

TEACHING IDIOMS TO ALBANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KOSOVO

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Abstract

Teaching English in general has not only become necessary but it has also made many teachers around the world strive to find the easiest solution to this issue. The paper in question deals with the same issue but with focus on teaching and learning idioms. It tries to give a new insight into the way students understand and learn idioms more easily. It takes into consideration two main concepts: learning by and teaching idioms to the university level students putting more emphasis on the latter. Some students might even wonder why to use idioms when people could have said words/phrases or sentences others would understand more easily without having to think much about their meaning. The answer to this lies in that native speaker use idioms very often so it is almost impossible for non-native speakers to avoid using idioms when communicating with native speakers of English. This is one of the crucial points the study in question also puts emphasis on. Apart from this, ever since the war ended in Kosovo, many organizations or educational institutions such as: OSCE, UNMIK, American School of Kosovo, British Council, American University of Kosovo have made it possible that people of Kosovo get in touch with native speakers who spoke English in a more natural way by also using idioms.

Keywords: Kosovo, English, idioms, teaching, learning, phrase.

JEL Classification: K33, K34

1. Introduction

Idioms have long been of great concern among researchers. This has been an issue for teachers as well as translators. This issue has been vitally important for the teachers and translators in Kosovo, too. Yet, there hasn't been sufficient study about this in Kosovo. However, the study in question tackles this from a particular point of view: challenges the university professors in Kosovo face in teaching idioms on one hand and the challenges the students at university level face in learning them. It poses dilemma especially for the students from English Departments who, regardless of whether they have chosen to be translators/interpreters or English professors, come across idiomatic expressions very often, if not every single day at work. This goes beyond just trying to put some words together. It implies having to deal with the cultural background as well. In this regard, tracing the words to their origin will ease the process of teaching and learning idioms. In this context, culture is one of the most important elements that we should put emphasis on. Nevertheless, this part is going to be elaborated about further in this work. It is also worth mentioning the fact that in trying to teach and learn idioms and anything that is idiomatic different professors use different methods/techniques which they think are best. This is also going to be further explained in this work.

With regards to teaching idioms, teachers in Kosovo teach some idioms to the pupils from the early years of the primary school for instance some phrasal verbs, some of which sometimes may have idiomatic meaning and sometimes literal meaning, such as: come back, switch off, switch on, stand up, sit down, get home, get up, put up (the volume), turn off (the radio, TV), look out, watch out, go away, throw away, put aside, and so on and so on. This means that by the time the students start their studies, they will have already come across some idioms for a long time but they have not studied them sufficiently. Apart from this, the students might have come across idioms on TV, from the music they listen to or else from the books they might have read.

So far, there have been traditional ways of teaching idioms to the students therefore finding better alternative methods is very important. Some researchers also consider it necessary to find alternative ways of teaching idioms to the students the reason being that they are found very difficult by the ELF students. Thus, since idioms appear difficult for the EFL students to understand and

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comprehend and the traditional teaching methods are stated to be inefficient, it is necessary to look for alternative ways of teaching².

2. What are idioms?

Various researchers give different definitions about idioms. Most importantly, most of them, if not all of them, agree that an idiom is a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the meaning of words alone. This further means that we cannot translate a word separately and then guess the meaning of the whole idiom. Some researchers consider idioms as a group of words, some others as multi-word units. In this regard, some definitions about idioms vary. Rodrigues and Winnberg state that “a definition found in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) states that an idiom is a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word”³.

Another researcher Majuri states that “the most often criterion to define idioms is that the meaning cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of the components involved”⁴. Rodriguez and Winnberg also claim that it is difficult to understand an idiom if you are not familiar with the culture of the people who use the idioms. In this context “The meaning of idioms is almost impossible to understand unless you make use of your cultural knowledge or have heard them before”⁵. Zyzik considers idioms multi-word units.

In recent years, there has been heightened awareness of the critical role of vocabulary on second language (L2) learning and teaching. Within this broad area of academic inquiry, there is also general consensus that the vocabulary of a given language is much more than a list of individual words, a speaker’s mental dictionary (or lexicon) also contains a wide range of multiword units such as phrasal verbs (“put up with”), social routines (“take care”), collocations (“surgery”), and idioms (bite the bullet)⁶.

Researchers have actually tried to give a definition for idioms since 1940s. In this regard, “What represents an idiom, a proverb, a conventionalized expression, or a grammatically irregular unit of language is notoriously-famously-difficult to define and hence to identify”⁷. Apart from this, “Significant and ongoing lexicographic efforts to do so have been undertaken at least since the 1940s”⁸. As to the definition of idioms, Hinkel further gives clarification about idioms stating that, “A formal and relatively early definition of idioms was advanced by Adam Makkai and was later adopted in several editions of Oxford English Dictionary...”.

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology, approved by the usage of language, often having significance other than its grammatical or logical one. Hinkel further explains the definition of idioms based on what Cowie and Mackin have concluded about idioms claiming that “an idiom is a combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning”⁹.

² Jermoskin, S., *The Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching Idioms: A Case Study with Estonian Secondary School EFL Students* MA thesis. University of Tartu, Department of English Studies, Tartu, 2017. Retrieved on 15.09.2018 from: http://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/57586/jermoskin_ma_2017.pdf, p.1.

³ Rodrigues, K. J. & Winberg, H. *Teaching idiomatic expressions in language classrooms. Malmo hogskola, kulture sprak medier (KSM)*. Retrieved on 11.06.2018 from: <https://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/16123/Examensarbete%202013HJ.pdf?Sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, 2013, p. 7.

⁴ Majuri, T., *Idioms and L2 Learners: The Effect of L1, Transparency and Frequency on Idiom Comprehension by Finnish and Italian Learners of English*. University of Turku, School of Languages and Translation Studies, English Philology, March 2014. Retrieved on 13.09.2018 from: <http://docplayer.net/29602593-Idioms-and-l2-learners-the-effect-of-l1-transparency-and-frequency-on-idiom-comprehension-by-finnish-and-italian-learners-of-english.html>, 2014, p.10.

⁵ Rodriguez & Winnberg, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 8.

⁶ Zyzik, E., *The role of input revisited: Nativist versus usage-based models*, L2 Journal, Volume 1, 2009, p. 42.

⁷ Hinkel, E., *Teaching idiomatic expressions and phrases: insights and techniques*, „Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research” 5(3), October, 2017. Seattle Pacific University, U.S. retrieved on 11.06.2018 from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1156200.pdf>, 2017, p. 2.

⁸ Hinkel, E., *op. cit.*, 2017, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

2.1. Classification of idioms by researchers

Different researchers have classified idioms in different categories. Hinkel classifies idioms into some of the following categories:

- Frequently recurring and culture-specific expressions with opaque meanings (e.g. cost an arm and a leg);
- Collocations, that is, the words that often occur together but with flexible and variable components (take place/part/a test, etc.);
- Fixed phrases with specific and well-defined meanings, as well as phrasal verbs (e.g. break in/out/down/up/into, etc.);
- Figurative expressions (such as metaphors) (e.g. The world is my oyster; couch potato; heart of gold; heart of stone, etc.);
- Set and rigidly ordered phrases (in which components are fixed in a certain order e.g. here we go, will that be all, etc.);
- Proverbs (e.g. two wrongs don't make a right, etc.);
- Culturally- bound sayings (e.g. a fish out of water, right as rain; count chickens before they hatch; not my cup of tea; the pen is mightier than the sword; Rome wasn't built in a day).

Based on this, all the word combinations that have idiomatic meanings have also been included in the group of idioms for example proverbs, phrasal verbs et cetera. Yet, there is one thing in common: idioms are considered multi-word units. Thus, "However, the accepted basic concept is that they are multi-word units of language-words that are connected to other words - that are remembered and used as single lexical (vocabulary) items".¹⁰

3. Different techniques (methods) mentioned by different researchers for teaching idioms

In trying to teach idioms to EFL students, different teachers use different methods (techniques) which they think are most suitable for students in a particular situation. Anyhow, the teachers base their efforts on the length of the idiomatic expressions to teach. Some researchers consider shorter idioms easier to teach and vice-versa, the longer ones more difficult to teach and practise, thus, "Another important consideration is that short collocations and phrases are encountered far more frequently than longer ones, and thus, can be easier to practice".¹¹ The method Hinkel uses in teaching starts from common collocations so that students find idioms easier to learn at later stages. He bases it all on the pivot word of a collocation and then attaches possible collocates to it. The following is such an example ¹²:

Come (pivot word)	possible collocates: about, after, around, alone, along, a long way, back, Close, daily/weekly, directly, early, first, here/there, home, Last, late, though, on time, over, prepared, right back, second/third, Together, to an end, to a decision, to a total of, up.
Give (Pivot word)	possible collocates: an answer, advice, attention, a chance, a moment, a choice/ choices, an example, an explanation, a headache, a gift/present/lift/ tip, a lecture/ speech, a class, an exam, an opinion, (someone's) regards/ best wishes, a promise, information, priority, time, up, in, away, a smile, an impression, an opportunity, a phone call, a hand, a push, some/any thought,
Life (pivot word)	possible collocates : real, family, every day, whole, private, normal, personal, public, early, daily, form, cycle, in, during, style, happy, good, easy, active, busy, exciting, long, full, peaceful, quiet, future, working, time, new, sheltered

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 9.

¹² Ibid, pp. 9-10.

Another method Hinkel uses to teach collocations to the students is by identifying suitable responses to conventionalized conversational expressions. “Another useful type of practice can take the form of identifying suitable responses to conventionalized conversational expressions with other appropriate conventionalized expressions”¹³.

For example:

What classes are you planning to take next term?	Thanks for asking. Not bad! How about your classes. Are the tests over yet?
Excuse me. Could you tell me where the bookstore is?	A bus may be better. It takes a long time to go by taxi during rush hour.
I need to get to the airport / the (xxx) office. Should I take a bus or a taxi?	Yes, it's right that way. At the corner, then turn left, and then go straight two blocks.
Hey, so how did your math/English/history Exam go?	Of course! Glad to be able to help. Hopefully, I can help you figure it out.
Thank you for meeting me on such a short notice. I appreciate it.	Not quite sure yet. Haven't had a chance to think about that. How about you?

“Further activities for learning common formulaic expressions can be requesting students to create lists of such functional conversational devices as greetings, introductions, or requests.”¹⁴ Based on this, idioms can be taught at different language levels and at different ages starting from the very simple expressions. The fact is that idioms are also essential and very frequently used by the native speakers therefore learning them will help a non-native speaker become a near-native speaker of English, if not a native one. Hinkel also suggests including idioms in teaching materials in any language skill.

Unlike Hinkel, Cimen and Komur use another method for teaching idioms to the students. They use metaphors to make idioms more understandable and easier to their students. In their study on idioms and the effects of using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms in a foreign language context entitled “using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms in a foreign language context” they give a definition for metaphors and give an explanation of why teaching idioms through metaphors is necessary and important. According to them, “Metaphors and idiomatic expressions are not only cross-linguistic, but also cross-cultural phenomena”¹⁵. This means that just like other types of idioms, metaphors are also a bridge to understanding idioms through culture.

Robo, an Albanian researcher, mentions some strategies in teaching idioms. She claims that According to the internet site¹⁶ the following tips are given to teach idioms.¹⁷ The following are the strategies Robo¹⁸ mentions:

- The teacher deals with proverbs and idioms when they crop up in their contexts, such as reading and listening tasks or when you use one naturally in class.
- The teacher teaches several ‘body idioms’ together. E.g. to be head and shoulders above the rest, to be long in the tooth, to shoot yourself in the foot, etc. It will be easier for students to remember some of them if they’re in groups.
- The teacher uses visuals and pictures to help learners remember them. For example, draw a bird in the hand and two in the bush.
- The teacher does some matching activities. For example, give students five proverbs that have been cut in half and get them to match them up.
- The teacher asks students if any of the proverbs translate directly into their own language. Most of the time students will know a similar expression in their language and it can help

¹³ Ibid, p. 9

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁵ Cimen, S. & Komur, S., *Using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms in a foreign language context*. Mugla University. Turkey, 2009. Retrieved on 23.05.2018 from: <http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/217279>, 2009, p. 4.

¹⁶ www.teachingenglish.org.uk, retrieved on 23.05.2018.

¹⁷ Robo, L., *Problems and strategies of teaching and translating English idioms in Albanian schools - Theoretical and practical implications*, University ‘Fan.S.Noli’ of Korca. Faculty of Education and Philology, Foreign Language Department, „European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research”, Vol.1, No 1, May-August 2014, Retrieved on 25.07.2018 from: http://journals.euser.org/files/articles/ejser_may_aug_14/LorenaR.pdf, p. 4.

¹⁸ Robo, L., *op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 4-5.

them to remember them if they compare the differences between English and their language.

- The teacher tires put idioms into context. Try to use situations when people actually use the expressions and get students to create dialogues or role-play and to use a few of the proverbs or idioms to reinforce the meaning.
- The teacher explains to students that it may be more useful for them to be able to understand the expressions when they hear them then to be able to produce them. Ask them how they would react if you used this type of expression in their language. Would they find it a bit strange?
- The teacher doesn't overload students with too many at a time. Five is probably a good number of one class.

Another strategy for teaching idioms mentioned by another researcher Suhodolli, M. is:

- Role-play where students pick a number of idioms and try to teach them to their peers. They read some idioms aloud and try to make their classmates first of all explain them in English and then give a translation/equivalent in Albanian language. The students are given limited time to do the task. This proved to be very useful in learning idioms much faster. In addition to this, the students from different regions write some of the idioms used in his/her region in L1 (different towns, villages within Kosovo) and then try to find an English equivalent to these idioms. In one words, learning idioms from context is to be paid due attention whatever methods professors use to teach them to their students.

4. Challenges of teaching and learning idioms at university level in Kosovo

One of the biggest challenges of English professors is not simply teaching students some grammar, but teaching them how to communicate, too¹⁹. This also poses a big dilemma in Kosovo. Sometimes, people find it difficult to understand English speaking people for different reasons. One of the reasons is that, very often, native speakers of English use words/phrases other people find almost impossible to understand or translate. This does not only pose dilemma for translators but for professors at different levels be it at university level in Kosovo, too especially English Departments where students are expected to master English to a greater extent as compared to other students. Another issue worth mentioning is that students should be aware that getting as closer as possible to the English culture will help them learn idioms more easily. For example, if a particular group of students have to deal with proverbs, then knowing about their equivalents in both the languages makes it easier to learn and understand them. The reason for this is that idioms cannot be translated or understood from the words separately but as a unit in its entirety. Besides, English people use other things to say something which Albanian people say differently and trying to translate the idioms, in this case proverbs, based on the words alone will just be misleading. Another issue is that there is a big difference in the cultures of the two people: English and Albanian hence the difficulty in understanding the phrases which are culturally-bound.

Another problem is that some students and professors themselves do not get it why people have to use idioms when they could have used phrases/sentences other people would find easier to understand. This issue is best explained by Rodriguez and Winnberg who claim that "According to Gee (2007), language builds abstractions on the basis of concrete images from embodied experiences of a material world, so, too, does human learning and thinking"²⁰. This further means that, English people use their cultural background in order to express something in a different way which makes it more difficult for non-native speakers to understand them. Idioms make a language more colorful and this makes them more important to learn.

A recent research was carried out in 2018 by Suhodolli Mirsad in Kosovo as a part of doctoral thesis research. The author in question carried out his research with 260 students from three different

¹⁹ Suhodolli, M., *The Effect of Context on Acquisition of Idioms by Albanian EFL Learners at University Level in Kosovo*. South East European University, Tetovo, Macedonia, January, 2019, p. 5.

²⁰ Rodriguez & Winnberg, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 8.

universities in Kosovo: with the English Department students from the first, the second and the fourth year of studies. An important part of his research (study) was that he compared the cultural aspect of both the languages: English and Albanian and, based on the research, he concluded that some of the challenges of the Albanian students in learning idioms are: the lack of usage of the English as well as Albanian idioms be it in the primary, secondary school or else at university level. Based on his research, the students consider figurative language in general and idioms in particular old-fashioned. In one way or another, insufficient emphasis is put on this issue. Apart from this, the university professors avoid using idioms as much as possible which poses another difficulty for the students to master them (idioms). Another issue worth putting emphasis on is not using proper methods in learning or teaching any language part related to idioms. Not using English as the only language in spoken is yet another challenge and, at the same time, an obstacle in mastering language in general and idioms in particular. This implies that students misunderstand and misinterpret idioms due to lack of vocabulary in L2, therefore, "this misunderstanding of idioms and misinterpretation might happen due to lack of rich vocabulary in L2"²¹.

Yet, acquisition of idioms and anything that is idiomatic be it phrasal verbs or even proverbs is improving the reason being that the people of Kosovo get more and more in touch with native speakers and the language itself at least by using the technology at their disposal. On the one hand, the youth of Kosovo is challenged with more authentic literature and different TV programs. On the other hand, when they want to apply for a job, then being more fluent is an advantage. The good side of this is that the Albanian youth of Kosovo see it more obligatory and necessary to learn English as best as possible for they achieve their goals be it academic or else for a job. So, making efforts to achieve the goals and better learning conditions using technology make it all easier despite challenges the Albanian students at an academic setting or in their everyday life face.

5. Conclusion

Teaching English in general and idioms in particular is very difficult and challenging for English professors worldwide so is in Kosovo, too. The study in question has tackled this issue at university level, more particularly, at English Departments, which makes it more challenging for the professors teaching English. There are many reasons for this and one of them mentioned earlier herein is that idioms in most of the cases are culturally-bound which means having to teach them beyond just grammar or reading a passage. Apart from this, different professors use different methods and this is another issue the study in question has put emphasis on based on other researchers' works. It is also a fact that using idioms in context helps the Albanian students not only acquire but also remember idioms for a longer period of time.

The most important part is that finding easier ways to teach idioms to university level students be it in Kosovo or abroad helps not only those students who want to become professors but those who also want to become translators/interpreters. So, idioms are a big challenge for translators, too as they might have to deal with them on everyday basis. The study in question has also given definitions for the idioms, of course, based on other researchers but one of the most common one is that idioms are a group of words that has a special meaning and it is not based on the meanings of the words separately. Apart from this, different researchers have mentioned different methods/techniques in teaching idioms to their students; some of them have suggested using matching activities, some others namely, starting from a particular type they consider idioms, for instance, metaphors and so on and so on. This article was also based on a research by Suhodolli, M. carried out recently on idioms with 260 students from three different universities and it shed light on some challenges as well as methods of teaching idioms.

Last, but not least, the study has also emphasized that, nowadays, despite being challenging for the youth of Kosovo, idioms have become necessary to learn as more and more students want to achieve their future goals be it academic or else for finding a job. Another important issue worth

²¹ Suhodolli, M., *op. cit.*, 2019, p. 6.

mentioning is that some of the students want to pursue their studies abroad, for instance in America, therefore, being able to speak and understand it as best as possible will open new paths for them and pave the road for a brighter future.

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