Teaching English Idioms for the First Year Students in Non-Linguistic Universities: On the Example of Technical and Economic Universities

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Annotation: Compiling an effective English lesson focusing on idioms for the first year students of technical and economic universities is a great challenge even for the experienced language teachers. This is a multi-dimensional process and requires to take into account a number of variables. This paper uses theoretical-comparative analysis to examine the specific features of teaching English for first-year students of technical and economic specialties with the focus on teaching English idioms. The research also aims to reveal some effective pedagogical approaches, methods, and teaching techniques on the issue. The research results reaffirm the conclusions of some previous studies stating that practical use of English idioms prevails over the theoretical knowledge about them in the spheres of technology and economy. The novelty of the research is in the results of the theoretical-comparative analysis, which has shown that the communicative approach, method of relativity to the future profession of the students, and such techniques as the step-by-step limited introduction of new idioms, thematic derivations, and profession-oriented discussions are potentially most effective ways of teaching idioms and idiomatic expressions for the students engaged in the technology and economy spheres. Moreover, diversity of levels of first-year students' language skills and motivational problems of most technical and some economic students should also be taken into consideration.

Keywords: teaching English; idioms; non-linguistic university; technical specialty; economic specialty; communicative approach; profession-related; terms; thematic derivations; motivation.

Introduction

The English language has been growing rapidly over the years and now it is termed as "lingua franca" of the world. It has become possible because of the unique features of the English language, which is simple and complicated at the same time. In fact, the grammar, syntax, and phonetics of English are not so difficult comparing to Russian or Chinese, for example (Sosnovskaya & Kirpichnikov, 2017). But being the first international language, English adopted and developed a quite complicated vocabulary system, a part of which is idioms [1-6]. English is rich in idioms. They make a language sound, creative, and can also get others to think and figure out what the person might mean by using the idiom and it creates curiosity among the interlocutors to learn idioms. Idioms exist in all languages and enjoy widespread use among speakers of every language the world over.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of English (2020), an idiom is "a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own". According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020), an idiom is "an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (such as up in the air for "undecided") or in its grammatically atypical use of words". 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". For example, "under the weather" is an idiom meaning

"ill" (p.870). An idiom according to World Book Dictionary (2001, p.1049) is "a phrase or expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the ordinary meanings of the worlds in it".

So, an idiom is a phrase, saying, or a group of words that has a metaphorical (not literal) meaning, which has become accepted in common usage. An idiom's symbolic sense is quite different from the literal meaning or definition of the words of which it is made. There are a large number of idioms in English – about 25000 – covering almost all spheres of people's life. In our research, we dealt mostly with idioms connected to the sphere of technology and economy. The natural question arises – why do students of these specialties need to learn idioms? The answer is in the fact that idioms evolve the language; they are the building blocks of a language and civilization. They also have great intensity to make a language interesting and dynamic. Idioms bring a spectacular illustration to everyday speech. They provide interesting insights into the use of words, languages, and the thought processes of their speakers.

Review of the Previous Research in the Field

Idiomatic expressions are an integral part of foreign language acquisition and often indicate a proficient learner. No matter what is your profession and specialty, the language you use firstly shows your academic level (Abramova et al., 2017). As Burke (1998) claims, "knowledge of slang and idioms are fundamental to non-native speakers' understanding of the language that native speakers actually use" (p. 20). D'Angelo Bromley (1984) supports this idea and notes that "idioms add confusion and difficulty to the learning of language" (p. 272). Actually, idiomatic expressions are common in both written and spoken language. According to Lundblom and Woods (2012), "idioms appear in any conversation, in print (magazines and newspapers), and media (movies, radio, and television), in the street language and the language of high-level meetings" (p. 203). Cooper (1999) also claims that "of the four kinds of non-literal expressions, idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse" (p. 239). Burke (1998) goes as far as claiming that "if nonnative speakers do not understand idioms, they will never be able to completely integrate and, instead, they will always be outsiders" (p. 23).

Idioms are pretty easy to the native speakers of a language and they will be fluent, frequent, and natural whereas second language learners feel irritating if they cannot understand the idioms the interlocutor is using [7-15]. So, it becomes necessary for the learners to be familiar with the idioms which will be a helping force to perform well in his communication. Hence, "understanding idioms requires special attention and should not be downgraded to a secondary position in the curriculum" (Cooper, 2008, p.257). Of course, it is difficult for the first-year students of non-linguistic specialties to master English idioms, because the figurative meanings of English idioms cannot be predicted through an analysis of their word meanings. This characteristic of idioms makes them strange and difficult to understand - especially for non-native speakers because their meanings are usually metaphorical (Pushpanathan, 2016). As Mota & Scott state, "the trouble with foreigners in that they take everything we say literally" (Mota & Scott, 2014, p. 104). However, idioms are common in the daily life of English-speaking countries and provide a rich source of their culture (Cooper, 2008). Nippold and Martin (1989) stressed, "Failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual's understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings" (p. 59). Apparently, teaching non-linguistic students to use English idioms is a considerably critical and great challenge for English teachers in Uzbekistan. The research of Strassman and O'Connell (2007) shows that even brilliant non-linguistic students are often able to discuss content, take notes, or create semantic maps; however, they often do not use the new words or concepts taught in class. Unfortunately, this problem is actual for the realis of Uzbekistan universities, where students of non-linguistic specialties regard English just as an academic discipline that should be covered, but not as a tool assisting their future profession.

Stating the Problems and the Aim

Thus, two main problems can be distinguished in the sphere of teaching idioms to the first-year students of non-linguistic universities in Uzbekistan: 1) lack of motivation appeared because students do not know how to apply their English in their specialty; 2) lack of a specific skill to learn language units (for example, idioms) in context, not separately. As a result, the paper aims to compile a list of recommendations for teaching English idioms to the students of technical and economic specialties organized based on the specifics of these two directions and providing students an opportunity not only to learn English idioms effectively but also apply them practically.

Specifics of Teaching English Idioms for the First Year Students of Technical Universities

Today, English performs the function of communication and education, being an instrument of collaboration and interaction in modern society. As a result, higher education in Uzbekistan should train the students capable of working in the real circumstances of the professional environment [16-21]. This is exposed to their language skills even if their future profession is not directly connected with linguistics, translation, or teaching foreign languages.

Several approaches are recommended to the solution of the problem of teaching English idioms for the first-year students of technical universities. One of the methods is the creation of the interdisciplinary curricula conception which is based on the profession-oriented model of socio-cultural formation of personality (Bobyreva, 2015). It means that communicative competence, intercultural competence, professional competence, professional communication, communication at a workplace, and professional language are highlighted as the components of this process.

The first challenge which faces any English teacher at a technical university is the fact that an academic group includes students with different levels of language skills. Groups may comprise beginners, intermediate, and even advanced learners. The formation of groups by the students' level of language skills is not always possible. This requires using the individual approach and graded language, especially in the beginning, that is during the first course. This period is very important as a teacher should do his or her best to level all participants of the group and to set clear and reachable aims to motivate first-year students (Mansouri, 2010).

The second challenge which faces any English teacher at technical university is the fact that teaching English vocabulary (including idioms) to technical students presupposes teaching not only English for general purposes, but also English for specific purposes (ESP). Learning professional terminology is one of the central and basic aims of teaching English for technical students at all. Technology belongs to hard sciences, and comparing to liberal arts, such as economy, policy, etc., it does not require too much communication, but it requires highly specific knowledge of terminology from both students and English teachers. Technical students are to learn not only specialized terms of a definite branch of science, serving the needs of such highly developed fields as power engineering, building construction, aviation, etc. They have to master the system of idiomatic expressions in the corresponding sphere and be able to properly use them in the process of communication with colleagues. For example, the following idioms are often used in the technical discussions in English: "all-singing, all-dancing" (if something is all-singing, all-dancing, it is the latest version with the most up-to-date features), "bells and whistles" (bells and whistles are attractive features that things like computer programs have, though often a bit unnecessary), "garbage in, garbage out" (if a computer system or database is built badly, then the results will be bad), "well-oiled machine" (something that functions very well is a well-oiled machine) (Stognieva & Connolly, 2020). Correct understanding and translation of idioms depend not only on good knowledge of the language but also on being aware of the culture of the country of the studied language.

The traditional methodology suggests using the translation of professional texts as a way to make technical students learn vocabulary. English teachers can incorporate idioms into the text and after translation, he or she may compile different activities with the target idioms (Shojaei, 2012).

As for non-traditional methodology, it offers English teachers to use actively such methods as modeling and discussion These methods are considered to be the most effective tools for teaching English idioms for the students of technical universities as applied simultaneously in the procedure of a lesson these methods push technical students to analyze professional information, discuss it in English using specific idioms, and make creative decisions. This mix of specialty with English idioms allows teachers of English to reach three aims – to motivate students letting them work over their professional issues, to create a natural atmosphere in which students feel comfortable and free, and to force students practically use the idioms introduced by the teacher directly in the process of their professionally-oriented talks (writings). Nevertheless, it is a very complicated and difficult process, especially applied to first-year students.

Specifics of Teaching English Idioms for the First Year Students of Economic Universities

Teaching English idioms for the first-year students of economic universities is less problematic compared to those of technical universities. It can be explained by the number of facts: 1) economic students are highly motivated to learn English in general, as it is closely connected to their profession; 2) specific idioms and idiomatic expressions used in the sphere of the economy are much easier to understand as most of them turned to be international and are widely used; 3) there are special books and teaching manuals of high quality concerning Business English.

Nevertheless, there are still some issues to be regarded. One of the problematic points is a large number of idioms and idiomatic expressions on the topics related to the economy (Malyuga & Orlova, 2016). Being one of those spheres that require a great volume of communication on all levels, economics covers most possible ways of communication – trade, contracts, business meetings, transportation, official letters and resumes, professional business slang, or idioms of sale, advertising, and marketing. For example, the idiom "to corner the market" means to control enough quantity of a product or service that enables one to then change the market price willingly. It can also mean to be the only one making or providing a given product or service. Or, another idiom, "to cut corners" means to do things most quickly and cheaply to save time and money but often compromising quality and bending the rules. The idiom can be used in the sentence like that: "The company's decision to cut corners ended up costing them dearly when they got caught red-handed and had to pay a huge fine for committing fraud" (Baranovskaya et al., 2019). So, from the point of view of teaching methodology, it demands some special activities on the development of memory and on memorizing such a great number of idioms connected to the sphere of economy.

Another challenging aspect when teaching English idioms to the first-year students of economic universities is that it requires a teacher's awareness of the subject matter. As a matter of fact, ESP always combines the subject matter and English language teaching skills. The role of a teacher at this initial stage (first course) is managing to adapt teaching strategies to students' needs. Such integration is very motivating for students because they will have the opportunity to put into practice their knowledge acquired during their English lessons in their major sphere of study, whether it is economics, commerce, business management, or marketing. While studying idioms, students have a particular purpose and focus for learning the idiomatic expressions as a part of a real-life language that they can use not only to understand everyday speech but to comprehend a special context for career opportunities.

General Recommendations

An effective procedure of teaching English idioms for the students of technical universities, especially during the first-year course, should be based on sound theoretical and practical considerations. The procedure should combine two complementary parts: the general-communication part and the academic communication part. The first one is to focus on the functional aspects of English idioms for general communication inside and outside the classroom. It provides the students with the necessary abilities to do things with language at the functional level: to interact socially, to explain, to argue, to discuss, to give directions, to invite, to express opinions on general topics, and so on [22-25]. The second part is to focus on providing students with specific professional idioms to enable them to comprehend authentic scientific texts in their relevant field of study, to summarize, to write scientific reports, to make notes from lectures, to discuss scientific concepts and to argue academically in their relevant field of specialization.

To teach English idioms effectively for the first-year students of economic universities the lesson should be designed with a special focus on business English vocabulary as the distinguishing component between General English and English of economists. Activities can be compiled to offer economic students idioms in a context of a written text or dialogue which dealt with a specific topic (for example, banking). Exercises may traditionally comprise comprehension questions about the text and idioms drills. But such activities do not take into consideration the students' background, their previous knowledge, nor do they take into account how the learner might use these new idioms and idiomatic expressions in real-life situations. That is why we recommend putting a greater emphasis on the use of the new idioms in speaking, writing, listening, and reading within a business context. When students earn idioms and know how to use them in a professional context, their language functionality enlarges – they will get to know how to use language to recommend, advertise, or give advice (about some goods, services), clearly express opinions, or showing agreement and disagreement (during negotiations, discussions, meetings, councils), persuade, etc. Idioms perfectly suit the language of presentations, improving negotiating, or meeting skills.

Teaching idioms for the first-year students of technical and economic universities may become an amazing and useful process if some general rules specific for these specialties will be followed:

1) When introducing new idioms, teachers should keep limits, and not overwhelm students by throwing lists of phrases at them. Even if these idioms seem to be easy to understand and common, because students of non-linguistic universities are not going to remember a few dozen idiomatic expressions from one lesson. Instead, introduce a few idioms at a time. It can also help to keep them all related to a certain theme. For example, focus one lesson on a few animal-related idioms that can be used during the interview ("work like a dog", "dog days", "the cat is out of the bag" etc.)

2) An effective method to teach English idioms is to use thematic derivations. For example, a teacher can use all sport-related idioms that can be used to discuss the contest between two companies. The use of thematic derivations makes it easier for students to grasp the meanings of the phrases, and see how similar words can mean very different things.

3) Introducing idioms through conversation is a very fruitful method. It can easily combine the process of learning English idioms with discussion on special themes giving students an idea of how the newly introduced idioms can be used in their professional activity. It's also a good exercise for inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom based on context.

Conclusion

Designing an effective English lesson focusing on idioms for the first-year students of technical and economic universities is not an easy task. By all means, it is a multi-dimensional process. A teacher should take into account the students' communicative and academic needs, their background knowledge, and practical implementation of the lesson materials, collaboration with the content-subject teachers. The teachers of English are experienced in English but they may lack knowledge and information about the scientific content of technology and economy. It is the reason why collaborative learning and communicative approach are most suited to teach idioms for such students. Moreover, the motivation of the students can be stimulated due to the focus on communication and by relating the English idioms to special subjects such as physics, mathematics, or the theory of economy. Communicative tests play a vital role in determining the success of teaching English idioms. Naturally, the procedure of teaching English idioms for the students of the technology and economy drastically differs from that of philology, since these directions differ in terms of objectives, content, and expectations. The practical use of English idioms prevails over the theoretical knowledge about them in the spheres chosen for this research.

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