

The Effect of Using Pictures on EFL Learners' Retention of Body Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract- This study investigated the effect of visual images on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions. Homogeneous participants (40 males and 40 females) were selected out of 120 at the pre-intermediate level. Then they were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental groups received instruction regarding visualizing the situations in which body idioms were presented respectively, whereas the control groups were taught the same idioms but the instruction was in form of giving definition of each idiom. After an interval of ten days from the end of the treatment, the four groups took a similar post-test to see whether learners recall body idioms and also to find out whether idioms retention has taken place through visual images. T-test analysis showed that applying visual images had a significant effect on learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions; and male and female experimental groups outperformed the control groups.

Keywords- Pictures; Learners' retention; Body idiomatic expressions

1. Introduction

Idioms are common in American daily life and provide a rich source of American culture (Cooper, 1999). Titone and Connine (1999) assume that idiomatic expressions have occupied a unique status in the spheres of linguistics and psycholinguistics primarily because they are expressions whose non-literal meanings are highly associated with the specific and often arbitrary configuration of their work (p. 14). Titone and Connine (1999) also state that idioms are usually grouped within a large class of linguistic expressions termed figurative or nonliteral language. Also included in this class of expressions are metaphor, simile, proverb, and many other linguistic constructions that produce an apparent need for comprehenders to go beyond what is literally stated to apprehend the communicative intent of speakers, and, consequently the meaning of utterances.

Carter and Bowing (2001) indicate that idioms make real problems to language learners: First, it is not always possible for listeners or readers to recognize that an idiom exists, and they may assume the literal meaning. Second, it is unusual to be able to substitute one word for another and provide a translation into non-idiomatic English. Studies have indicated that English idioms are also difficult for ESL/ EFL learners (Buchwald, 2000, Cooper 1999). Therefore, without having access to a good dictionary, which provides examples, an idiom cannot be translatable

(Carter & Bowing, 2001). The rationale for selection of body idioms is that since these idioms are dealing with different parts of the body, for teaching them it seems, it is better to visualize them by pictures.

Therefore, the present empirical study intends to find the relationship between using pictures and retention of body idiomatic expressions. The main question was to discover whether illustration strategies can affect EFL learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions among male and female EFL learners.

The present study is primarily concerned with the investigation of the effect of using pictures on retention of body idiomatic expressions of Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, this chapter will first look meticulously at works in the literature on the notion of multi-word phrases, and because these formulaic expressions are part of the lexical knowledge of the learner, we have to start by giving a detailed description of the role of formulaic language (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012). In the second part of this chapter, the notion of idiom (which is subcategory of vocabulary) will be specifically investigated. Then, we will turn our attention to different approaches, techniques and some empirical studies previously done in relation to idiomatic expressions, finally the researchers' purpose of this study will be presented.

2. Review of Literature

With the emergence of Chomsky's influential theory of language, Universal Grammar, much attention, since that time, has been paid to the importance of creativity, and systematicity of language.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important aspects of language learning is retention and recall of previously learned materials. Richards and Platt (1992, p. 457) defines "retention as the ability of the learners to recall or remember things after an interval of time". Here distinction should be made between short-term recall and long-term retention. Short-term or immediate recall is the ability of learners to remember the material immediately at the end of treatment in each session. This is based on Laufer's (2007) definition for short-term recall "it is usually measured immediately after performing the task that is supposed to lead to retaining some information, after a short intervention" (p. 29). For instance, we teach (through any task we decide) some idioms in a normal class. We can test the retention of these idioms immediately, or make the learners do another task for 10-20 minutes and then test the target idioms.

Retention is an important part of learning. However, it is different from learning. In order to have a sieve - like memory, Carter and Nunan (2002) state that we should engage long-term memory. One of the mnemonic devices that can help us is to create mental linkage. Students' interest and curiosity, for instance, about idioms are stimulated when they learn the logic behind idioms origins and the many stories that underlie how they came about. Moreover, it is important to realize that learning these aspects about them reveals that idioms are not only interesting but also fun. When you find pleasure in what you learn; you probably want to remember it. By applying amazing pictures, for instance, a teacher can make the meaning of the item, more memorable, and therefore accelerate the meaning process.

Westen (1999) believes that knowing how knowledge is stored in memory is essential to our understanding of cognition. He adds that memory is a multidimensional structure. According to Tulving and Thomson (1973), memory is a by-product of the normal process of receiving and retrieving. In fact, they believe that when people remember something they simply reactivate the same neural networks that processed this information. Idioms retention is not an exception.

Although the majority of studies related to the present study investigate the effects of various techniques on idioms comprehension, reviewing the related literature on this topic indicates that previous studies have not covered directly the relationship between using pictures and EFL learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions. There still appears to be almost few studies have investigated gender (sex) as a factor. Therefore, the impact of using pictures on promoting EFL learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions will be investigated in the present study.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Eighty participants (i.e., male, n=40 & female, n=40) at the pre-intermediate level were selected based on a non-random convenience sampling from among 120 students at Zabansara (Oxford) language institute. Through their performance on a proficiency test designed based on Nelson English language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976), those participants whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were selected as the participants of the study. In each group only 20 students who were at pre-intermediate level were under consideration. Their age was ranging from 17 to 22 years old.

3.2. Instrumentation

Firstly, Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976), including 50 items, were applied to determine the homogeneity of the groups regarding their levels of proficiency as pre-intermediate level. Its reliability index was estimated ($r=.73$). Secondly, the post-test included 30 items on body idioms in multiple choice format extracted from *101 American English Idioms* (Collis, 1987), *Basic Idioms in American English* (Hubert & Setzler, 1991) and also 30 multiple choice items extracted from natural-sounding dialogues with clear contexts and highly frequent English body idioms embedded in *Learn American Idioms Through Conversations* (Abedini, 2007) and *Pictorial Dictionary of Slang and Idioms* (Mirhassani & Alipour, 2005). The reliability of the post-test was estimated ($r=.73$). The test items were selected from these books to bridge a gap between American idioms and the situations in which they are applied by supplying graphic illustrations of situations for those idioms.

3.3. Procedure

The experimental and control groups were assigned the same materials. However, the techniques of teaching idioms were different. The treatment lasted ten sessions, forty minutes a session, twice a week, in a period of about forty five days. In fact, sixty body idioms were arranged in ten pre-planned forms and were taught to all groups. The rationale for selection of body idioms is that since these idioms are dealing with different parts of the body so; they easily lend themselves to graphic illustrations. In doing the treatment processes, the researcher conducted the following stages:

During the second phase, participants of the experimental groups of male and female were supplied with certain pictures including six body idiomatic expressions and their situations, and then they were provided with definition and enough description about the pictorial idioms and their usage whereas the participants (both male and female) control groups also received the same materials (six body idiomatic expressions a session); In fact, these groups just received the definition for each idiom in English. It is worth mentioning that whenever the participants did not

understand the meaning of the body idiomatic expressions, they were provided with Persian equivalent.

Finally, when the treatment was over, to determine the effectiveness of applying pictures on body idioms retention, after an interval of ten days, the four groups were given the similar post-test, including sixty multiple-choice items (body idioms) which they had worked on throughout the instructions. The obtained scores by the groups were compared to determine the possible differences among the groups. The data were analyzed through Independent Samples *t*-test to clarify the mean differences and the treatment effect.

4. Results

After an interval of ten days from the end of the treatment, the four groups of the study took a similar post-test (idioms retention test) on body idiomatic expressions which they had worked on throughout the instructions to see whether any difference is observed regarding learners' retention of body idioms.

Descriptive statistics among experimental and groups on the post-test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics among experimental and groups on the post-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Groups	Experimental	40	32.9938	12.2889	31.94305
	Control	40	27.7725	10.7452	11.69897

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics separately to show the mean difference among the four groups. Totally, descriptive statistics of experimental and control groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of experimental and control groups on the post-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	Female	20	28.5475	14.2276	4.318140
	Male	20	37.4400	8.12029	1.81575
Control	Female	20	26.7750	8.13128	1.81821
	Male	20	28.7700	12.99166	2.90502

Table 2 indicates that the experimental groups of male and females' means are higher than their counterparts in the control group. These data are put into *t*-test analysis to show any significant difference in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent Samples *t*-test of experimental and control groups on the post-test

Test	Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Observed <i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test	Experimental (n=40) vs. Control (n=40)	-5.22125	2.58107	-2.023	78	.047

Table 3 illustrates that the experimental groups of males and females outperformed the control ones. In each post-test, males performed better than females. Since descriptive statistics cannot show the significant differences among the research groups, an Independent Samples *t*-test was run in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent Samples *t*-test Male/female groups on the post-test

Test	Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Observed <i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental	Male vs. Female	-8.89250	3.66309	-2.428	38	.020
Control	Male vs. Female	-1.99500	3.42711	-.582	38	.564

Table 4 indicates that the difference in the performances of males and females were significant at the level of ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, results indicated that using pictures had a meaningful and significant effect on retention of body idiomatic expression among the female participants.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Findings showed that there was a great improvement in retention of idiomatic expressions among the experimental groups who, during the treatment, were provided with situations in which body idioms were visualized for them. In other words, the participants of the experimental groups who enjoyed the experience of exposure to visual images, performed better than the control groups who were just provided with the definitions of body idiomatic expressions.

The reason for the better performance of experimental groups might be due to the fact that they were provided with situations in which body idioms were visualized by pictures, helping them retain and remember body idioms better (Zhang, Wu, Wei, & Wang, 2011). The results also showed that using pictures can improve EFL learners' retention of body idiomatic expressions to a significant extent because it could bring a great change in the (both male and female) experimental groups' retention of body idioms and led them to go through significant comprehension and retention. Therefore, it can be claimed that instructing EFL learners in this type of strategy to promote their retention of body idioms would be effective. This is consistent with the results obtained from the research conducted by Wu (2008) concerning the improvement of idiomatic expressions comprehension and retention. Wu (2008) stated that the ability of keeping idiomatic expressions in mind can be enhanced through applying illustrations. According to her, using rich illustrations in teaching idioms can improve the learners' ability to recall and remember those idioms (Zhang & Wu, 2011).

The application of visual images in teaching idiomatic expressions resulted in successful learning among males and females language learners (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). It is suggested that EFL learners intending to promote their retention of idiomatic expressions, study pictorial idioms books in which those idioms have been visualized (Zhang, Yan, Wei & Wu, 2011; Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011).

Learner autonomy is the ultimate goal of language teaching. In the area of language teaching learner autonomy implies that in the absence of language teachers and classes, language learners continue their learning (Gorjian, Pazhakh, & Parang, 2012). If learners are solely and completely dependent on their teachers and classes to be involved in language learning activities, as soon as they will be left by themselves, they easily quit their learning. Thus, explicit instruction may play a great role in retention and comprehension through but the role of implicit instruction cannot be overlooked. Learners may take the third strategy which is explicit/implicit strategy in a parallel which is coming from the agreement between teacher instruction (i.e.,

explicit) and students' tacit knowledge (i.e., implicit) which is indirect to many of EFL teachers. This strategy may be called invisible instruction which is the compromise instruction dealing with learners' (meta) cognitive strategies and teachers' explicit/implicit instructions. This strategy needs to be assessed appropriately since we are not sure which one affects retention effectively. Future research may be required to discover the interplay between the components of invisible instruction and its influence on the promotion of idioms retention.

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Vitae

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