An Empirical Study of Ecuadorian University EFL Learners' Comprehension of English Idioms Using a Multimodal Teaching Approach

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Abstract—**The present study investigated the effect of using a multimodal teaching approach toward teaching English idioms to Ecuadorian EFL students. The control group was taught 20 English idioms using a traditional teaching method and the experimental group was taught the same 20 English idioms using a multimodal teaching approach. An idiom comprehension quiz was administered to both groups with the experimental group scoring significantly higher than the control group. The study provides pedagogical suggestions on using a multimodal approach to teaching English idioms.**

Index Terms—**English idioms, teaching idioms, language teaching, multimodal teaching**

I. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A. Introduction

Idioms are a part of every language. Native speakers use idioms spontaneously and often. Idioms are used in all forms of discourse: conversations, movies, radio, television shows, lectures, and so on (Fotovatnia & Khaki, 2012). It has been estimated that about 7,000 idioms are used by native speakers each week (Cooper, 1999). There have been various attempts in the research at defining idioms, such as "fixed expressions" (Carter, 1998), "phraseology" (Howarth, 1998), "multi-word items" (Moon, 1997), and "multiword expressions" (Yi, 2006); however, Larson's (1984) definition seems more applicable for this study, "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (p. 20).

The English language is noted for being a language of idiomaticity. It is "rich in metaphors, similes, phrasal verbs, and figurative speech, conventionally referred to as 'idiomatic expressions'" (Al-kadi, 2015, p. 513). Since idiomatic expressions mean one thing literally but are taken to mean something different, they are notoriously difficult for English language learners; however, in order for English language learners to function effectively with English communication, learning English idioms is essential. Understanding and applying idioms requires language learners to go beyond a simple word-by-word comprehension strategy and to integrate figurative meaning into contextual information (Cornoldi & Colpo, 1998). Several language researchers agree that a sound knowledge of idioms is undeniable for English proficiency and fluency and there is a positive correlation between idiom acquisition and communicative competence (Wray, 2002, Liu, 2008, De Caro, 2009, Aljabri, 2013, Liontas, 2002). Communicative competence is "the mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, effective, and sociocultural aspects of the related language, and it is also the capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form" (Cakir, 2011, p. 372).

B. Characteristics of Idioms

Idioms are complex linguistic configurations. Langlorz (2006) suggested "idioms are peculiar linguistic constructions that have raised many eyebrows in linguistics and often confuse newcomers to a language" (p. 1). Idioms have specific linguistic characteristics. They have "three aspects of language: form, meaning, and usage, i.e. they have syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions" (Al-kadi, 2015, p. 514). Fernando and Flavell (1981) summarized the syntactic and semantic features of idioms with the following five properties:

a. Its meaning is not the compositional sum of its constituents.

b. It is a unit that has either a homonymous literal counterpart or at least individual constituents that are literal, although the expression as a whole would not be interpreted literally.

c. It is transformationally deficient in one way or another.

d. It forms part of a set of expressions in a given language.

e. It is institutionalized. (p. 48)

Fernando & Flavell (1981) proposed that idioms are non-compositional because their meaning cannot be concluded from the sum of the individual elements. However, other researchers, such as Gibbs & Nayak (1989) proved that some

idioms are decomposable, or analyzable. Their research proved that the component parts of idioms can contribute individually to their figurative meaning, with some idioms being classified as more decomposable than others (Zyzik, 2011). According to Gan (2014), idioms "range along a continuum of compositionality or analyzability" (p. 935).

According to McCarthy & O'Dell (2002, p. 6) there are seven types of idioms:

"Form	Example	Meaning
1. verb + object/complement (and/or adverbial)	kill two birds with one stone	produce two useful results by just doing one action
2. prepositional phrase	in the blink of an eye	in an extremely short time
3. compound	a bone of contention	something which people argue and disagree over
4. simile (as + adjective + as, like + noun)	as dry as a bone	very dry indeed
5. binomial (word + and + word)	rough and ready	crude and lacking sophistication
6. trinomial (word + word+ and + word)	cool, calm and collected	relaxed, in control, not nervous
7. whole clause or sentence	to cut a long story short	to tell the main points, but not all the fine details"

Idioms also fall into a category of transparent or opaque. Transparency is a measure of how closely related the literal and figurative meanings of the idiom are. When they are related closely, the idiom is regarded as transparent, but when the literal and figurative meanings are unrelated, the idiom is regarded as opaque. Nippold & Rudzinski (1993) put forth the "Metasemantic Hypothesis" to show the discrepancy in difficulty between transparent and opaque idioms. This hypothesis suggested that idioms are learned through an active analysis of the words that make the idiom; therefore, high-transparency idioms are easier to understand than low-transparency idioms. Idiom familiarity is also an important characteristic. Idiom familiarity is a measure of how frequently the idiom occurs in the language (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). The familiarity (or frequency of exposure) of idioms play an essential role in learning idioms.

A question remains: What are idioms used for? To answer this question, McCarthy & O'Dell (2010, p. 8) listed seven reasons:

• "For emphasis, e.g. The singer's second album **sank like a stone**. (failed completely).
• To agree with a previous speaker, e.g.
A: Did you notice how Lisa started listening when you said her name?
B. Yes, that certainly made her **prick** her **ears up**. (started listening carefully).
• To comment on people, e.g. Did you hear Tom has been invited for dinner with the prime minister?
He's certainly **gone up in the world**! (gained a better social position- or more money- than before).
• To comment on a situation, e.g. The new finance minister wants to **knock** the economy **into shape**. (take action to get something into a good condition).
• To make an anecdote more interesting, e.g. It was just one disaster after another today, a sort of **domino effect**. (when something, usually bad, happens and causes a series of other things to happen).
• To catch the reader's eye. Idioms- particularly those with strong images- are often used in headlines, advertising slogans and the names of small businesses. The writer may play with the idiom or make a pun (a joke involving a play on words) in order to create a special effect, e.g. *a debt of dishonor* instead of the usual **debt of honor**. (a debt that you owe someone for moral rather than financial reasons).
• To indicate membership of a particular group, e.g. surfers **drop in on** someone, meaning to get on a wave another surfer is already on."

C. Idiom Teachability

The teaching of idioms has been a controversial subject and has been researched from different contexts. One of the issues is whether idioms are acquired in social contexts or obtained in more formal settings, such as in the same way vocabulary and grammar are taught in schools (Al-kadi, 2015). Since idioms are arbitrary and non-literal, teachers often experience difficulty when teaching idioms. Pimenova (2011, p. 117-11) gave five reasons why the learning of idioms is so difficult:

a. Unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms.

b. No analog idioms in L1.

c. Cultural differences.

d. Lack of experience dealing with idioms.

e. Lack of the broad context of a given idiom.

Idioms are perplexing and sometimes even ungrammatical. Knowing the meaning of an idiom's compositional parts does not mean it is sufficient enough to understand its full meaning. There is no definitive answer in the research as to the best way to teach idioms; however, researchers have proposed differing methods to approach them. Cakir (2011) opined the easiest idioms to teach and learn are those which have exact counterparts in the first language and suggested teaching the most frequently used idioms in meaningful contexts, such as pictures, video clips, dialogues, drawings, and role plays. Wu (2008) suggested using a variety of collaborative activities using story contexts, rich illustrations, and role-play to teach idioms so the students interact with each other and have fun while learning. Guduru (2012) recommended techniques such as memorization, using an idiom notebook, and displays on the classroom board. Researchers Azar and Talebinezhad (2013) proposed using poetry as an authentic source to teach idiomatic expressions and to improve students' metaphorical competence. Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki and Mahmoodi (2015) endorsed using movie clips to teach idioms. Irujo (1986) pointed out that the grouping of idioms into categories according to topic will not only make them easier for students to learn, but also will make it easier for teachers to relate the activities to topic-based units.

In the teaching of idioms, a teacher must also consider culture, as idioms are often culture specific. According to Cakir (2011), since idioms are culture specific, it is not always possible to find their counterparts in every language. To understand the meanings of idioms, it is necessary to learn about the target culture and also the intercultural differences (Taki & Soghady, 2013). Learning idioms is an exceptional opportunity to learn about a language's culture (Glucksberg, 2001). If students lack cultural references then the learning of idioms becomes even more of a challenging task. Boer and Demecheleer (2001) and Chen and Lai (2013) also investigated the impact of cross-cultural variation on learners of idioms and suggested that teachers must give extra attention to the figurative language that relates to metaphoric themes as it relates to culture. Giving extra attention to idioms not only teaches students some cultural aspects of the target language, but it also can give them confidence in using and understanding them.

D. Multimodal Approach

A multimodal teaching approach can be a source of creativity and flexibility and can enhance the learning environment. The New London Group (1996), composed of eleven linguists, conceived the term "multimodality" when they discussed the changing ways of communication due to new technologies. They argued for a much broader view of literacy than the traditional printed text and advocated for a new approach to engage students and use all available resources, especially multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996). Kress (2003) claimed that very soon the screen will govern all of our communication practices. Jewitt (2006) defined modalities as different modes of expression- aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic. These different modalities come together in a digital environment in ways that reshape the printed word and image or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This combination allows for creativity, meaning making, and can strengthen the learning environment.

When a teacher presents material through a variety of modes, then students are encouraged to develop a more versatile approach to learning (Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan, 2003). Through technology induced interactions, multimodality provides resources and opportunities that challenge the traditional forms of teaching. Examples of multimodal teaching may include, but not limited to: digital storytelling, virtual gaming, kinetic typography, hyperlinked texts/stories, blending visual and print media, audio recordings, and writing and editing wikis. According to the New London Group (1996) the view of traditional literacy, relying on the printed text, is a limited and restrictive approach and teachers must expand to new forms that focus on a pedagogy of multiliteracies, "by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (p. 64). Xerri (2012) argued "The notion of multimodality redefines pedagogy because learning itself is reconceptualised, partly because of the impact of new technologies" (p. 508). A multimodal teaching approach can and should be incorporated into EFL classrooms.

II. RESEARCH PURPOSE

Idioms are a complex phenomenon in languages and can be very arduous for second language learners. Most of the studies on English idioms have been conducted with native speakers and concerned with the effects of familiarity and transparency. Very little research has been conducted with foreign language learners and their comprehension of English idioms. Little to no research has been directed toward using a multimodal approach to teach idioms to EFL students. This study aims at investigating Ecuadorian university students' comprehension of English idioms using a multimodal teaching approach in English language class.

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 81 university students at a small private university in Ecuador in a B2 level English class. All students were undergraduate students with majors in business, mechatronics, engineering, biology, diplomacy, or tourism. There were 41 female students and 40 male students, ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. All of

the students speak Spanish as their native language. There were 4 English classes in total, with two as experimental groups and two as control groups.

B. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to gather the data for this study. Both instruments were an idiom comprehension quiz that consisted of 20 multiple choice questions with one correct answer. One was the pre-quiz and the other was the post-quiz. The post-quiz was the same questions but in a different order than the pre-quiz. The 20 English idioms selected for the quizzes were selected from the book "Speak English Like an American" (2004) by Amy Gillett. The idioms were selected because they showed a wide range of familiarity and transparency levels. To guarantee the validity of idiom comprehension quizzes that were prepared by the researchers, they were given to three university English language professors to examine their accuracy and adequacy.

C. Procedures

The pre-quiz was given to both the control groups and the experimental groups. The main purpose of the pre-quiz was to ensure the homogeneity of the groups. Using the results from the pre-quiz, an independent samples t-test was carried out, which showed that there was no statistically significant mean difference in test scores between the two groups ($t = -.78$, $p = .44$), suggesting that the control group ($n = 37$, $M = 11.43$, $SD = 2.94$) and the experimental group ($n = 44$, $M = 10.87$, $SD = 3.29$) were homogeneous samples in levels of comprehension and achievement. Next a list of the 20 idioms with definitions and examples was given to the students. The control group was advised to study the list for the post-quiz to be given a week later. In contrast to this traditional teaching approach, the experimental group was informed of the upcoming multimodal activities.

First the students in the experimental group were shown YouTube videos of idioms in movies and television shows. YouTube integrates meaning-making capabilities through images, audio, visual, and textual. Students were able to see and hear the vast usage of idioms in the English language and culture through some of their favorite television shows and movies. Students were also shown comics about some of the idioms and were asked to interpret the comics' idioms. For the next exercise, students were asked to work with a partner to produce an artistic interpretation of one of the idioms selected at random by means of a digital collage. Having students compose in a digital, multimodal landscape can present "not just a new way to make meaning, but a different kind of meaning" (Hull and Nelson, 2005, p. 225). Students had to guess which idiom was being represented by each digital collage.

The final activity for the experimental group was to create a digital video role play in groups of two to three. Each group selected two idioms at random to include in their digital video role play project. Role play is a way of bringing real life situations into the classroom (Doff, 1990). With performing a role play, students need to conceptualize a role, a situation, or both and invent a conversation using the two selected idioms. According to Magos and Politi (2008), role play activities help students "communicate, express their feelings, enrich their vocabulary and appraise their existing knowledge" and role-play offers a more engaging language-learning experience, creating a "safe environment where learners are relaxed, creative and inventive" (p. 101-102). By constructing the role plays as digital videos the students must combine a variety of traditional and new literacies to create their multimodal project. The students also engage in higher-order thinking (e.g., critical, reflective, and creative thinking) to understand, synthesize, evaluate, and make use of the information to create the digital video role play content (Sadik, 2008).

At the end of the idioms unit, both the control groups and the experimental groups were given a multiple-choice post-quiz on the 20 idioms studied. An independent samples t-test was carried out to examine possible differences in overall means of posttest scores.

D. Findings

Results from Independent Samples t-test: An independent samples t-test was carried out to determine the presence of a significant difference in overall mean posttest scores between the control and experimental groups. The following hypotheses were tested:

H_0: There will be no significant difference in test scores between university students who were taught idioms the traditional way and those who were taught using a multimodal approach.

H_1: There will be a significant difference in test scores between university students who were taught idioms the traditional way and those who were taught using a multimodal approach.

The result from the independent samples t-test showed that there was a statistically significant mean difference in test scores between the two groups ($t_{(59)} = -6.97$, $p = .00$, CI -6.55 - -3.63), suggesting that the multimodal group ($M = 18.39$, $SD = 2.46$, $n = 44$) has a significantly higher mean on test scores ($M_{diff} = -5.09$, $SE(M_{diff}) = .73$) compared to the group of traditionally taught students ($M = 13.30$, $SD = 3.83$, $n = 37$). The null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is a significant difference in test scores between university students who were taught idioms the traditional way and those who were taught using a multimodal approach. *Cohen's d* of 1.58 indicates a large difference in overall mean posttest scores between both groups.

Treatment	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*SE*
Traditional (control)	37	13.30	3.83	0.63
Multimodal (experimental)	44	18.38	2.46	0.37

Independent -samples t-test	*t*	*df*	*p*	*MD*	*CI*
	-6.97	59	.00	-5.09	-6.55 - -3.63

III. CONCLUSION

Many language researchers agree that a substantial knowledge of idioms is essential for English proficiency and fluency and there is a clear correlation between idiom acquisition and communicative competence (Wray, 2002, Liu, 2008, De Caro, 2009, Aljabri, 2013, Liontas, 2002). Idioms contain linguistic features that are challenging to EFL learners and for idiom teachability. There is no conclusive answer in the research as to the best way to teach idioms; however, this study presents a modern multimodal approach to teaching idioms. When instruction is presented through a variety of modes, then students are encouraged to develop a more resourceful approach to learning (Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan, 2003). Through technology induced interactions, multimodality provides resources and opportunities that challenge the traditional forms of teaching. Examples of multimodal teaching may include, but not limited to: digital storytelling, virtual gaming, kinetic typography, hyperlinked texts/stories, blending visual and print media, audio recordings, and writing and editing wikis. The present study used YouTube videos, digital artistic collage interpretations, and digital video role plays. The results from the study indicated that the group who received the multimodal teaching approach scored significantly higher on the idioms quiz than the group that received a traditional teaching approach. To improve EFL learners' idiomatic proficiency, teachers should adopt more multimodal activities in the classroom in order to give learners better chances at understanding idioms.

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