the independent variable and the participants’ idiom learning was the dependent variable. Since the participants were homogenized by means of KET and equal number of male and female participants was assigned to the two groups. Just language proficiency was the control variable of the study.

VI. Participants

The participants of study were 38 students of undergraduate translation training students from the Islamic Azad University of Guilan Branch-Iran. Their age ranged from 19 to 25 with no control of gender. They were selected randomly based on the result of the KET test. Since the problem of speaking was bolded, those students with the scores that were at least one standard deviation from the mean of class were selected. The 38 students were randomly divided in to two experimental groups.

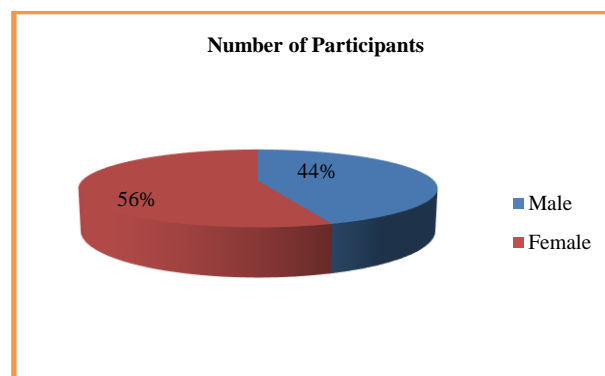


Figure 1: Number of Participants in this Study

VII. Material

Sixteen phrasal idioms (6 matching, 10 non-matching phrasal idioms as indexed by the results of Experiment 3 previously recorded) constituted the material of the present Full Context Task (FCT) experiment. Each item containing the idiomatic expression was made up of either short paragraphs three to six sentences in length (31 to 47 words) or short dialogs consisting of one to three interactional exchanges (33 to 80 words). Four paragraphs and 12 dialogs containing the idioms reported in Experiment 3 were randomly selected. The order of presentation of the experimental items was again varied to ensure randomization of material.

VIII. Procedures

After selecting the 38 participants, they were given a piloted idiom test. Consulting an expert in the field, the researchers considered the participants who answered less than 20 percent of the questions as the ones assumed not to know the target idioms and so formed the target sample (N=38). In order to have two equal groups, another male student was also randomly omitted from the study. Then, they were randomly divided into two equal groups of 19 students: two experimental groups each consisting of 9 male and 10 female learners. The two experimental groups practiced new idioms through different treatments using idioms in conversations and paragraph writing. The instruments used in this study included the assessment materials, the course book, and the tasks and activities utilized for each group. The assessment materials were a test of general English proficiency, an idiom test, and a

posttest. The KET was piloted and the results of the pilot study revealed that the test had a reliability of .74 estimated through Cronbach Alpha and so it was administered to 38 students. The book ‘101 American English Idioms’ (Collis, 1987) was used as the course book for both groups. Short-paragraph writing tasks included giving the students the opportunity to write about some topics that they were interested in. The second experimental group was asked to develop a topic into a paragraph of about 80 words using as many newly-taught idioms as possible. Finally, various exercises such as matching the idioms with their definitions, completing the sentences using the new idioms, and filling in the blanks with the new idioms presented in a list were used as activities in the control group. These exercises were prepared and photocopied by the researchers and handed to the students each session to practice the new idioms.

IX. Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, after piloting the KET, it was administered to 38 university level EFL learners. The mean of the scores for 38 students came out to be 21.76 and the standard deviation 8.91. Therefore, 38 students whose scores fell between 12.85 and 30.67 were selected as the participants of the study. Then, the piloted idiom test was given to the 20 selected students and six students who answered more than 20 percent of the items were omitted from the sample. Subsequently, the participants were randomly divided into two groups. In order to find out whether there was any significant difference among the performances of the two groups on the idiom test at the onset of the study, a one-way ANOVA was run on the idiom test scores. The assumptions for running ANOVA were checked. Skewedness ratios for the three groups fell within the acceptable range of ± 1.96 and thus the distributions of the scores of the three groups were normal as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the idiom Test Prior to the treatment

	No. of items	M	Std.	SD	Skewness	Std. Er	Skewness Ratio
Conversation Group	17	11.03	0.42	2.51	-0.51	0.39	-1.2
Paragraph Writing Group	17	10.89	0.37	2.33	-0.36	0.39	-0.89

The results of the Levene’s test also indicated that the p value was higher than .05. So, the three groups had homogeneous error variances (Table 2).

Table 2. Levene ‘s Test on the Idiom Test Scores

F	Df1	Df2	Sig.
0.052	2	54	0.547

Since the assumptions were not violated, one-way ANOVA was safely used to check if the differences among the two groups were significant.

Table 3. The result of one-way ANOVA on the idiom Test Prior to the Treatment

Source	Type III Sum of Square	Df	Mean	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	0.286	2	0.143	0.024	0.976	0.001
Intercept	6431.000	1	6925.000	2387.851	.000	0.584
Group	0.274	2	0.143	0.015	0.759	0.021
Error	473.712	72	5.984			
Total	3425.000	75				
Corrected Total	4578.000	80				

As demonstrated in Table 3, there was no significant difference among the variances of the three groups ($F(81, 2) = .024, p = .976 > .05$). This shows that the three groups were homogeneous in terms of their idiom knowledge prior to the treatment. When the treatment period was over, the researchers administered the idiom posttest (which was piloted with 30 similar students) to compare the idiom learning of the three groups. Table 4 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the posttest for the three groups.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the three Groups’ Posttest Score

	No.	Mean	Std. Er	SD.	Skewness	Std. error Skewness	Skewness Ratio
Conversation Group	19	49.68	1.33	7.06	-1.13	0.44	-2.57
Paragraph writing Group	19	37.71	2.67	14.13	-0.21	0.44	-0.48

Table 5.

	No. of items	M	Std.	SD	Skewness	Std. Er	Skewness Ratio
Conversation Group	17	11.03	0.42	2.51	-0.51	0.39	-1.2
Paragraph Writing Group	17	10.89	0.37	2.33	-0.36	0.39	-0.89

As demonstrated in Table 4, the highest mean score was obtained by the conversation group (49.68), then by the paragraph writing group (37.71), and finally by the control group (29.57). Since the skewness ratio for the conversation group fell out of the range of ± 1.96 , the normality assumption for running ANOVA was not met. Moreover, the Levene's test of homogeneity of variance demonstrated that this assumption was also violated ($F(81, 2) = 11.57, p = .0005 < .05$). The result of this test is demonstrated in Table 5.

Table 6. Leven's Test on the Idiom Post-test Score

F	Df1	Df2	Sig.
11.571	2	81	0.000

Since the assumptions of running ANOVA were violated, to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference among the idiom learning of the three groups, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was run. Table 6 demonstrates the mean rank score of the three groups. As demonstrated, the conversation group obtained the highest mean rank score on the posttest. Finally, a significant difference was found between the conversation and paragraph writing groups ($U = 202.5, Z = -3.11, p = .002$) with the medium effect size of .42, which indicated that the conversation group learned idioms significantly better than the paragraph writing group. Analysis of participants' post task evaluations revealed similar results. Participants' responses ranged from a sense of accomplishment to complete frustration. In particular, a great many of them expressed their frustration with the vocabulary and the passages, while others pointed to the positive challenges of the total experience. However, a full understanding of all the factors (i.e., word and idiom recognition, lexical access and retrieval, prior background and world knowledge, formal schemata, and strategy use) which govern the processing, comprehension, and interpretation of phrasal idioms while reading authentic texts, will have to await additional experimentation before plausible theory-driven arguments can be made in the field of second language acquisition and applied solutions to classroom teaching practices suggested. With respect to the results obtained from the analysis of data pertaining to the post-test, one can conclude that both experimental groups (conversation and paragraph writing) outperformed the control group. The effect size for the comparison of the conversation and control groups was large; however, the one for the paragraph writing and control groups was small, so the confidence with which we can interpret and generalize the results is low for the latter case. Therefore, the data strongly suggested that the use of idioms in conversation can improve the intermediate students' idiom learning. The data also implicitly suggested that the use of idioms in paragraph writing can improve the intermediate students' idiom learning. One possible reason for the outperformance of the two experimental groups compared to the control group might have been the mode of practicing idioms.

IX. Discussion

The data was collected during an academic semester. Theories from (Scott, W. and Ytreberg, L. 2000) and Nunan (2003) were used during the process because they state, "Dialogues can provide situations for students to practice ordinary conversation and offer students ample practice with basic speaking skills in context. Firstly, dialogues can be viewed as short plays and used for students to act out rather than simply read aloud. Moreover, the dialogues the students write function as basic communication at all levels. In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels" (Scott, W., and Ytreberg, L., 2000). Nunan (2003) stressed that role-plays are also excellent activities for learners' speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom before they must do so in a real environment. Therefore, dialogues offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world. At the end of the small scale project, the teacher and the students had advantages in English learning course from the use of idioms, because they increased their vocabulary, improved communicative skill, understood conversations easily, and gave the right meaning of idioms. While implementing several workshops, the students were able to understand dialogues including idioms. Some idiomatic expressions were: "get out of here, brain, bubbly, toasted, roomies, chip in on, but in, was a like and john". Teachers can encourage students to learn idioms and this is also a good suggestion when learners want to increase their vocabulary. When people learn idioms, they can get involved into the real world. Everybody is able to speak natural English and it is the idioms in the language that give it a natural, conversational, and creative feel. So, if people want to speak English fluently, it is necessary to learn idioms in order to improve their communicative skill. When the students presented their own roleplays, they stated, "The best way to learn idioms is through their use and we liked many things with these activities; for example, we used

idioms without being aware that a group of words can become an idiom". Finally, it is relevant to mention that the students and the teacher noticed that using idioms helped them go deeper into the language and be close to the culture and tradition of a foreign country. Also, teaching idioms give the students useful understanding. The results of this study, though limited in scope, are in line with other researches who suggest that for learning idioms using them in production is more effective than de-contextualized learning (e.g., Swain, 1996). The results can further challenge Waring (1995), Nation (1994), and Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), who have questioned the appropriateness of contextualized methods of vocabulary learning for all learners and believe that learning words 'out of context' by studying word lists, doing vocabulary exercises, or even by reading through a learners' dictionary, are more useful, especially for beginning and intermediate learners. Consequently, attempts should be made to provide learners with situations in which English words and idioms are presented in the context of speaking and writing. Moreover, the findings of this study suggested a significant difference between conversation and paragraph writing groups in favor of the conversation group with a medium to large effect size. Therefore, one can strongly conclude that out of the two treatments given to the two experimental groups, conversation had a significantly higher impact on the idiom learning of the participants. The outperformance of the conversation group could have been due to the fact that in designing and performing the conversations, the learners needed to interact with one another cooperatively, whereas in the paragraph writing group the learners engaged in writing individually. Interaction and cooperative learning have proved to result in more effective learning. Interaction is said to provide input (Gass, as cited in Swain, 2000), cause negotiation or interactional modification (Pica, as cited in Swain, 2000), and result in focusing on the form of the input (Doughty & Williams, as cited in Swain, 2000). Furthermore, Slavin (1995) asserts that through interaction, cognitive conflicts arise which in turn result in increased learning. Likewise, Swain contends that, "When a collaborative effort is being made by participants in an activity, their speaking (or writing) mediates this effort. As each participant speaks, their 'saying' becomes 'what they said', providing an object for reflection" (p. 113). She concludes that this way new knowledge is constructed because "our students' performance outstripped their competence" (p. 113). As a result, according to Swain, learners get engaged in problem-solving and knowledge-building by means of collaborative dialogue. Therefore, one can interpret that being output-based, the paragraph writing and conversation groups outperformed the control group and being collaborative, the conversation group outstripped the paragraph writing group.

X. Conclusion

This paper explores the cases of learning idioms in light of an integrated skill approach at Islamic Azad University in Guilan, Iran. It demonstrates that teachers and students at the university achieved moderate effectiveness in idiom learning. Both teachers and students believe that students are motivated, feel relaxed and confident and actively participated in idioms learning activities in this foreign language context. Successful interpretation of idiomatic meaning is varied at best despite the inferred context motivating an idiom's usage. The challenge for researchers and language educators alike is to focus future SLA research and pedagogy on the interplay between teacher competency and idiom language acquisition, figurative language control and reading, before definitive claims regarding the efficacy of a particular instructional method can be made. The findings also reveal that students have demonstrated the process in idiom comprehension as well as in idiom production though the evidence in the comprehension of idiomatic phrases are more evitable. These positive learning achievements in idiom learning are the result of the creative use of idiom-related teaching activities that are designed in integrated skill tasks. Idioms are contextualized in listening or reading activities and then practice with speaking and writing focus. The learning tasks are varied from idiom sharing, matching, role-play to theater playing with idioms.

The results also show that idioms teaching should focus more on idioms practice in activities "at the communicative end of the communication continuum" (Harmer, 2001, p. 249).

Based on this study, it can be concluded that visualization technique is effective in the improvement of learning idioms of EFL students. It can be inferred that considering idiom teaching, the traditional way of vocabulary and idiom teaching makes the students lazy and bored. The teacher needs something different to make students interested and motivated. They should combine their idiom teaching method with the different learning techniques. The suggested visualization technique requires the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques in classroom teaching. It can simultaneously meet the various needs of learners to enhance memory and learning.

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