



The use of pictorial devices to improve english idioms elucidation among efl seventh-grade students

El uso de dispositivos pictóricos para mejorar la elucidación de modismos en inglés entre estudiantes de séptimo grado

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ABSTRACT

Idioms are considered one of the most complex aspects students of English as a Foreign Language must face on their road to mastering it, and although the literature about the pedagogical principles to teach idioms is not abundant, known studies made about the didactical aspects of idioms teaching, point in the direction of using imagery or visual aids as a successful way to help students to interpret them. Throughout the quantitative method, this paper collects the results of a study made with A1-A2 level seventh-grade students that shows how helpful in an EFL classroom the use of imagery in the process of idioms elucidation, with an improvement rate of over fifty per cent when an idioms interpretation test is accompanied with visual aids in opposition to a test with no visual aids at all.

Keywords: Idiomatic elucidation, imagery, elementary school, visual aids, learning strategies.

RESUMEN

Las expresiones idiomáticas son consideradas uno de los aspectos más complejos que los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera deben encarar en su camino para dominarlo y aunque la literatura acerca de los principios pedagógicos para enseñar expresiones idiomáticas no es abundante, estudios conocidos realizados en torno a los aspectos didácticos de la enseñanza de expresiones idiomáticas, apuntan en la dirección del uso de imágenes o ayudas visuales como una manera exitosa de ayudar a los estudiantes a interpretarlos. A través del método cuantitativo, este artículo recoge los resultados de un estudio hecho con estudiantes de séptimo grado en los niveles A1-A2 que muestra cuan provechoso es en salón de clases EFL el uso de imágenes en el proceso de la elucidación de expresiones idiomáticas, con una tasa de mejora de por encima del cincuenta por ciento cuando un test de interpretación de expresiones idiomáticas está acompañado de ayudas visuales en oposición a un test sin ninguna ayuda visual.

Palabras clave: Interpretación idiomática, imágenes, escuela básica, ayudas visuales, estrategias de aprendizaje.



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Introduction

English idioms, or idiomatic expressions, have constantly challenged English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students to elucidate their meaning. The most probable cause lies in idioms conveying both literal and figurative meanings (Fayyazi & Ashari Tabar, 2020). We can find expressions all over the English language usage, which is the reason why it is so difficult for non-native speakers to master the English language in the way a native does (Khoshnevisan, 2019).

Among all formulaic sequences inside the English language, perhaps the most difficult to master for EFL/ESL students are idioms. The complexity of phrases lies in their semantically unpredictable (Ahmadi & Zarei, 2021), as there is no way to determine their meaning based on their literal translation extracted from their syntactical components.

Another factor that adds complexity to the understanding of idioms is Native Language (L1) interference, especially when the Target Language (L2) idiom does not have an equivalent in L1 (Cucchiaroni et al., 2020). The nature of idioms takes them apart from other English lexical structures, demanding even an interdisciplinary approach for their study, taking into consideration the perspective of diverse fields of knowledge such as lexicography, computer science, neuro-linguistics and psycholinguistics (Espinal & Mateu, 2019).

EFL teachers cannot simply evade idioms as they are not only an "indispensable part of almost all the languages in the world" (Guo, 2019, p. 145), but mastering idioms among EFL students "demonstrates a high level of language proficiency" (Guo, 2019, p. 145), hence idioms constitute a valuable tool to assess English high-level mastering. Avoiding or delaying the learning of idioms to a later stage would be counter-productive since they are "a major part of figurative language" (Orfan, 2020, p. 2) and therefore, they can improve EFL students' communi-

cative skills as they advance in the acquisition of English language (Orfan, 2020).

A common misconception about idioms is they are used solely in colloquial communication. Still, studies made by Miller (2019) have demonstrated that they are also used in spoken and written academic English. Said this, the importance of idioms transcends the aspects of person-to-person communication to position into the highest spheres of scientific outreach.

Learning and using idioms is considered by Yunus & Hmaidan (2021) the most critical barrier second language students must overcome to become fluent. Nguyen et al. (2022) indeed ensure that only through the learning of idioms can EFL students master the English language in the way a native would do it. More clearly, "language learners' ability to understand idioms is a measure of proficiency" (p. 98). Idioms also need to be taken apart from other linguistics structures because they require explicit instruction to be mastered and cannot be learned just by incidental exposition (Ramonda, 2019). From this perspective, idioms should be taught from the first stages of the L2 acquisition. The elementary school classroom seems the perfect scenery to introduce idioms as direct or transversal content.

Considering all these factors, idioms are not a conventional part of the daily life into an EFL classroom but a topic that must be treated with special pedagogical considerations. To bridge the gap between literal and non-literal meaning for students to interpret idioms correctly, mnemonic is a supplementary tool (Ahmadi et al., 2020b).

There seems to be a dearth of empirical research regarding the effect of mnemonic devices on idiom learning (Ahmadi et al., 2020a). It probably results from idioms being neglected in EFL contexts for a long time (Ahmadi et al., 2020b). As idioms are an essential part of any EFL teaching and English acquisition processes, the present research consigned to this paper attempts

to demonstrate how important may be for students to successfully elucidate English idioms' meaning using pictorial devices in the classroom.

Although the number of studies about the impact of using pictorial devices in teaching L2 idioms is not scarce, it is not abundant either. Thus, this study will add some data to the general knowledge about the topic gathered so far. The present study attempts to discover the incidence of pictorial devices in understanding idioms for EFL students in 7th grade.

This study only attempts to find out what is the level of idioms elucidation when pictorial devices are used. According to Cucchiarini et al. (2020), "pictorial elucidation contributed to better retention of idiom meanings, but did not help recollect their exact linguistic forms", so the focus of the present work is only limited to measuring the level of pictorial elucidation of idioms but not the level of linguistic form recollection. Ramonda (2019) also supports this idea as he says that the use of pictures may "divide the learners' attention between the visual and verbal input" (p. 5). New research could be done to establish the level of idioms' linguistic form recollection after students have elucidated their meanings. Students could, at some point after the day they answered the tests, see the pictures again and probably could remember the linguistic form of the idiom in the L1 but probably will not be able to recall the linguistic structure of the idiom in L2.

This research uses a no experimental approach as it tries to determine the behaviour of the dependent variable (improving idioms elucidation) after the population of this study has been exposed to the independent variable (using pictorial devices in the teaching of idioms).

Methodology

This paper aims to determine whether using imagery may improve the ability of seventh-grade students to interpret English

idioms correctly. This research resorts to the quantitative method. Thus, data collection will be done through two tests with contrasting results. The test will measure sample students' ability to interpret some curated English idioms correctly. Both tests are the same, but the first will require students to interpret idioms without visual aids. In contrast, the second test will be accompanied by imagery that explains the meaning of the idioms sample students tried to solve in the first test with no aids.

7th-grade students formed the population for this research from Centro Escolar Pacheco, a public education institution in Portoviejo, Ecuador. The total population of 7th-grade students (distributed into three classrooms or "parallels") is roughly 75, and a sample of 25 students was selected to conduct the research. The average age of the children was eleven years, and their English level, according to the placement test, was A1/A2 (elementary). The sample was selected considering their academic records and previous performance in their EFL classes. The placement test helped the authors of this paper to determine the sample's suitability properly.

Two instruments were used, and in the first stage, students from the sample responded to a multiple-choice fifteen-question test. Every question required the student to elucidate the meaning of one idiom by picking its purpose from five different options. Once the students had finished the first test, they received the same test again. Still, this time, every question came accompanied by a picture that described the meaning of the idiom, and the student had to pick the meaning again from four options available, "I ignore it" the fifth option in case the student did not have the slightest idea what the idiom's meaning was. Both tests were contrasted to determine the level of improvement from the first test with no pictures to the second test accompanied by pictures.

As children formed the population, the sample students' legal representatives signed an informed consent document to approve their kids' participation in this research. Twenty-five students from the seventh grade were taken into a classroom and placed with enough separation from each other to ensure no cooperation. To develop the first test, students had two minutes per question; thus, the total time to answer the test was thirty minutes. Students could ask questions to solve doubts as long as the doubts were related to the meaning of the choices for every multiple-choice question so they could make an informed decision when they picked one of the choices. Once the first test was retired from the desks, students had a fifteen-minute rest before repeating the test. The second time the students made the trial, they received a second sheet containing a picture that accompanied every question and was selected to explain the idiom's meaning. Students had the same time as the previous test to answer all questions. Once students ended the tests, the answers were contrasted to determine the level of correctness in the first test in relation to the second one in which the pictures were used.

Results

As theoretical support for the review of study results

L2 idiomatic expressions constantly challenge EFL students, and such a task will significantly challenge low-level ones. When EFL students face idioms for the first time, they could be perplexed as they have to elucidate idioms such as "wipe the floor with someone" based on interpreting its constitutive parts (Ahmadi et al., 2020a). It is here where the difficulty of idiom arrangements lies.

Since idioms are part of the daily life of native English speakers, as they use them with no effort and mostly subconsciously, they should be introduced systematically to non-native English speakers (Ahmadi & Zarei, 2021).

Most teachers will probably go for explicit and direct interpretation of idioms to share their meaning with their students as it is considered a better strategy for learning idiomatic expressions (Ahmadi et al., 2020b). However, if chosen carefully in language learning, pictures could be successfully used as cognitive devices to clarify idioms interpretation (Ahmadi et al., 2020b).

In the understanding of idioms via the anchoring of new concepts to existing ones, Ahmadi et al. (2020b) believe that the use of "images and pictures can foster 'meaningful learning' [that] play an undeniable role in this cognitive process". This author also advocates using films and movie clips to benefit EFL learning processes (Ahmadi et al., 2020b); thus, static or in-motion imagery remains a solid tool for improving L2 learning.

Ahmadi et al. (2020a, 2020b, 2021) have studied extensively the application of mnemonic devices based on pictorial representations to the learning of idioms among English students, Ahmadi & Zarei (2021) declare: "Imageability plays a fundamental role in the semantic processing of idioms" (p. 292). Idiom comprehension is reinforced by using visual mnemonics, mainly because visual and verbal paths activate the dual coding system (Ahmadi & Zarei, 2021).

Although it is recommended to emphasize strategical teaching of idioms in EFL classrooms, teachers should pay more attention to idioms in L2 that do not have an equivalent in L1 and vice versa (Cucchiari et al., 2020) since they represent an extra level of challenge for EFL students. Although idioms are often non-transparent (van Dijk et al., 2022), that is, their meaning is not equivalent to their direct translation, imageability (mental graphical representation) facilitates idioms comprehension (Senaldi & Titone, 2022), despite their non-transparent nature. Thus, we conclude pictorial representation of idioms counters one of the main difficulties EFL students face in their correct interpretation.

Fayyazi & Ashari Tabar (2020), for their part, also advocate for the use of pictures in the teaching of idioms as they can trigger imagery recalling and, hence, input remembering. Fayyazi & Ashari Tabar (2020) are so confident in their findings that they suggest EFL teaching material creators make their products (such as textbooks or flashcards) heavily based on the use of pictorial representations for the teaching of idioms (p. 29).

A study published by Nguyen et al. (2022) mentions twenty-two different strategies for the teaching of idioms, naming "using pictures" (p. 109) as one of them. Hamdan & Smadi (2021) also developed studies to determine the level of idioms' meaning elucidation using pictorial devices. Although their focus was on Arabic idioms to be translated into English, we see that using images improves chances for foreign language students to interpret idioms' meaning correctly. Hamdan & Smadi (2021) demonstrated in their studies with children that they were better at matching pictures with idioms' non-literal interpretation than verbally explaining them.

Wiliński (2022) cites an experiment made by Szczepaniak & Lew, who found out that the presence of pictorial representations to accompany idioms entries in dictionaries "have a significant effect" (p. 117) in the later recalling of the idiomatic form. Wiliński (2022) also conducted his research on the topic, and he concluded that using pictorial elucidation as a strategy to study idioms is "an effective method" (p. 125).

Zarei (2020) also worked on L2 idiom comprehension by the contrast of four different techniques, finding that "visualization was significantly more effective...on L2 idiom production" (p. 217). Ramonda (2019) has done extensive research on the use of pictures to help EFL students elucidate English idioms' meaning, and his findings reveal that the use of images "generally promoted the meaning recall" (p. 26) of idioms by providing learners an alternative input channel other than plain reading and translating.

Alrajhi, A. S. (2020) researched the effect of the conjunction of graphics and text through infographics to teach L2 idioms and consistently found that this strategy is "highly effective for learning idioms" (p. 325), showing that when it comes to the teaching of idioms, text results into a more successful transmission of information when accompanied with an image.

A study cited by Orfan (2020), whose data was collected from 80 EFL students, found that pictorial elucidation in tandem with etymological elucidation "was the most effective strategy in helping students to learn idioms" (p. 4). Although etymological elucidation is not the focus of this paper, pictorial elucidation is, and we realize this device is effective for idioms teaching for itself or even may serve to strengthen alternative methods EFL teachers could be inclined to use in teaching idioms. Nolas et al. (2018) studied the evocation of childhood idioms through photography related to situations that are part of children's lives.

Some authors like Edyanto et al. (2021) have explored multimedia in teaching idioms further by researching the effects of Augmented Reality (AR) in the learning process. Samburskiy (2020) contributed to this topic following the opposite route to the present paper and asked the participants in his research to determine "if the idioms could be easily associated with an image", with a positive outcome (p. 193), that is, students were able to create for the idioms they were exposed to, a mental image that could explain their meaning.

Several studies have explored new devices to help EFL students, meaning elucidation for idioms, even though idioms remain a relatively unexplored part of English Language Teaching (ELT) knowledge.

Quantitative study results

The results from the first test (with no visual aids) show that sample students correctly figured out the meaning of 3.84 idioms on

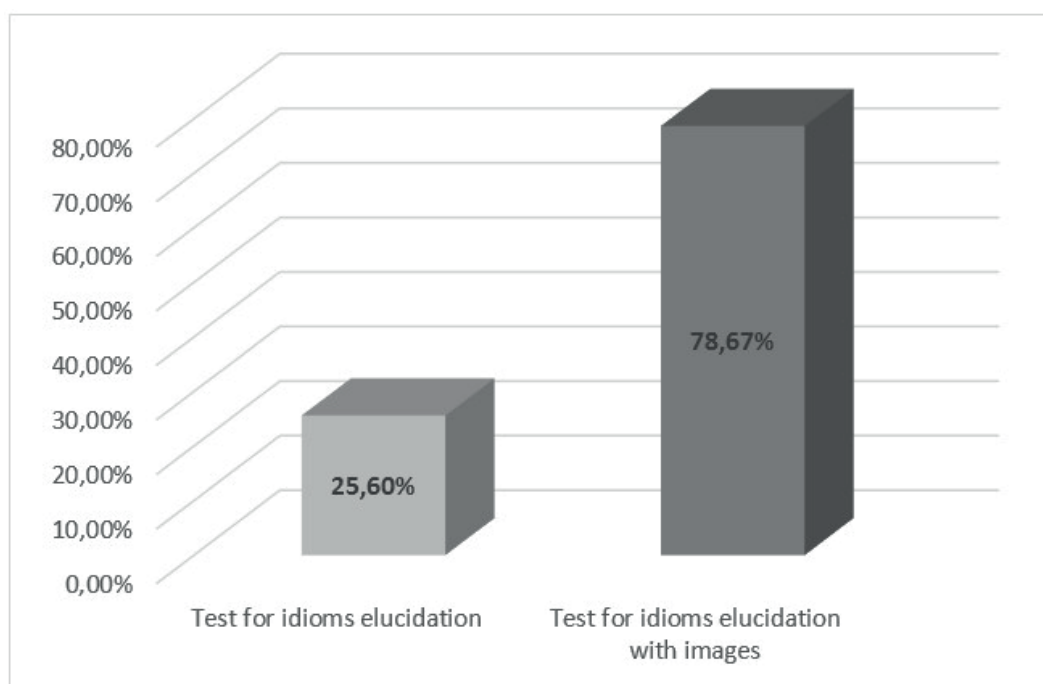
average out of 15, which represents 25,60% of idiom elucidation correctness. On the other hand, the second test (with visual aids) resulted in 11,8 correct answers out of 15, which represents 78,67% correctness, which is 53,07% more than the previous

test. The results suggest that the use of pictorial devices helps increase students' success rate for English idioms interpretation by 53,07 per cent. The evidence demonstrates that images are relevant tools for students to interpret idioms correctly.

Table 1. Idioms elucidation success rate using images

	First test	Success percentage	Second test	Success percentage
Student 01	2 out of 15	13,33	12 out of 15	80,00
Student 02	3 out of 15	20,00	11 out of 15	73,33
Student 03	2 out of 15	13,33	10 out of 15	66,67
Student 04	1 out of 15	6,67	12 out of 15	80,00
Student 05	4 out of 15	26,67	15 out of 15	100,00
Student 06	3 out of 15	20,00	12 out of 15	80,00
Student 07	5 out of 15	33,33	15 out of 15	100,00
Student 08	4 out of 15	26,67	13 out of 15	86,67
Student 09	0 out of 15	0,00	8 out of 15	53,33
Student 10	7 out of 15	46,67	7 out of 15	46,67
Student 11	6 out of 15	40,00	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 12	3 out of 15	20,00	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 13	2 out of 15	13,33	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 14	1 out of 15	6,67	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 15	3 out of 15	20,00	9 out of 15	60,00
Student 16	2 out of 15	13,33	6 out of 15	40,00
Student 17	8 out of 15	53,33	11 out of 15	73,33
Student 18	8 out of 15	53,33	13 out of 15	86,67
Student 19	7 out of 15	46,67	12 out of 15	80,00
Student 20	5 out of 15	33,33	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 21	4 out of 15	26,67	10 out of 15	66,67
Student 22	3 out of 15	20,00	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 23	4 out of 15	26,67	12 out of 15	80,00
Student 24	7 out of 15	46,67	14 out of 15	93,33
Student 25	2 out of 15	13,33	9 out of 15	60,00
Averages	3,84 out of 15	25,60	11,8 out of 15	78,67

Figure 1. Idioms elucidation success rate using images



Discussion

The available sources regarding the pedagogical strategies developed to teach and learn idioms clearly specify directly or indirectly that the process is better served when visual aids are used in the classroom. Although students tend to learn departing from those things they know better to move to those things they ignore, this principle could be disrupted in the learning of idioms as probably even though students can identify the constitutive words of an idiom and know their meaning in a more or less stable context, the new purpose acquired now by those exact words now being part of an idiom, could be perplexing.

Thus, imagery rises as the cohesive factor that puts into a new perspective the constitutive parts of an idiom, in a way the students can embrace their words beyond their particular meaning to now acquire a distinct semantic hue. The efficiency of visual aids, be they static or in-motion, as a solid tool to support the acquisition of a second language has been widely tested and demonstrated in recent studies by authors such as Ahmadi et al. (2020b), Ahmadi & Zarei (2021),

Senaldi & Titone (2022), Fayyazi & Ashari tabar (2020), Nguyen et al. (2022) among others.

With the experiment presented in this paper, it is also noticeable that supporting idioms learning with pictorial devices could improve idioms elucidation even in students with a relatively low English level. The sample for the study object of this paper was taken from seventh-grade students from a regular public school, so their English class was presumably in the range of A1-A2, something that was confirmed for the placement test applied to them. The level of success the students showed in the results with the test accompanied with pictorial devices in comparison to the test with no visual aids demonstrates the use of imagery in the process of idioms interpretation is adequate even from the lowest levels; therefore, it is consequently appropriate for higher levels of English mastery.

The previous statement is relevant to clarify that although instructors avoid teaching idioms in the first stages of the EFL/ESL acquisition process, as they are considered too complex for beginners to understand,

the evidence presented by the present study says otherwise. Low-level students trying to interpret idioms on their own could probably miss in most cases. Still, as demonstrated, the visual aids can improve their ability to elucidate idioms from early stages by means of which students get acquainted with them from the beginning of the process, paving the road to master them in later stages.

The insertion of idioms in EFL/ESL study programs from early stages could become an innovative and revolutionary way to engage in English acquisition due to the ubiquitous nature of idioms and due to the fact they have been chiefly considered the pinnacle of English mastering. Why not start mastering the pinnacle from the beginning?

Conclusions

- Pictorial devices remain unquestionably one of the strongest pedagogical strategies to support English acquisition and, on a more detailed level, to support idioms interpretation.
- Idioms elucidation rate among ELF/ESL students may improve dramatically when visual aids are used in the process.
- Depending on the use of imagery, idioms may be successfully incorporated into any EFL/ESL program from the early stages of the process and not only when students have advanced to higher levels.

The level of retention for idioms' linguistic form through the use of pictorial devices would be another topic for a further research project. Another opportunity to develop further research about this topic is trying to determine if images used in the teaching of idioms should explain literal meaning or symbolic meaning. Aydin (2019) explored this topic, pointing out that no research had been done before (at least to his knowledge), so he considers more research should be done on this topic "to validate further" (p. 321) his findings.

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