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Effects of Etymological Elaboration on the EFL Learners' Comprehension and Retention of Idioms

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In recent years, idioms have received overwhelming attention in language pedagogy. Experts in the field have sought ways to optimize learning and teaching of these prefabricated language chunks. It is now maintained that the meaning of idioms which was once deemed as arbitrary is somehow 'motivated' by their literal, original usage. Referring to the etymology of idioms in order to understand their idiomatic meaning is called 'etymological elaboration'. This study sought to explore the effect of this technique on learners' comprehension as well as retention of idioms. It appears that this effect can be explained by Dual Coding Theory where the etymological association calls up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored alongside the verbal form in memory. In this experiment 50 Iranian advanced students studying English at Bahar Language Institute, Shiraz were divided into two homogeneous groups of experimental and control. The test of the former group comprised a matching task pertaining to the origin of idioms, a multiple – choice task concerning the idiomatic meaning of idioms, a multiple-choice task regarding the idiomatic meaning of idioms and a gap-filling task in which subjects were supposed to provide the missing keyword for each idiom. The control group just had a test including multiple choice as well as gap filling tasks. The matching task was utilized as a treatment to demonstrate the effect of knowing the origin of idioms on the participants' performance on the other tasks. The participants' mean scores were calculated , in both 'identify-the-meaning' and 'gap-filling' tasks, the mean score of participants provided with the etymological elaboration was more than those who did not receive this treatment, which indicated that etymological elaboration enhanced the learners comprehension and retention of idioms effectively.

Key Words: idioms comprehension, idioms retention, etymological elaboration

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1 Introduction

Language pedagogy like any other academic field has its own challenges, one of the most demanding of which is teaching idioms. Language teachers, material developers and theoreticians have all attempted to seek the most efficacious ways to teach idioms. Learners, however, are still faced with the difficulty of remembering and internalizing idioms.

1.1 What is an idiom?

The word “idiom” originates from the Greek “idios”, meaning “one’s own, strange”. There is no specific definition for idioms on which all experts in the field unanimously agree. Nonetheless, they are considered to be a subtype of ‘multiword units’ (MWU), which are defined as “a fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage” (Grant and Bauer, 2004).

1.2 The importance of idioms

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English: "Familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions and the ability to use them appropriately in context are among the distinguishing marks of a native-like command of English" (Cowie and Mackin 1975). While many second-language learners may be satisfied with something less than 'native-like' command, idiomatic usage is so common in

English that it can be difficult to speak or write without using idioms (Seidl and McMordie, 1987). Tajalli (2008) states that using idioms in speech can have a great effect on listener or reader. So idioms constitute an integral part of vocabulary learning. The importance of teaching and learning idioms has fostered an interest in developing more effective ways of teaching idioms. One of these which this study sought to investigate is etymological elaboration.

1.3 Etymological elaboration

The technique of associating the meaning of idioms with their original, literal usage is referred to as etymological elaboration or EE (Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans, 2004).

How etymological elaboration helps learners comprehend and retain idioms is not clear yet. As Boers (2004) states: “We cannot be sure about what exactly might be going on in the learners’ brain for etymological elaboration to have this attested mnemonic effect.” One plausible explanation lies in Dual Coding Theory (Clark and Paivio, 1991), as the etymological information is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which then

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can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form, and which can subsequently provide an extra pathway for recall" (Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers, 2007).

2 Objectives of the Study

This study was designed to investigate whether or not providing the EFL learners of English with the origins of idioms helps them comprehend the fixed expressions and retain them in the long term memory.

If the findings of this study serve to bolster the efficacy of etymological elaboration on comprehension and retention of idioms, this technique can be utilized as a novel and appealing way of learning and teaching idioms in classroom settings. It may also be of help in translating idiomatic phrases.

2.1 Research questions

In this study it was attempted to seek answers to two questions. One of these lies in the realm of idiom comprehension and the other concerns idiom retention.

1. Does Etymological Elaboration as a strategy, contribute to the EFL learners' comprehension of idioms?
2. Can the learners remember idioms for a long time if they are informed about their origins?

3 Methodology

The aim of the study was to explore whether providing the learners with the original usage of idioms can help them understand the idioms' idiomatic meaning and also remember them for a long time. To this end, the experimental group was provided with origins of idioms whereas the control group did not receive such treatment.

3.1 Subjects

The participants were 50 EFL students (30 males and 20 females) who studied English at Bahar Language Institute and their age ranged from 18 to 22. Their native language is Persian.

The subjects were presumed to be homogeneous as far as proficiency is concerned since they had all taken an IELTS mock test and their scores ranged from 5 to 6 out of 9. According to the rubrics and guidelines of the test, test takers in this range are categorized as intermediate to advanced level of proficiency.

3.2 Instrument

A pen and paper test comprising 15 idioms was utilized so as to assess the effectiveness of the proposed strategy. This test was replicated from Boers et al. (2007). It consisted of three parts:

- A matching exercise (including 15 idioms) in which the idioms and their origins were to be matched.
- A multiple-choice exercise (including the same 15 idioms as in the matching exercise) regarding the definition of idioms
- A gap-filling exercise made up of some meaningful sentences which were to be filled in with the appropriate idioms. The 15 idioms used in this exercise were the same as the ones used in the above exercise.

Some examples of the above exercise are included in the Appendix.

3.3 Procedure

To ensure the validity of the test, the researchers consulted three experienced university lecturers at Islamic Azad University and Shiraz State University who have been teaching idioms for a number of years. Then the test was administered once and the data were put into SPSS. Cronbach's alpha was made use of to check the reliability. The result indicated that the test was reliable enough ($r=0.88$).

Once convinced of the validity and reliability, the researchers administered the test to check the effectiveness of the proposed strategy.

3.3.1 The test for experimental group

3.3.1.1 Matching exercise

In this task, the participants were asked to match the idioms to their origins. The 15 idioms were presented on the left and their origins on the right. The origins were not in the correct order, thus the students had to match them. On finishing the exercise, they were given the answer key to check their answers. Yet they were not allowed to change what they had written.

3.3.1.2 Multiple choice task

In this exercise the subjects were asked to choose the correct definition for each of the 15 idioms from the four choices presented. Once finished with task, they were provided with the key like the above exercise.

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3.3.1.3 Gap filling task (Idioms in context)

In this exercise which was held a week after the above mentioned exercises, the students were given 15 meaningful sentences containing 15 idioms and were requested to complete the idioms using suitable keywords. This task aimed at checking the retention of idioms in the long run. The sentences were clear however they were not the definitions of idioms.

3.3.2 The test for control group

3.3.2.1 Multiple choice

Save for the first task, the same tests for experimental group were given to the control group.

3.3.3 Statistical procedures

Following the data collection stage (the scores the participants had obtained through the exercises), an independent samples t-test was conducted to indicate whether the etymological elaboration had an effect on the learners' comprehension of idioms. Likewise, another t-test was run to show the effect of the proposed strategy on retention of the learners. The mean and standard deviation of each group for both variables-comprehension and retention-were also calculated.

4 Results

4.1 Mean scores

The mean scores and standard deviations for each group are presented in the following tables. The first table represents the scores on the comprehension task and the second the mean scores on the retention exercise.

Table 4.1 The Mean and Standard Deviation for Comprehension Task

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Experimental	9.8400	2.70308
Control	6.9600	2.18861
Total	8.4000	2.83563

Table 4.2 The Mean and Standard Deviation for Retention Task

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Experimental	10.7200	3.00721
Control	6.4800	3.99082
Total	8.6000	4.10077

The comprehension and retention test scores based on which the above mean scores were obtained are presented in Tables 4.3 and 4.4.

Table 4.3 The Experimental Group's Scores

Participants	Multiple-choice	Gap-filled
1	6	5
2	4	0
3	5	5
4	8	0
5	11	15
6	7	13
7	4	3
8	4	3
9	5	7
10	6	1
11	4	8
12	7	2
13	7	4
14	8	12
15	8	9
16	6	8
17	9	2
18	11	8
19	10	10
20	10	9
21	8	8
22	5	7
23	6	10
24	9	7
25	6	6

Table 4.4 The Control Group's Score

Participants	Multiple-choice	Gap-filled
1	5	7
2	13	12
3	11	12
4	11	9
5	13	15
6	13	14
7	13	14
8	7	8
9	6	6
10	13	3

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11	13	13
12	11	10
13	10	12
14	4	11
15	9	9
16	9	10
17	10	11
18	12	9
19	12	10
20	9	11
21	7	14
22	12	14
23	6	8
24	10	7
25	9	12

4.2 The t-test

In order to analyze the data obtained from the comprehension and retention tests, the SPSS was utilized. Since the study had one independent variable (etymological elaboration) and two dependent variables namely comprehension and retention and for each dependent variable there was a distinct test, it was assumed that an independent samples t-test would be appropriate to show the effect of etymological elaboration on the learners' comprehension and retention of idioms. So the independent samples t-test was run two times (once for comprehension and the other time for retention). The results are depicted in Tables 4.5 and 4.6.

Table 4.5. Independent Samples t-test for Comprehension Task

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference 133	
Equal Variances Assumed	1.027	.316	4.140	48	.000	2.88000	.69561	1.48139	4.27861
Equal Variances not Assumed			4.140	46.009	.000	2.88000	.69561	1.47983	4.28017

Table 4.6. Independent Samples t-test for Retention Task

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Equal Variances Assumed	2.014	.162	4.243	48	.000	4.24000	.99940	2.23057	6.24943
Equal Variances not Assumed			4.243	44.610	.000	4.24000	.99940	2.22662	6.25338

5 Discussion

As shown in the tables, the participants' mean score for the experimental group is 9.84 (SD=2.7) while the mean score of control group is 6.96 (SD=2.1), this is indicative of the statistically significant difference between the two groups; it can be concluded that etymological elaboration helped the learners to figure out the meaning of idioms. Referring to the results of the independent samples t-test also reveals that our conclusion is retained and the beneficial effect of etymological elaboration is confirmed. ($p=0.00<0.05$).

As regards the effect of etymological elaboration on the retention of idioms, the mean scores obtained from the retention task (gap-filling task), indicate that the mean score of the experimental group is 10.72 (SD=3.00) while that of the control group is 6.48 (SD=3.99). As with the comprehension task, we can see that the mean of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group, which clearly shows the positive effect of the etymological elaboration on retention of idioms. The results of the independent t-test as well confirm the mentioned effect.

6 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the study indicate that etymological elaboration can serve to help students better understand and retain the idioms they are exposed to. Based on these findings, we suggest teachers of English use this technique in their classes and encourage students to use this helpful technique rather than asking them to memorize the idioms in a rote fashion.

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Appendix

Matching Exercise

A. Match each idiom with its origin (matching exercise)

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. a rule of thumb | 2. under the gun | 3. to roll with the punches |
| 4. in the pink | 5. a dicey situation | 6. to blow smoke |
| 7. a sitting duck | 8. lock ,stock and barrel | 9. a red letter day |
| 10. no holds barred | 11. dressed to the nines | 12. to be wet behind the ears |
| 13. the Lord willing ad the creeks do not rise | 14. to tie the knot | |
| 15. to take the bull by the horns | | |

- A. the phrase refers to the risk and uncertainty of betting games played by dice
- B. in fox hunting, hunters wore red jackets called pink that were a symbol of being ready for hunting
- C. this phrase refers to three primary components of a firearm
- D. a bird on the ground is far easier to shoot than a flying bird
- E. based on the use of one's thumb as a rough measurement tool
- F. this phrase refers to laboring under the threat of a gun, either you finish or you get shot
- G. Some marriage ceremonies tie together the wrists of the bride and the groom
- H. The phrase is a tactic in boxing where the aim is to avoid receiving a direct hit
- I. Magicians often use smoke in their performance to obscure your view and conceal a bit of trickery
- J. In old times a tailor used nine yards of fabric to make high quality suits

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- K.** Calendars typically have holidays marked in red
- L.** The phrase refers to a time shortly after birth before being completely dry
- M.** This appears to be a simple prayer for heavenly support and a lack of floods
- N.** A phrase used in wrestling where there are no restrictions on holds
- O.** Refers to the danger and difficulty of taking a bull's horn

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