

EFFECTIVE WAYS OF TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS TO EFL LEARNERS

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Introduction

Idioms are an indispensable dimension of language teaching; they are the 'street shoes' and the 'house slippers' of conversational English. Idioms must be added to the vocabulary stock just as any other new vocabulary; their constituent words may look familiar, but their meanings are, well, idiomatic.

They are generally more durable and universal within a language than jargon, slang or colloquialisms, but nevertheless they are sensitive to questions of register and social situation. In addition, the line between slang and idioms is not rigid.

Most idioms are commonly used in everyday conversation, not in formal writing. Thus, students need to learn more idioms if they want to talk more naturally and understand the ideas of whom they are talking to because, in everyday conversation, native speakers often use them.

Methods of teaching English idioms

English native speakers find it difficult to master English idioms, let alone EFL learners because of the figurative meanings of the English idioms that cannot be predicted through an analysis of their individual word meanings. Non-natives most often take words literally and it is not surprising that they fail in understanding the real meanings of idioms. Idioms are common in American daily life and provide a rich source of American culture.

There are various ways of teaching English idioms to EFL students so as to help them, first, learn, and, next, apply them appropriately.

1. Teaching English idioms in contexts

The role of context is central to language learning. It is well-known that EFL students do not really understand the various meanings of the new words in different contexts. That is why EFL students do not know how to handle the words they have learned practically in various contexts. It is fundamental for teachers to provide a rich context for students' language learning and practice. It is more effective for EFL students to learn language in meaningful contexts than learn isolated words through memorization and drilling.

Stories have been popularly used to teach and entertain students in language learning. Interesting stories usually draw students' attention and easily make students absorbed in them. Since contextual information is significantly effective for aiding students' understanding English idioms, it is essential for EFL teachers to provide students with rich contexts. Thus, introducing English idioms within interesting stories can possibly help EFL students understand and remember them better.

2. Teaching English idioms with rich illustrations

Although there is on-going debate regarding the effect of visuals on reading comprehension, some researchers claim that reading materials accompanied by visuals will be more comprehensible. For example, as Scarcella and Oxford (1992: 107) point out, teachers need to illustrate key vocabulary effectively by showing pictures and diagrams so as to improve the ESL students' reading comprehension. It is efficient to provide interesting pictures in order to foster and reinforce vocabulary development. Consequently, visuals must be stimulating, interesting and motivating so that students' comprehension and retention of reading should be facilitated.

3. Teaching English idioms by topic grouping

A good way of teaching idioms is that of grouping them according to topic (for example, idioms that have to do with parts of the body, colour idioms etc.). It is also very interesting to contrast and compare English idioms with the corresponding ones in the students' own native language. This may entail discussions on the origin of an idiom and on how different languages may express the same idea in similar/different ways.

Idioms may also be organized according to social occasions. One of the most accurate books of idiomatic English organized on this principle is Bruce *Speaking Naturally. Communication Skills in American English* (1985). The categories follow a traditional pattern: "introductions and address systems", "invitations", "thanking people and replying to thanks", "expressing anger and resolving conflict" and so on. Besides, the phrases and usages, sorted on the basis of the formality level, are wonderfully fresh and accurate, from "I couldn't agree more" to "you're dead wrong!"

Another approach which I consider worth mentioning is the one based on audience-centred themes. "Themes" presuppose going beyond static categories based on social occasion, such as those in Tillitt and Bruder's book *Speaking Naturally*. Themes are chosen in close dependence on the emotional or developmental issues in the lives of young people. The teacher's hope is that the immediacy of such themes in the lives of students may add to their ability of acquiring and deploying the idioms they are taught.

4. The role of retelling and rewriting in teaching idioms

Retelling has been considered a good strategy to know how much students have learned and to increase their comprehension. Generally speaking, retelling activities can facilitate students' reading retrieval because activities can encourage students to try recall. Their recalling helps teachers understand how much information their students have obtained. Older students can benefit from retelling stories because it allows students to learn how to organize and describe events, which enhances reading comprehension. As a result, retelling activities can reinforce integration of previous reading comprehension activities.

Since retelling activities are good techniques to facilitate students' reading retrieval, teachers should apply such activities in teaching English idioms. After introducing the meanings of English idioms to students, teachers have students work in pairs and retell the content of the respective idioms in their own words. Then, students are asked to rewrite sentences provided in class by using English idioms. The retelling and rewriting activities provide students with more chances to get aware of the meanings of English idioms and be familiar with the English idioms they have just learned.

5. Teaching English idioms through dialogue writing and role-play

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 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,

having students work in pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and at different levels. Role-play is also an excellent activity 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 skills before encountering real world situations.

Dialogues and role-play are useful writing and speaking activities. Dialogue writing could motivate students to write without difficulty due to pair collaboration. Role-play activities could help them remember the dialogue they wrote through repetitive practices. They find it easier and funnier to remember English idioms because they enjoy learning them with friends. Thus, dialogue writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities for students' meaningful and efficient drilling exercises.

6. Teaching English idioms with Readers' Theatre

Readers' Theatre is an activity in which students, while reading directly from scripts, are able to tell a story in a most entertaining way, without props, costumes or sets. This is a reading activity and students are not asked to memorize their lines. They are, however, encouraged to "ham it up" and use intonation and gestures matching their characters and appropriate to their characters' words.

Readers' Theatre has been viewed as an interesting and motivating strategy that can provide readers with a legitimate reason to reread the text and further improve their word recognition, reading fluency and reading comprehension. Researchers claim that Readers' Theatre offers a way to improve fluency and enhance comprehension as well as to create interest in and enthusiasm for learning. Even slow learners can benefit from Readers' Theatre because there is no memorization required and there is no risk for them at all. Apparently, Readers' Theatre provides enough opportunity for practice-repeated reading in language learning. This activity also enhances interaction opportunities with peers and makes the reading task more appealing than learning alone. I consider this activity to be efficient in teaching idioms as well.

Conclusions

It is vital for EFL learners to learn English idioms in order to get a good command of English. If teachers do not include idioms in their curriculum, they deprive their students of some of the English language cultural richness. It is hard to imagine their speech without all the popular sayings that are indeed a very relevant part of culture.

It is important for EFL teachers to design various activities for students to acquire English idioms and subsequently use them efficiently. Moreover, students learn better when they are provided with collaborative activities because they can interact with peers and share fun in learning. Finally, when teachers integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing activities in teaching English idioms, students can be involved in the application of English idioms in all four skills. Thus, teaching English idioms to EFL learners is efficient when they are provided with various activities to practice and use English idioms in different contexts.

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HELPING TEACHERS-TO-BE TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE CLASS(ROOM)

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Introduction: The essentials of teacher-training program

Being an in-service teacher is quite a difficult task; it is not only a problem of offering teacher trainees information regarding the most recent developments in English teaching methodology, pedagogical skills and classroom resources, but also a problem of helping individuals to become teachers who, in their turn, must be prepared to educate and help "develop" other individuals.

The first question an in-service teacher may ask himself/herself is "What do teacher trainees need to know?"

Practice has proved that they need to know that their future job is centered round several paradigms: *becoming aware*, *planning*, *acting* and *reflecting*. These actions should be treated together, in a "complete" process, because they cannot be separated. In fact, the first in the list includes the last one, closing the "circle" and offering an integrative perspective over the problem under discussion.

The Didactics of English or on how to make efficient teachers

Methodology courses and seminars become the best framework for helping teacher trainees to become efficient teachers. The course provides trainees with knowledge and guidelines for the first two mentioned dimensions (becoming aware; planning), while the seminars (based on interactive work, discussions and microteaching) become the perfect opportunities for the other two dimensions (acting, reflecting).

a) Becoming aware

According to Gebhard (1999: 23), an important element in teaching is "to gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices". In his opinion, this is important to be done systematically and consistently as a reflective activity, after each teaching experiment. In our opinion, this is valid for the pre-teaching activity, too.

There are three things on which awareness is focused during the teaching activity: on the activity which is going on at a certain moment; on more general aims; and on the content that has been taught. Summarizing, awareness involves several aspects which are presented below.

1. Becoming aware of the new identity trainees are going to gain

Gaining a professional identity is central in the process of becoming an effective teacher. This is what teacher trainees need to understand from the very beginning of a methodology course, and this is what they should be aiming at. This means, in fact, the first step towards an effective teaching, in general, and an effective class(room) in particular.

Trainees should be aware of the fact that the identity of a teacher stems from his/her general level of education, the subject competence, the professional competence and the attitudes he/she displays. They also need to be aware of the multiple roles they have to play while teaching: facilitator, manager, counselor, monitor, organizer, language instructor, prompter, partner, supporter, motivator/stimulator, co-researcher, evaluator or actor on the "classroom stage".

2. Becoming aware of the language to be taught or getting "teacher language awareness", that is, "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively" (Thornbury 1997: x); as well as of the activities implied by the learning/teaching process, that contribute significantly to the effectiveness of teaching.

The idea is that the trainees have to understand the fact that an important thing in teaching the language is to "investigate which forms are available in English to realize certain meanings, notions, and language functions" (Bourke 2008: 14)."

3. Becoming aware of the "audience" and of their performance in the classroom.

Teacher trainees need to realize that classrooms are to be treated as social communities and that learners are individuals (hence the necessity of meeting individual needs) who come with their own motivations, attitudes towards learning, knowledge, psychological and cultural features, as well as linguistic competence. It is also important to realize that students learn in different ways (we talk about what was called perceptual learning, associative learning, cognitive learning and affective learning). This means that they have to take into account the different types of learners as pointed out by Maggioli (1996: 33): the visual learner (who better learns and recalls information by visualizing the source, who always notices details and generally tries to keep the oral production to a minimum but prefers the written presentation; the learner who works with pictures, posters, flash cards, timelines, realia), the auditory learner (who prefers the oral production and is a good listener; who prefers to listen to cassettes, songs, rhymes etc.), the tactile learner (who learns and understands better when performing activities and when experiencing things) and the kinesthetic learner (who moves a lot and prefers games, blackboard work and competitions).

4. Becoming aware of the activity of teaching (awareness of teaching) and of its implications.

In our opinion, this is, in fact, the field in which the in-service teacher's most important role is to be noticed. In other words, the in-service teacher needs to provide teacher trainees with insights into some aspects of their future job, to make them realize its complexity. Teaching does not mean just being in front of the classroom; language learning and teaching should be an interactive process (that creates interactions between students themselves, as well as between teachers and students). Trainees need to identify the role the teacher plays in establishing both cognitive and affective objectives in teaching, as well as the characteristics of an effective teacher: he/she should be flexible, imaginative and helpful in achieving objectives; he/she has to offer appropriate, comprehensible input and, at the same time, be prepared to set expectations on the class objectives; he/she should have in view that he/she has to lead his/her students from "tightly controlled", "guided" exercises (for habit formation) to "free" ones (creative activities).

The class(room) constrains his/her job in several ways, as there exist social, linguistic, pedagogical and even physical variables in the classroom. In consequence, he/she needs to be prepared to adapt his/her "performance" every minute, that is, to adapt his/her teaching style, strategies and techniques, linguistic and paralinguistic markers and behaviour.

Last but not least, he/she has to ensure students opportunities to develop an intrinsic motivation in learning the foreign language.

All these aspects, once presented, together with methodology courses that deal with learning theories, teaching methods and approaches, techniques and strategies, help teacher trainees learn how different areas of the English language teaching can be dealt with.

b) Planning

During the methodology course, importance should be given to the students' activity of planning the lessons according to several elements: the students (their age, their level of study and their goals); the textbook to be used; the content of the material to be taught; the objectives established for each type of lesson (in terms of what students will be able to do at the end of the lesson) and specific teaching strategies to be used. This will contribute to developing in students a set of language skills, grammatical competence, pragmatic competence (speaking appropriately for the context) and of critical thinking skills (knowledge – which is often memorized facts or information –; comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation –, according to Bloom's Taxonomy (1984).

Presentation of samples of curricula, discussions upon them, and presentation of different alternative textbooks are helpful in the process.

Practice has also proved that the best way to teach students how to plan a lesson is to make them do that in the classroom, under professional guidance. Using pair or group work during workshops, planning a lesson may become a helpful and challenging activity. In pairs students may work and plan the entire lesson, while in groups, they can co-work in planning one of its parts: preparation, presentation, practice or evaluation. The in-service teacher monitors the groups coming up with suggestions, to have them establish the stages of the lesson, establish the tasks, use a variety of activities, make use of functional activities, moreover, ensure learner-centered planning activities, so as to link language awareness approach to the task-based learning.

Attention is also given to deciding upon the types of techniques to be used: static/dynamic techniques, discovery/practice techniques.

c) Acting/performing

Peer-teaching and microteaching (the procedure through which teacher trainees practise their teaching methods with their peers) represent the next required step in preparing teacher trainees for an effective future job. They are given the opportunity of trying out different management techniques and experience language learning, test-taking and working in pairs or groups. Students are exposed to different viewpoints while being encouraged to express their own beliefs and practices, finally operating a comparison.

Generally, two types of microteaching can be used:

1. spontaneous/unprepared (after describing a technique/a language teaching method). Students have to put into immediate practice such techniques as elicitation, questioning, presentation of lexical items or grammar points, brainstorming, demonstration etc.) and check effectiveness as well as advantages and disadvantages.
2. prepared (based on what students know/have learned in their methodology course). Students are allowed to study the theoretical material and prepare the teaching of a stage of the lesson (various ways of checking homework, warm-up activities, checking the previous lesson or introducing the new material) or the entire lesson.

In these activities, the most important element seems to be the feedback that students receive after having finished the lesson/stage of the lesson. Supportive feedback, with reference to the following elements may help them become aware of how teacher effectiveness can be achieved:

- the teacher's personal quality (personality, general style, flexibility, degree of confidence);
- preparation of the lesson (clarity of objectives, variety of activities, preparation and suitability of the materials, variation and suitability of techniques/procedures);
- class management (clear explanations and instructions, appropriate pace of the lesson, creating interactions, variation of interactions, integration of skills, body language, facial expression, gestures, encouragement of students, feedback offered, evaluation, class control, teacher talking time, giving homework, offering students the possibility to clarify message content, creating opportunities for developing students' autonomy in learning, imagination and creativity, creating a warm, relaxing and sympathetic relationship among students, helping students to actively engage in the learning process and performance-based assessment (they involve students in actual communication) "based directly on the learner's intended (or hypothesized) use of the target language", as Bailey (1998: 42) admits;
- use of techniques (variety of techniques, questioning technique, checking understanding, chaining stages of the lesson, balance between controlled and less controlled activities, alternating discovery and practice techniques, dynamic and static ones);
- error correction (awareness of students' errors, strategies and timing of error correction);
- using materials in the classroom (the textbook, realia, visual materials, the blackboard – visibility and clear layout);
- materials used (appropriacy, variety).

d) Reflecting

Reflective teaching/reflecting teaching model is quite a new concept in methodology. It centers on the What, How and Why of the very act of teaching, seen from two perspectives: a pre-teaching activity and a post-teaching activity. So, there exists:

1. pre-teaching reflection;
2. post-teaching reflection.

If the activity of reflection in the pre-teaching moments is related to awareness and planning, the one involved in the post-teaching moments is related to after-teaching awareness concerning the act of teaching. Some of the most frequent questions that students need to ask themselves are the following:

- have the objectives been reached?
- were the activities and techniques appropriate?
- how much did the teacher encourage and enable students to take responsibility of their learning?
- what worked well and what didn't?
- were there any problems and what were their causes?

At the same time, reflection means having in view the students' progress, as this, in its turn, will have influence upon the activity of planning activities, re-organizing content as well as re-thinking strategies and techniques.

Through reflection, students learn how to evaluate themselves and get future directions for work in the area. They can also compare their experience with that of the teachers they observed during the teaching practice and integrate the effective experience in their teaching philosophy and practice.

Keeping a teaching portfolio (a valuable tool for the teacher, always undergoing alterations and enrichment; it tells them which methods work, how, when and why) is a

thing the in-service teacher should always insist on, because it represents a record of classroom performance, with valuable information for the development of a teacher.

Conclusions

In-service teachers have an important role in helping teacher trainees become effective teachers. This goal can be accomplished in two ways: first, by providing the theoretical background concerning the language theories, teaching approaches, methods and techniques, as well as awareness growing devices concerning teacher's identity in the classroom, the class(room) as such and the activity of teaching. Second, by providing opportunities for putting theory into practice, and allowing teacher trainees analyse, compare and evaluate their own activity or their peers' activity.

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