

## *Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Using Roleplay Activities on enhancing their Mastery of English Idiomatic Expressions*

**MESSEREHI Mahbouba**  
**University of Khenchela-Algeria**

### **Abstract:**

*The aim of this research paper is to discuss the importance of mastering idiomatic expressions as an essential aspect of learners' communicative competence in English as foreign language classes (EFL). It is also intended to investigate the effectiveness of using roleplay activities as a technique that can be employed by EFL teachers to enhance student's mastery of idioms. This research is based on analyzing the performance of 42 students in roleplay activities in which they were asked to write a scenario for the idioms they had been instructed, participants were asked then to play roles to perform their written scenarios. Drawing on a questionnaire, the results showed that the participants recognized several benefits of roleplay activities on enhancing their understanding and use of English idiomatic expressions for real-life communication.*

### **المخلص :**

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى مناقشة أهمية إتقان العبارات الاصطلاحية باعتبارها جانبا أساسيا من جوانب الكفاءة التواصلية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية. كما يهدف أيضا إلى إبراز فعالية أنشطة لعب الأدوار كأسلوب يمكن استخدامه من قبل المعلمين لتعزيز إتقان الطالب للتعبير الاصطلاحية . ويستند هذا البحث إلى تحليل أداء 42 طالبا في أنشطة لعب الأدوار و ذلك بعد كتابة سيناريو باستخدام التعبيرات التي تلقوها أثناء الدرس ثم طلب من المشاركين لعب الأدوار لتنفيذ السيناريوهات المكتوبة. وأظهرت نتائج الاستبيان أن المشاركين أقرروا العديد من فوائد أنشطة لعب الأدوار على تعزيز فهمهم واستخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية للتواصل الحقيقي.

### **Introduction :**

*Learners' ability to understand and to use idiomatic expressions while communicating in English is an essential aspect of their communicative competence. The reason behind the need for enhancing learners' mastery of idiomatic expressions is the fact that they are very commonly used by native*

speakers in their natural speech in both written and spoken language. According to Gaines (1986), "Idiomatic expressions give English its colour and vitality. They are indispensable to the daily speech of the people and to the language of newspapers and books, television and movies". P.7. Gillett (2004) maintains that since idioms are present everywhere, they constitute one of the keys to understand and speak like a native speaker.

Accordingly, addressing idioms as an integral part of EFL instruction is a worthwhile activity.

Regarding the fact that English is a highly idiomatic language, research in language teaching came at the conclusion that the achievement of native-like ability to comprehend, produce, and select target language idiomatic phrases appropriate to the context and the message to be communicated can help EFL learners become more proficient and fluent language users (Carter, 2002; Bogaards, Laufer, & Benjamins, 2004; Ramisch, 2015). In other words, idiomatic competence is widely thought to assist non-native language learners in attaining a high level of communicative competence which is considered as the major goal of foreign language teaching. In particular, as specified by Bachman and Palmer (2010), learning idioms contributes to the knowledge of the target-language culture and the members of its speech community; expressions like "we shall overcome" or "yes, we can" carry meaning given by the culture of particular events, places and institutions. They go further to claim that knowledge of natural or idiomatic expressions enable language users to distinguish between language use that sounds native-like and that which sounds like it has been translated from another language.

In view of the above, as listed in the common European framework of reference (CEFR), one of the indicators for the good mastery of the four skills of the language is "the learners' ability to understand a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms" (Council of Europe, 2012, p. 66).

However, EFL students at Khenchela University are still hesitant to use idioms in their speech and find a big difficulty to understand native speakers' daily conversations. Idiom teaching might have not received adequate attention in foreign language teaching contexts yet; few teachers are aware of the roles of idioms in communicative competence. This may be due to some difficulties arising when dealing with idioms in EFL classes such as: how to choose the suitable teaching method, selecting idioms, and explaining the use of an idiom in its appropriate contexts which might lead many teachers to avoid idioms in their language and teaching. Therefore, this study focuses on the teaching of idiomatic expressions to Algerian EFL learners at Khenchela University; the focus is particularly made on Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Using Dialogue writing and Roleplay Activities on enhancing their Mastery of English Idiomatic Expressions.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definition and Classification of Idioms**

By reviewing the literature, it is quite clear that many attempts have been made to define and classify idioms, which suggests that researchers have not settled for a single explanation. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, idioms fall in one category of language aspect called multi-word-expressions; according to Spears (2005), many overlapping terms are used to describe idiomatic phrases such as : verbal collocations, idioms, idiomatic expressions, clichés, proverbs, set phrases, fixed phrases, phrasal verbs, common phrases, prepositional verbs, and phrasal/prepositional verbs. However, most researchers agree on one common definition maintaining that idioms are phrases or groups of words that have a figurative meaning i.e., their meanings cannot be understood literally even if you know the definitions of the separate words involved (Gaines, 1986; Thornbury, 2002; Carter, 2002). For instance, the expression to let the cat out of the bag (= to reveal a secret) cannot be decoded if only the meanings of let, cat, bag and out are known as separate items; similarly, the expression piece of cake (=very easy) cannot be understood if only the meanings of piece and cake are known separately. In his attempt to provide a settled definition of what an idiom is, Carter (2002) cites three main features distinct to idioms; he mentions that idioms might be tentatively defined as (1) non-substitutable or fixed collocations, (2) usually more than single word units, (3) semantically opaque. But the different degrees of possible fixity or 'frozenness', both syntactic and semantic, should be noted. Gaines (1986) illustrates the different types of idiomatic expressions by classifying them according to their structure as follows:

*n.:* noun idiom. These may be simple nouns (*pad, Flop*), modified nouns (*eager beaver, backseat driver*), or noun phrases (*apple of my eye, short end of the stick*).

*v.:* verb idiom. There are one-word verb (*splurge, freeload*) two-word verbs (*rip off, count on*), and verb phrases (*throw in the towel, face the music*).

*Adj.:* adjective idiom: *cool, swamped, gun-ho, half-baked*.

*adv.:* adverb idiom: *on easy street, in a nutshell. Once in a blue moon*

A few idioms are complete sentences in themselves: *the coast is clear. Mum's the word. Let bygones be bygones.*

### **Teaching Idioms in Foreign Language Classes**

Considering the fact that competent idiomatic language use is an indicator of language mastery, as CERF descriptors suggest, it is essential for learners to be exposed to this language component in the course of their development. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting such as Algeria, where English is taught as a foreign language with limited exposure to English outside the classroom, instruction is essential. However, it is worth noting that idioms are one of the major

difficulties for EFL learners to master. According to Carter (2002), idioms present particular difficulties because they are restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up. Thornsbury (2002) Shares this opinion by stressing the fact that idioms are a source of difficulty for learners in both receptive and productive aspects; he states,

Idioms present problems in both understanding and in production. They are difficult to understand because they are not easily unpacked, and they are difficult to produce because they often allow no variation. Few errors sound more comical than even slightly muddled idioms (e.g. I don't want to blow my own horn instead of I don't want to blow my own trumpet). Moreover, many idioms have a very narrow register range, being used only in certain contexts and for certain effects. P.127

In the light of the aforementioned opinions, it is quite clear that addressing idioms in EFL classes might be a challenging task for both teachers as well as learner, therefore they need to be approached with a great deal of caution. Many activities and tasks have been suggested to use while teaching idioms in the classroom, this might include: matching idioms with their meaning, completing the missing words in an idiomatic expression, compare idioms in the target language with idioms in the mother tongue, memorising list of idioms around certain basic key words. However, regarding the difficulty of grasping idiomatic expressions for EFL learners, most of these activities might be a source of confusion for them; Thornsbury (2002) mentions that,

Traditional teaching approaches tend to group idioms together according to some category, and present them in sets. Teaching a set of idioms that are notionally related-such as idioms associated with the parts of the body (down at heel, put your feet up, toe the bill, toe the line, etc.)- would seem to be sure recipe for confusion. It is not difficult to imagine what would go wrong: put your heels up, toe the bill, etc. More typically, idioms are grouped by theme. For example, the expressions under the weather, off colour, run down, and out of sorts are all synonymous with ill. But again, if these being taught for production, the potential for confusion is high. P127.

As a matter of fact, it is critical for teachers to consider how to best teach idiomatic expressions, researchers agree on the fact that one of the best ways to address idioms in the classroom is teach them in context i.e., through dialogues since idioms are best learned in meaningful contexts as confirmed by Thornsbury (2002) in the following statement, "More effective and less perilous approach might be simply to teach them as they arise, and in their context of use" p127.

### **Teaching English Idioms Using Dialogue Writing and Roleplay Activities**

Role-play activities provide learners with opportunities to communicate freely and spontaneously in different situations. According Maxwell (1997), language learners can gain a deeper awareness of the target culture by means of experiences

*in which they role play authentic situations. In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels. Nunan (2003) stressed that role-plays are also excellent activities for learners' speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom before they must do so in a real environment. Dialogues, then, offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world. Therefore, based on the aforementioned arguments stressing the importance of context in teaching/ learning idioms, the current study draws on dialogue writing and roleplay activities as a technique to enhance learners' mastery of idiomatic expression in EFL contexts.*

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

*In the light of the above literature review, the present study attempts to provide empirical evidence on the effect of using dialogue writing and roleplay activities on enhancing EFL learners' mastery of English idiomatic expression. The researcher intends to investigate the effectiveness of this technique from the students' points of view. The study aims to answer the following research questions:*

- 1. What are the students' perceptions of their idiom knowledge and attitudes towards learning idioms?*
- 2. How do students perceive the use of role-play tasks in the classroom in learning English idioms?*
- 3. To what extent do students believe that role-plays facilitate comprehension and use of idioms in their speech while interacting outside the classroom?*

### **Participants**

*The study was carried out during the academic year 2013/2014 with group of 42 learners of English at Khenchela University-Algeria, who were selected randomly to take part in the study. The students were in their second year of graduation and the group was composed of 36 female students and 6 males with an average age of 20 years old. The group had not been exposed to any specific previous instructionalempphasis on teaching idioms in an organized way before the study.*

### **Method and Procedure**

*The experiment took place during six week period in a session that lasts for three hours, and the lesson plan for each session was organised as follows:*

- 1. Exposure. Students listen to a dialogue performed by native speakers that contain a set of idiomatic expressions, and try to get a general idea about the topic, the speakers, and the place of the conversation.*

2. *Teacher checks the students' understanding of the situation and the vocabulary*

3. *Students listen again to the dialogue and try to depict the idiomatic expressions*

4. *After finding out all the idiomatic expressions in the dialogue, students discuss their meanings with the teacher.*

5. *Teacher provides the meaning for each idiomatic expression*

6. *Roleplay. Students are then assigned to work in pairs to write one dialogue by using the English idioms introduced in class and then play roles to act out the dialogue.*

*At the end of experiment period, students were required to answer a questionnaire to give their own perception of this learning experience.*

### ***Results and Discussion***

*In order to find out the answers to the research questions regarding students' perceptions of the effect of the use of dialogue writing and roleplay activities on enhancing their mastery of English idiomatic expression, a questionnaire (see appendix 1) was administered to the participants at the end of instruction period. The questionnaire was made up of fourteen items divided into two main sections: section one seeks to illicit information concerning students' attitudes towards learning English idioms, and section two aims at gathering data about the learners' views of the effectiveness of this particular teaching technique used during the experimental period. The results of the questionnaire were then analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively as follows:*

#### ***Sections one: Students' attitudes towards learning English idiomatic expression***

*As far as learners' attitudes towards idiom instruction is concerned, the majority of students (90.47%) strongly agree that learning idioms is an important part of their English language learning experience and that it is necessary for achieving effective communication.*

*According to the students' responses, the statements that received the highest percentage of agreement in terms of the importance of learning idioms are as follows:*

*(1) Learning English idioms is important for me to get familiar with the English native speakers' everyday language (97.61%),*

*(2) Knowing English idioms is important for me to perceive the cultural differences and similarities better (92.85%).*

*(3) Knowing English idioms is important for me to understand the target culture better (90.47%),*

(4) *Learning English idioms is essential for me to develop and enrich my four skills in English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (42.85% strongly agree and 47.61% agree),*

(5) *We cannot ignore this part of the language: idiomatic expressions and formal grammar should be given equal importance (33.33% strongly agree and 40.61% agree).*

*It is clearly apparent from the students' responses that the majority of students have positive attitudes towards learning idioms. Students are in favour of having idioms as an essential part of their curriculum. It is also clear that students believe that learning idioms is mainly helpful to understand native speakers' colloquial speech. Furthermore, students' responses confirmed their awareness about the direct link between understanding culture better and their knowledge of English idioms in addition to the development of their language proficiency as a whole. However, students do not quite agree that idioms must be attributed the same importance as grammar in their curriculum since they left this items the last in the rating scale which received the lowest percentage of agreement. This can be explained by the fact that grammar has always given priority in English language teaching curricula, and thus this statement might seem unreasonable for them.*

### ***Section two: Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of roleplay activities in learning English idiomatic Expressions***

*As far as students' perception of the effectiveness of dialogue writing and role-plays on enhancing their mastery of English idioms is concerned, the participants demonstrated a general approval of the activity. All the participants considered the activity to be helpful. According to the students' responses, the statements that received the highest agreement to explain how role-plays actually helped them to enhance their mastery of idiomatic expressions are provided as follows:*

*Improving oral proficiency: 95.23% of students strongly agree that Dialogue writing and roleplay activities helped them to use English idioms in different contexts of real life communication. This indicates that improving and developing speaking skills is perceived as the most beneficial feature of role-plays.*

*Getting used to native speakers' conversations: 92.85% of students strongly agree that learning idioms through Dialogue writing and roleplay activities helped them to get familiar with the native speakers' use of idioms in their daily language.*

*Enhancing students' productive skills: 90.47% of students strongly agree that dialogue writing and roleplay activities encouraged them to use more idioms in their speech outside the classroom. Accordingly, another positive aspect of learning idioms using dialogues and role-plays is to get students work on their writing as well as speaking skills.*

*Remembering idioms better: 88.09% of students see that Role-play activities are helpful to remember the idioms they used in their dialogues through repetitive practices. Besides, Dialogue writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities to practice the use of idioms in meaningful contexts.*

*Learning from classmates: 83.33% of students agreed that roleplay activities made it easier and more fun for them to remember English idioms because they shared and enjoyed learning English idioms with friends which means that Learning from classmates' performances is one more benefit students have gain from role-plays.*

### **Conclusion and implications**

*The findings of the present study suggest the positive effect of dialogue writing and roleplay activities on learning/teaching English language idiomatic expressions. The findings of the study report the students' positive attitudes towards learning English idioms using this particular technique. Students' responses to the items of the questionnaire confirmed the efficiency of using dialogue writing and roleplays on developing both their productive as well as receptive skills in the sense that they facilitated understanding and remembering better the idioms dealt with in the lessons. Among the benefits that can also be highlighted are: Getting used to native speakers' conversations, Learning from classmates and using more idioms while speaking outside the classroom. Accordingly, the study supports the argument that the learning of idiomatic expressions can be enhanced through systematic formal instruction within the context of meaningful-authentic language use. The findings of the present study, though not generalizable due to the limited number of the participants, indicate the importance of involving students in productive learning. The results proved that dialogues and role-play are useful written and oral activities that involve students in an active way of learning. This is an advantage that both teachers and materials writers need to consider while dealing with teaching idioms in EFL classes.*

### **References:**

1. Bachman, L. (2010). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Bachman, L., & Palmer, A. (2010). *Language Assessment in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Bogaards, P., Laufer, B, & Benjamins, J.(eds.). (2004). *Vocabulary in a Second Language: Selection, acquisition, and testing*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Publishing Company
4. Carter, R. (2002). *Vocabulary Applied Linguistic Perspectives 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed*. London: Routledge

7. Council of Europe. (2012). *The common European framework in its political and educational context* Retrieved from
8. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_en.pdf)
9. Gaines, B., K. (1986). *Idiomatic American English*. Kodansha International Ltd.
10. Gillet , A. (2004). *Speak English Like an American . USA: Language Success Press*
11. Lazar, G. (1996). *Using figurative language to expand students' vocabulary*.*ELT Journal*, 50(1), 43-51.
12. Maxwell, C. (1997). *Role Play and Foreign Language Learning*. Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the Japan Association of Language Teachers, Muramatsu, Japan
13. Molinsky, S., J., & Bliss, B. (2003). *Handbook of Vocabulary Teaching Strategies: communication activities with the word by word dictionary*. New Jersey: Paramount
14. Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. New York: McGraw Hill.
15. Ramisch, C. (2015). *Multiword Expressions Acquisition*. Switzerland Springer International Publishing
16. Richards, J. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge: CUP.
17. Spears, R., A. (2005). *The McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc
18. Thornsbury, S. (2002). *How to Teach Vocabulary*. Longman: Pearson Education Limited