

How does “A *Stitch in Time Save Nine*” in EFL Classes?

İsmail ÇAKIR¹

Abstract: It is widely admitted that understanding a language does not only refer to knowledge of grammar but also peculiar features and characteristics of that language such as idioms, proverbs, metaphors, etc. Admittedly, such utterances extensively take place in native speakers’ oral or written utterances. However, due to such nonliteral expressions it is not always possible for nonnative speakers to get the gist of the message implied by the native speakers. To comprehend what is meant, it is necessary to have an efficient competence in the related language which covers what a speaker needs to know how to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings. Proverbs pertaining to this setting do frequently occur in many authentic materials, and require special attention in foreign language teaching circumstances. As in foreign language teaching classrooms most of foreign language teachers avoid using or handling these cultural expressions, students cannot learn and use them adequately and appropriately. Considering this fact, this paper aims to probe how to deal with proverbs in learning and teaching a foreign language. A classroom implementation to develop learners’ lexical competence through proverbs will be presented in this paper after giving the necessary review of literature related to proverbs and their function in foreign language learning. Moreover, some ideas and suggestions on teaching proverbs will be focused on within the context of this study.

Key words: Proverb; Culture; Competence; Pragmatics; Language; Teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniably accepted that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar but also certain features and characteristics of that language such as idioms, proverbs, metaphors which are most frequently uttered by the native speakers both in oral and written communication. Therefore, in order to be successful in communication, it is essential for speakers to be able to convey the message to the listener as required. Indisputably, in most everyday conversations speakers and listeners are not aware of the rules they obey, because more attention is paid to content than to organisation. What the

¹ Assist. Prof. Dr. Erciyes University, Faculty of Education, Kayseri, TURKEY.
E-mail: ismcakir@yahoo.com.

*Received 20 September 2010; accepted 25 November 2010.

listener and speaker wish to accomplish through a good communication, which is realized through speech acts of greetings, inquiries, comments, invitations, requests, refusals, promises, etc., is to be able to convey the message across. In almost all these circumstances it is highly possible to confront nonliteral expressions of metaphors, idioms, proverbs, etc.

As is clearly seen, in an effective communication it is essential for language learners to know not just grammar and text organization but also pragmatic aspects of the language. On the other hand, it is fair to say that even fairly advanced language learners often lack the ability to use language appropriately according to context. Therefore, it would be true to assert that it is necessary for a language learner to learn how to understand and create a language that is appropriate to the situations in which one is functioning and employing the proper illocutionary patterns in accordance with the sociocultural parameters of the specific situation. Or else, failure to do so may cause users to miss the key points that are being communicated in either written or oral language and/or have their messages be misunderstood. Such misunderstandings may lead to a total communication breakdown, which can be defined as pragmatic failure. In other words, this failure is the inability to use language appropriately according to context based on the sociocultural values and beliefs of the country or the community where the language is spoken. For this reason, it is imperative to learn and teach nonliteral expressions such as similes, metaphors, proverbs and idioms as well as literal ones which make a language pragmatic. Of these four nonliteral expressions, which should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum, is proverb.

Although people frequently call upon such expressions in order to express themselves more effectively and clearly, they aren't amply rewarded in foreign language teaching classrooms. On the other hand, it should be accepted that teaching and learning such expressions for both foreign language learners and teachers is deemed to be not the easiest part of vocabulary instruction but rather a stumbling block (Laufer, 1997). According to Kellerman (1978) nonliteral expressions (idioms and proverbs) are difficult to understand and learn even when the two languages are similar in the use and meaning. Furthermore, even native speakers are unable to use them properly or comprehend what is uttered if they are not equipped with enough pragmalinguistic background.

Pragmatically speaking, idiomatic expressions are extremely common in colloquial language. In a way, they are a code, a language within a language, designed to mystify outsiders. In general, they are a puzzling linguistic phenomenon because they are ambiguous and sometimes even ungrammatical. In normal sentences the meaning generally arises from its compositional parts but they are semantically and syntactically peculiar. On the other hand, it should be added that proverbs as well as idioms beautify the language and establish the characteristic style of individual languages. Speech and writing flourished with proverbs or idioms are generally considered as flowery language. Accordingly, it is conceivable that lack of knowledge or understanding of proverbs and idioms in a language prevents the learner from understanding the cultural niceties or peculiarities. Dougall (2004) supports this view with his words that idioms and proverbs can provide a snapshot of other cultures that allows for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture. Without grasping the meaning of these types of sayings we are limited to a unilateral understanding, providing fertile ground toward the development of cultural and linguistic ethnocentrism. He adds that when we understand the viewpoints of others we can become enriched as individuals and societies.

2. WHAT IS A PROVERB?

In "The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs" (1998) it is defined as a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner. Miguel de Cervantes asserts that a proverb is a short sentence based on long experience (cited in Munira Jamal, 2009). It is generally short and known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder 1993:5, 24.). It should also be clarified that a proverb is structurally different from an idiom, which could be a noun phrase or verb phrase to be used in a sentence. The listener to a great extent can interpret the meaning of

a proverb whereas it is not always possible for an idiom as it has different underlying meaning that cannot be inferred from the individual words.

3. THE ROLE OF PROVERBS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

When you ask language learners which aspect of language makes it difficult for them, they would most probably reply that they don't have enough vocabulary to communicate and to comprehend the utterances produced by the native speakers. One of the most effective ways for students to incorporate new words and expressions into their language is through the study of figurative language. Hence, it would be beneficial for language learners to immerse in the way that speakers of the target language express inner thoughts, views, ideas and emotions. In this respect, learning proverbs provides learners with a good opportunity to acquire information about a language's culture (Agar, 1991; Glucksberg, 2001). For that reason, idiomatic expressions should not be underestimated during the learning process. So, every language learner is supposed to be prepared to deal with real language in varied contexts disregarding the fact that understanding and producing L2 proverbs is very difficult. Furthermore, they must be prepared to meet the challenge considering the fact that lower level of linguistic competence in the target language will lead to disadvantage in understanding L2 figurative expressions. All in all, it is true to say that such expressions frequently take place in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio broadcasts, and television programs, etc. For that reason, learning the language that the native speaker uses is essential for foreign or second language learners.

However, in foreign language teaching classrooms it is not always easy to teach and learn them as they are nonliteral and meanings cannot be clearly inferred. It is sad to say that many foreign language teachers do not give importance to figurative expressions claiming that meaning can be taken from the context and that there is no need to waste time. Since they are culture specific it is not always possible to find their counterparts in every language. Writing on a similar theme, Irujo (1986:59) makes the point that there are various difficulties in learning nonliteral expressions properly in language learning environments. First of all, they are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners in order not to lead them misunderstanding or to get them confused. Moreover, most of the native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address second language learner. Secondly, they vary in formality from slang and colloquialisms to those which can be used in formal situations. Additionally, many second language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the "other expressions" section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises to teach them.

On the other hand, it should not be disregarded that figurative language is very pragmatic and carries meanings that we cannot easily get from the context, and students need to master nonliteral aspect of the target language. Besides, they not only get some cultural aspects of the language, but they can also feel confident in using and understanding them. So, it cannot be denied that using proverbs appropriately in oral and written discourse generates confidence in the student and respect in those with whom he/she comes in contact. In a word, as they constitute a language and students find them in real-life situations, in songs, films and contacts with natives of the language, students feel curious about the meaning and use of the expressions they frequently get in contact with. Their frequent, spontaneous and appropriate daily use is an indication of native or non-native command of language, which is obviously the characteristic of competency in a language. When students are not able to understand or produce such expressions they mostly tend to express themselves in plain and non-native language. Keeping this issue in mind, it is vital that these forms need to be developed further not only on the recognition level but also on the production level considering the fact that they play an important role in second language learning (McPartland, 1981). He adds that every language learner needs to develop competence in them since they are used by native speakers in spoken and written mode. Therefore, they must play an integral part in syllabus design since "real life language" utilizes them.

4. PRACTICAL TIPS TO TEACH PROVERBS IN FLT CLASSROOMS

It is not possible to tell that there is a special method to teach nonliteral expressions in the foreign language classrooms. However, what we can do is to present them depending on the level and needs of the students. Therefore, a language teacher should design a systematic plan for teaching proverbs to either native language learners or bilingual students or foreign language learners. In order to foster learners' pragmatic competence figurative language needs to be used where and when necessary. Needless to say, the more language teachers use figurative language in classroom, the better students master such interpretations as the classroom is the only place to use target language for most of the students. Here are some practical tips for language teachers to present proverbs in foreign language teaching contexts.

- Explain to students that it may be more useful for them to be able to understand the expressions when they hear them than to be able to produce them.
- Do not focus on the infrequent and colloquial proverbs with difficult vocabulary.
- Use short video clips where the proverb is used
- Use pictures while teaching them. (Exercise 1)
- Teach them in context, which may be better than teaching them in isolation; use texts featuring them. (Exercise 2)
- Encourage your students to use the proverbs in meaningful contexts out of the lists they have prepared themselves.
- Teach the identical and similar proverbs before the ones difficult to comprehend. (Exercise 3)
- Let students act out the literal meaning of a proverb and, ask the class to guess the figurative meaning.
- Let students work in groups and give them several proverbs. Each group writes stories choosing one in the list, and tells the story to the class. (Exercise 4)
- Divide the proverbs into categories such as “body parts, money”, “friendships”, “emotions”...etc. (Exercise 5)
- Do some matching activities. For example, give students five proverbs and their meanings in different columns and get them to match them up. (Exercise 6)
- Encourage students to create dialogues or role-play and to use a proverb to reinforce the meaning.
- Don't overload students with too many at a time. Five is probably a good number for one class.
- Ask students to find out the counterparts of the proverbs in their own languages.
- Divide the class into groups and give each group one of the proverbs taught before, and ask them to explain the proverbs using different techniques such as role play, mime, gesture, etc.
- Use proverbs as topics for writing exercises.
- They should be integrated in other skills.
- They should not be ignored in the authentic teaching materials.
- Keep in mind that “Actions speak louder than words”

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To be successful in communication, it is essential for speakers to be able to convey the message to the listener effectively. In an effective communication it is essential for language learners to know not just grammar and text organization but also pragmatic aspects of the language. As most of the language learners, even some of the foreign language teachers, lack the ability to use language appropriately according to context, they automatically prefer to avoid handling such issues when confronted. On the other hand, it is highly recommended for foreign language teachers to focus on such issues which cannot be separated or left out during the teaching process. To Dougall (2004) the idea that the more senses one employs in the learning process the greater are the possibilities of retention of information is a truism.

As Laufer (1997) contends teaching and learning nonliteral expressions is deemed to be not the easiest part of vocabulary instruction but rather a stumbling block. Kellerman(1978) also supports this view in that nonliteral expressions (idioms and proverbs) are difficult to understand and learn even when the two languages are similar in the use and meaning. Even though idioms and proverbs are difficult to incorporate into language classes and require special attention (Laufer, 1997; Kellerman, 1978), it is generally approved that they beautify the language and establish the characteristic style of individual languages. Irujo (1986:59) puts forth that there are various difficulties in learning such expressions properly in language learning environments. First of all, they are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners in order not to lead them misunderstanding or to get them confused. Moreover, most of the native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address to second language learner. Secondly, they vary in formality from slang and colloquialisms to those which can be used in formal situations. Additionally, many second language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the “other expressions” section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises to teach them.

Bearing all this in mind, it is vital that these forms need to be developed further not only on the recognition level but also on the production level without disregarding the fact that they play an important role in second language learning (McPartland,1981). He maintains that every language learner needs to develop competence in them since they are used by native speakers in spoken and written mode. Therefore, they must play an integral part in syllabus design since “real life language” utilizes them. It should be kept in mind that if we want our students to master another language, we need to help them become communicatively competent in that language. Successful speaking is not just a matter of using but also knowing when to use it under what circumstances. Proverbs should not be seen as a support to language teaching but it should be placed on an equal footing with foreign language teaching. Hence, establishing a perfect mutual understanding –which is mostly culture and cultural values of that language-, should be on the agenda of language teachers in order to eradicate or decrease the pragmatic language problems. It is noteworthy to state that in language teaching it is not pedagogically acceptable that some concepts like proverbs, idioms, metaphors should be skirted. On the contrary, a good language teacher should strive to teach them in a communicative and meaningful way together with the culture of that target language in order to foster the pragmatic competence in it.

In brief, within this paper, it has specially been emphasized that by dealing with the nonliteral expressions, particularly proverbs, teachers promote learners’ pragmatic competence. For that reason, a good teacher must pay special attention to present the target language with its authentic use. Finally, and most importantly, while doing this, the teacher must keep in mind that it is not enough to know the grammar of a language, but to be able to use and understand the language appropriately where and when necessary as the native speaker does.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, C. (2001). *Semantic and Pragmatic Difficulties and Semantic Pragmatic Language Disorder*. Retrieved from <http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/spld.htm> on 09.04.2009.
- Collis, Harry. (1994). 101 American English Proverbs. *Passport Books*. Illinois, USA.
- Cooper, T.C.(1998). Teaching Idioms. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(2), 255-266. Retrieved from <http://www.nadasisland.com/> on 04.04.2009.
- Crystal, D.(1985). *The English Language*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Çakır, İ. (2006, October). Socio-pragmatic Problems in Foreign Language Teaching. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://www.jlls.org>.
- Dağpınar, A. (1998). *Identical and Similar Turkish-british British-turkish Proverbs and Idioms*. Ankara : Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları.
- Dougall, D.M. (2004). *Why Learn Proverbs?* Retrieved from http://en.lingo24.com/articles/Why_Learn_Proverbs.
- Ellis, R.(1994). *The Studies of Second Language Acquisiton*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gramley, S. & Patzold, K.M. (1991). *A Survey of Modern English*. London: Routledge.
- Hinkel, Eli. (2006). *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Irujo, S. (1986a). Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth: Transfer in the Acquisition of Idioms in a Second Language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 287-304.
- Irujo, S. (1986b). A Piece of Cake: Learning and Teaching Idioms. *ELT Journal*, 40 (3), 236-242.
- Irujo, S. (1993). Steering Clear: Avoidance in the Production of Idioms. *IRAL*, 31(3), 205-219.
- Jamal, Munira. (2009). *What is a Proverb? Theoretical Remarks*. Retrieved from www.lingua-jip.de. on 20.10.2009.
- Kellerman, E. (1978). Giving Learners a Break: Native Language Intuitions as a Source of Predictions about Transferability. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 15, 59-92.
- Laufer, B. (2000). Avoidance of Idioms in a Second Language: The Effect of L1-L2 Similarity. *Studia Linguistica*, 54, 186-196.
- McPartland, P. (1981). Take it Easy: American Idioms. *Language Learning*, 33(4).
- Mieder, Wolfgang. (1993). Proverbs are Never out of Season. *Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, K. (1994). Pragmatic Consciousness-Raising in EFL Context. L. Bouton (Ed.). *Pragmatics and Language Teaching*. Monograph Series Urbana Campaign. US: University of Illinois.
- Simpson, John and Speake, Jennifer. (1998). *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied linguistics*, 4(2).
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

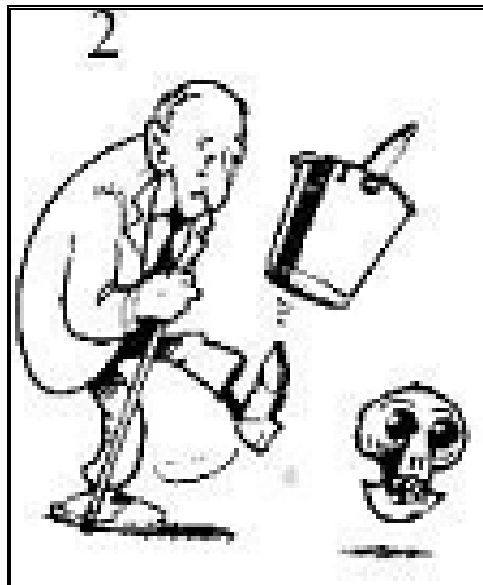
APPENDICES

SOME SUGGESTED TECHNIQUES FOR USING PROVERBS IN FLT

Exercise 1. Teaching in Pictures



LET THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG (REVEAL THE SECRET)



KICK THE BUCKET (TO DIE)

Exercise 2. Teaching in Meaningful Contexts

A BIRD IN HAND IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH

How is your new job coming along, Sasha?

Oh, the job is fine. I have good working hours and the surroundings are very pleasant. There is only one hitch.

What is that?

The salary isn't too great.

That's a shame. Did you interview for any other jobs?

Yes, A couple of them would have paid much better, but I never got an offer from them, so I figured that...

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush! Right?

Exactly! I accepted this job rather than waiting for a better offer that might not have come.

(Adapted from '101 American English Proverbs', page 81)

Exercise 3. Teaching in Comparison

IDENTICAL PROVERBS	SIMILAR PROVERBS
You reap what you sow.	Make hay while the sun shines.
Where there is smoke, there is fire.	The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.
In unity there is strength.	Strike while the iron is hot.
Bad news travels fast.	Barking dogs seldom bite.
A friend in need is a friend indeed.	Birds of a feather flock together.
Love is blind.	Old habits die hard.
Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.	Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.

Exercise 4. A Classroom Implication

Procedure

Here are some of the activities produced by the ELT 1 students in the course "Lexical Competence" which aims to develop students' lexical competence with the help of vocabulary including proverbs, idioms etc. In each lesson students are provided with various new words, idioms and proverbs along with the meaningful texts. Students are divided into groups and each group is given some newly practiced vocabulary, and they are expected to create new stories, dialogues using the list including words, idioms and proverbs. Each group works on the task within the duration devoted. Finally, the group leaders tell their stories to the class. Thus, they are encouraged to develop their creativity and cooperative working. They are required to keep these products in their folders to observe their progress throughout the term.

Excerpt 1.

Group's Name: THE GREEN LIFE

Group's Members: Gülşah SÖNMEZ, Fadime YILMAZ, Elif ŞAHİN, Hatice ÜNAL

Proverb: Don't judge a book by its cover.

Tom : Why so glum, pal?

Jack : We have a new teacher and she looks like a hard woman.

Tom : Why do you think so?

Jack : I'm afraid of not passing her class.

Tom : **Don't judge a book by its cover.** She wants you to be disciplined and learn effectively.

Jack : I hope so, may be you are right.

Excerpt 2.

Group's Name: THE GROUP "DNCN"

Group's Members: Deniz Örnek, Nuriye Şahin, Cemre Özrendeci, N.Nur Öztöpuz

Proverb: Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Date: March 6, 2009

'Don't Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth.'

Cemre has just been fifteen. She threw a party at her home yesterday. Her friends and relatives came to that party and gave their presents to her. After having her birthday party, everyone went their homes and Cemre rushed her room with curiosity to open boxes. While she was looking, she was murmuring "I have had already this, I don't like their colours, these are out or my style, why they bought these silly things" then her mother heard them and came in her room saying *don't look a gift horse in the mouth*. Whether you like them or not, they brought them for you and you shouldn't have complained in that way.

Excerpt 3.

Group's Name: Group Cemsikars

Group's Members: Hüseyin Akdoğan- Suat İçel-Asaf Deveci-Ezel Aktaş

Proverb: A leopard couldn't change his spots

Date: 10.04.2009

A Leopard Couldn't Change His Spots

Cemsit was a man who always drunk alcohol. He started to drink at his 19 just after his father died. He was the only child of his family so there was a big from his father. Because of his bad friends, he spend all his Money by drinking every night and day. His mother couldn't stand his bad behaviour any longer and she finally died. There was nobody and nothing to worth living for Cemsit except alcohol. He was living only for and with alcohol but nothing and nobody.

Some of his relatives and neighbours felt sorry for him and decided to marry with a girl they found. So that they could marry, Cemsit promised not to drink alcohol any more. After a while, they married but Cemsit couldn't help drinking alcohol. That is, a leopard couldn't change his spots. Due to the fact that Cemsit didn't keep his promise, they divorced. Finally, the well known conclusion came up. Cemsit's dead body was found under the bridge with alcohol bottle.

Excerpt 4.

Group's Name : Group Supernatural

Group's Members: Beyhan Üstündağ, Yağmur Coşgun, Havva Bada, Seçil Ediz

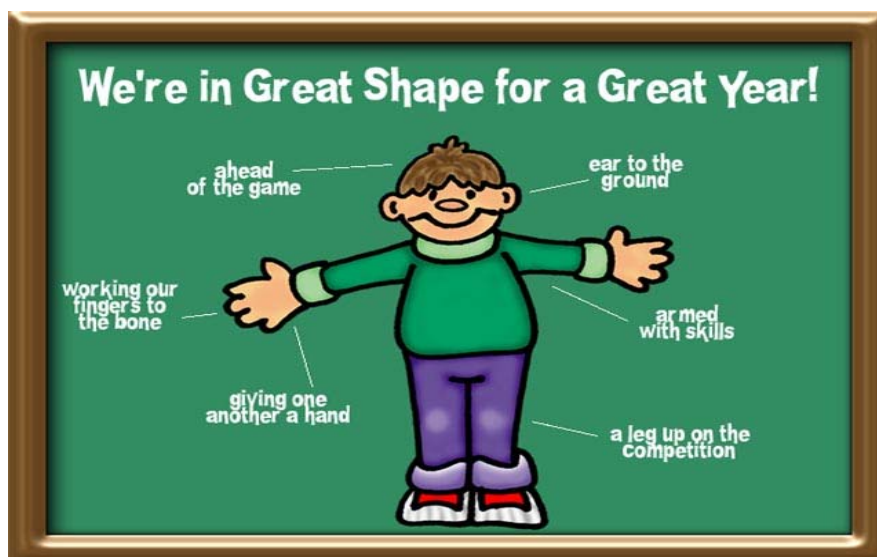
Proverb: Haste Makes Waste

Haste Makes Waste

John was a successful businessman. One day, he made an agreement with a Japanese firm. The business transaction was very important for the future of the company. Unfortunately, he was very

drowsy in the meeting morning. While driving his car, he was so unconscious that he wasn't even aware of breaking the compulsory traffic rules. The young handsome businessman didn't also become an adult at the age of 18. All in all, he had an accident while driving fast and died. As a result, if we put two and two together, we can conclude that ***haste makes waste***.

Exercise 5. Teaching in Groups/Categories



Exercise 6 . Matching

1	ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD	A	SOME PEOPLE WILL MISBEHAVE WHEN THEY ARE NOT BEING WATCHED
2	WHERE THERE IS SMOKE THERE IS FIRE	B	PEOPLE'S ACTIONS ARE MORE CONVINCING THAN THEIR WORDS ARE
3	ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS	C	ANOTHER PLACE OR SITUATION ALWAYS APPEARS TO BE BETTER THAN YOUR OWN.
4	THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE	D	WHEN THERE IS EVIDENCE OF A PROBLEM,THERE PROBABLY IS A PROBLEM
5	WHEN THE CAT IS AWAY THE MICE WILL PLAY	E	SOME THINGS ARE NOT AS VALUABLE AS THEY APPEAR TO BE

Copyright of Studies in Literature & Language is the property of Canadian Academy of Oriental & Occidental Culture and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.