Learners' Beliefs about the Notion of Idiom

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Abstract

This manuscript aims to build up a conceptual framework in relation to the most prominent features of idioms. Core concepts will be discussed and compared with the beliefs that university students have concerning a definition of idiom. These students' beliefs were collected through a questionnaire used in a preliminary study on idiom learning. The results show that the non-compositionality of idioms, figurativeness and colloquialism are characteristics that students expect to find in idioms.

Keywords: Idiom definition, Idiom variables, Learner beliefs

The present article attempts to describe the information obtained in a preliminary exploration of the context where the main study took place. This exploratory study was aimed at getting detailed information about the institution, teachers, students and materials in relation to the teaching and learning of vocabulary and specifically the teaching and learning of idioms. This report, however, addresses only the aspects referred to the learning of vocabulary and idioms by the students, their concepts of idiom and the extent to which they consider learning idioms important. Further we compare the students' responses with those provided by students in other studies and summarize the features of idioms found in those responses.

1. Background to the Study

Vocabulary is made up of single vocabulary items and multiword lexical units that convey unitary meanings. Within the domain of multiword lexical units, the border line between idioms and other fixed phrases seems not to be clearly defined. There seems to be no agreement about the precise definition of idiom. Some authors have preferred to use general terms that do not require a discussion of the nature of idioms. This has allowed them to use a broader concept of fixed phrases. In this respect McCarthy (1998:130) points out that 'a definition of idiom that has blurred boundaries has advantages as well as disadvantages: it usefully enables us to incorporate within the term a wide range of lexical expressions over and above the clause-idioms…'

The study of idioms can be approached from different angles, e.g. a) lexico-grammatical approach (Fraser 1970, Makkai 1972, Cowie 1988, Cowie et al. 1983), b) syntactic approach (Yorio 1980, Cowie et al.1981, Moon 1998), c) functional approach (Alexander 1984, McCarthy 1998, Moon 1998) and d) lexicographical approach (Moon 1998). Very often the approach taken influences the kind of definitions provided by researchers and scholars. Series of different terms for various types of multiword unit have been found in the empirical and theoretical literature. Charteris-Black (2002) for example, uses the term figurative phrases and figurative idioms. Moon (1998) refers to multi-word units and fixed expressions. Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) refer to lexical phrases. Bahns (1993) speaks about lexical collocations, Bogaards (2001) compares multi-word items (idioms) with lexical units (words). An even broader term is employed by Lennon (1998) 'idiomatic language'. Alexander (1984) uses the term fixed expressions and Mel'cuk (1998) calls them set phrases or phrasemes. At this point, it would be interesting to know what types of phrases are included within the scope of the terms used by the authors mentioned before. Table 1 gives a summary of categories that have been previously considered.

Table 1. Terms used to classify fixed phrases

Makkai (1972:135)	Alexander (1984:128)	Fernando, Ch. (1996) p. 3	McCarthy, M. (1998) p. 130	Moon, R. (1998) pp 2-5
Lexemic idioms Phrasal verbs *Make up*	Phrasal verb idioms	√ (collocation)	√	√
Tournures *Kick the bucket*	Tournure idioms	√	√	√
Irreversible binomials *Pepper and salt*	Irreversible binomials			
Phrasal compounds *red tape*	Phrasal compound idioms	√	√ (opaque nominal compounds)	√ **(compound nouns)**
Incorporating verbs *manhandle* Pseudo-idioms *Kith and kin*	X	X	X	**X**
X	Metaphorical/allusive idioms *a dog's breakfast*	√	√ (cultural allusions, possessive phrases)	**X**
Sememic idioms Proverbs *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched*	Proverbial idioms and proverbs *It never rains but it pours*	√	√	√
X	Idiomatic similes *as different as chalk from cheese*	√	Frozen similes	√
Familiar quotations *Brevity is the soul of wit*	Catchphrases, clichés and slogans.	√	√ (cultural allusions)	√ **(sayings)**
Idioms of institutionalized politeness, greeting, understatement, *I wasn't too crazy about* Hyperbole, *he won't even lift a finger)*	X	Idiomatic speech routines *By the way*	√ (social formulae, gambits and discourse markers)	√ **(routine formulae)**

One of the earliest categorizations was provided by Makkai (1972) who distinguished lexemic idioms from sememic idioms, the former were more linguistically fixed and the latter were defined more by being frequent. Other authors like Alexander (1984), Fernando (1996), McCarthy (1998), and Moon (1998) have taken Makkai's categorization as a starting point to structure their own categorization of fixed phrases or multiword units in the broad sense of idiom. Alexander (1984) and McCarthy (1998) seem to be the ones who have contributed the most in order to identify phrases that were not mentioned in Makkai's list, e.g. Metaphorical/allusive idioms and idiomatic similes.

It is not one of our aims to discuss fine details of what is considered an idiom and what is not. It is important however to provide a description of the more or less agreed core features of idioms to be able to describe the features that stand out for learners.

1.1 The Non-compositionality of Idioms (Semantic Opacity)

Idioms have always been defined taking their non-compositionality as a principle: 'an expression consisting of more than one word, whose composite meaning is not deducible from the normal meanings of its constituent parts' Cornell (1999). 'An idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements' Cooper (1999) p. 233. The non-literality or non-compositionality of idioms is also called semantic opacity. It consists of the impossibility for the 'listener' or 'reader' to understand the meaning of the idiom from its constituent parts. In order to understand this definition we can appeal to one of the most cited and well known idioms *kick the bucket*. We know that *kick* is a verb that implies a movement of the foot to strike something, we also know that *bucket* is a container but, by putting both content words together we would not be able to conclude that the phrase means 'die'.

Moon (1997) defines non-literality (non-compositionality) as "The degree to which a multiple-word item cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialised unitary meaning" (p. 44) There are three basic types of phrases according to the degree of compositionality (Glucksberg 1993): a) *transparent*, or compositionally simple. These are expressions that can be directly interpreted, e.g. *on the fringes*. The second type is b) semi-transparent, idioms whose meaning can be partially inferred and which can have a conceptual metaphorical sense, e.g. *to be all ears*. The last non-compositional type is c) opaque, a non-literal phrase, uninterpretable without previous knowledge where the word-by-word analysis that Moon refers to would yield a semantic anomalous phrase, this means a meaning without sense within a determined context. Opaque phrases are also called true or pure idioms. They are a) overtly opaque, or quasi metaphorical (Cacciari & Glucksberg 1993), metonymies that convey meaning via their allusional content e.g. *cannot hold a candle to someone* and b) covertly opaque (where the apparent meaning is not the real one) e.g. *knock on wood*, Nunberg et al. (1994) these are also named in the specialized literature 'phrasal idioms'. Pure idioms were usually originated by a special event in history and in order to understand their meaning it would be necessary to have the antecedent information. *Kick the bucket,* for example, has as usual explanation that *bucket* here is an old word for a beam from which a pig was hung when its throat was cut, it kicked the bucket as it died (Scholfield 1996 personal communication). This antecedent information could vary from country to country and from region to region.

1.2 A Contrastive Definition of Idiom

Learning English as a foreign language requires the consideration of the non-compositionality of idioms seen from the L1 perspective of the learners. Hence idioms can be considered as 'combinations not literally translatable' (Scholfield 2005 personal communication). If idioms (especially opaque idioms) are not the sum of their parts concerning meaning, their equivalent phrases in the source language will surely have different semantic and syntactic structures. There are however figurative idioms that can be judged by native speakers as considerably opaque and which are directly translatable in L2 if the metaphor existed in both languages e.g. *take the bull by the horns.* This idiom has both a literal and (idiomatic) figurative meaning: the figurative meaning is identical in form and meaning to *agarrar al toro por los cuernos* in Spanish. Transfer and contrastive analysis are areas of great interest because of the closeness or distance between the two languages, English and Spanish can help to determine the level of success if a lexical item or lexical phrase is transferred from one language to the other. Lado (1957) in Irujo 1986, claim in this respect that the contrastive analysis hypothesis could predict possible learning difficulties by comparing the target and the source languages.

1.3 Linguistic Fixedness and Institutionalization

Linguistic fixedness stands for the conventional combination of words whose grammatical or lexical components are wholly or partially fixed c) "Complex *bits of frozen syntax* whose meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of their constituents, that is, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts" Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) p. 33. Grand & Bauer (2004) define fixedness (or frozenness) as 'a reference to the ways in which idioms allow neither permutation nor paradigmatic replacement nor addition or deletion of elements'. (p.44) According to Glucksberg (1993) idioms vary in the extent to which they can undergo syntactic operations (or lexical substitutions and semantic productivity). They possess a relative fixedness that makes them conventional to the speakers of a determined language. The following example illustrates the lexical fixedness of idioms: *red herring,* is an opaque idiom, it refers to something unimportant that distracts from the main subject. Hence, to convey this meaning no other paradigmatic combinations are accepted, e.g. *a red haddock,* despite the fact that is a type of fish, *haddock* does not collocate with *red* in order to convey 'distraction'.

Some idioms accept lexical substitutions, *break the ice* for example, has variants such as: *crack the ice, break the frost, break the chill* (Glucksberg 1993). Thus the productivity of idioms is limited, however idioms like *two left feet*

(meaning 'clumsiness'), admit changing the quantifier and instead of two we can say: *three left feet* which implies more than usual clumsiness.

The degree of institutionalization of an idiom is related to its lexical fixedness. Institutionalization is the degree of conventionalization of the phrase. This means the extent to which the idiom is identified by the speakers of the language as a unit. The conventionalization of idioms implies common knowledge of their lexico-grammatical structure, specifically the syntactic behaviour of the phrases that make idioms be fixed phrases. Very often the fixedness of the idiom has been measured by the number of possible syntactic manipulations (passivization, pronominalization, fronting, clefting, insertion of material etc.) Fontenelle (1998) p. 191. In order to determine the degree of syntactic fixedness, it is also essential to know if there is inflection in one or more of the elements of the phrase in its non literal meaning, also if the inflections are regular or not. Moon (1998) provides the following examples to illustrate the above: *on the other hand, on the one hand, *on another hand, *on a different hand, *on other hands.* These phrases are considered conventional not only because the meaning conveyed through the concatenation of words is linguistically accepted in the non-literal meaning but also because the phrase is highly fixed.

Syntactically, institutionalized phrases could be regular: well formed, flexible and with transformational operations, e.g. *to break someone's heart*: *she broke my heart / he could break your heart / my heart is broken* etc. They could also be irregular, phrases with irregular syntax e.g., *the more the merrier*, etc. There is also the type of regular phrases with certain syntactic limitations, that is to say phrases that are moderately fixed or moderately productive e.g. *they were given the sack / he gave me the sack / *he gave the sack to me, /*the sack was given to me* (Yorio 1980). These are phrases that are relatively fixed and their possible combinations are restricted, however, common usage breaks these established rules and 'produce' a new syntax for phrases e.g. t*o turn a blind eye to* was transformed into *blind eyes have been turned* by a periodical publication, McCarthy (1998) p.130.

1.4 Figurativeness (Metaphor & Metonymy)

Another key feature of idioms appears in this definition 'Idioms are **figurative expressions** whose metaphoric meaning has become conventionalized' Johnson (1996:231). Johnson considers the figurative content of idioms as a relevant aspect of their nature, that is to say the metaphoric (and metonymic) content of the idioms especially in semi-transparent idioms though it could be present historically in some opaque idioms as well.

Figurativeness is the resource through which the senses of words differ from their primary established ones which creates certain incongruity between original and novel contexts of use (Charteris-Black 2002). These 'new senses of words' are related to linguistic metaphors which are, according to Deignan et al. (1997) p.352 'the spoken or written realizations of a conceptual metaphor'. *Anger is heat* is considered a conceptual metaphor in the English language, a linguistic realization of which could be *I grew hot under the collar*. Figurativeness is present in imageable idioms (semi-transparent) which contain metaphors like: *take the bull by the horns*, metonymies: *lend a hand* and hyperboles: *not worth the paper is written on*.

Grant & Bauer (2004) p. 46 claim that when dealing with figurative language, (as native speakers and language learners) our comprehension is focused on the 'untruth' element together with our linguistic and pragmatic competence. It is actually our linguistic competence which indicates that what we read or hear is 'untruth' but our pragmatic competence helps in interpreting the meaning, Grant & Bauer (2004) p. 50 conclude that 'understanding figurative language involves taking a compositional untruth and extracting probable truth from it by an act of pragmatic reinterpretation'. Similarly, Lazar (1996) p.46 suggests that the following process is undertaken by language learners in the interpretation of figurative meanings: 'a) comprehend that two things which do not normally collocate together are being compared or brought together; b) deduce which features of the one are salient in the comparison; c) reinterpret how the meaning of the other is altered when these salient features are applied to it'. Hence, the learners need to discover the relationships with the use of inferencing.

1.5 Colloquialism

There is one last thing to consider concerning the definition of idiom and its characteristics. This last feature can be observed in the following definition of idiom: "Idioms are common expressions used in **colloquial speech** with accepted figurative meanings that differ from their present-day literal meanings." Schweigert & Moates (1988) p.281. The colloquial aspect of idioms is given prominence here as an important attribute. Colloquialism in idioms is usually related to the spoken language, popular speech or oral culture. However, when verifying their frequency we realize that many of them are present in written form in the printed media available in the BNC. Their level of formality could be verified as well in authoritative dictionaries and not all of them belong to a colloquial register or to a high degree of informality. It is important to consider that certain idioms have a formal and even have a literary aspect: *render unto*

Caesar. Affect is another feature present in colloquialism. Idioms also often convey a special content of affectivity in relation to their denotations, e.g. *the black sheep of the family,* is rather colloquial and connotes an affective overtone, or *pissing in the wind* which is colloquial and carries an affective (negative) meaning. Again, the colloquial aspect of idioms will not be one of the variables of our study. The target idioms are thought of as unknown to students, hence specifications of their use will be for the moment irrelevant to them. Cooper (1999) though, had this aspect as a variable in his study on the comprehension of idioms. His results showed this variable was not related to the comprehension of idioms.

2. Research Questions

The study of idioms focused on learning aspects requires the exploration of the beliefs that learners have concerning their nature and difficulty. Hence, this exploratory study will address the following research questions:

a) What is the concept of idioms that students have?

b) What idiom-type features are found in their responses?

c) How do these concepts differ from the responses of students in other studies?

d) What are the students' beliefs concerning the importance and difficulty of learning idioms?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Subjects

This preliminary study was carried out with 15 learners in the 9th semester of their undergraduate programme in Applied Linguistics at the University of Tlaxcala, Mexico. Some of them might have certain teaching experience since they have finished their practicum course, which implies teaching in any school and being supervised and observed by the teacher of the course and peers. They are mostly women around 21-23 years old. They have studied English in this programme for four years, taking eight hours of English a week.

3.2 Instruments

The questionnaire on the learning of vocabulary and idioms aims at eliciting the learners' beliefs and current practices concerning the learning of vocabulary and idioms. The questionnaire consists of nineteen questions divided into three sections whose items are the following:

Section I.- consists of two questions that elicit information about the students' general background concerning their learning of English in other stages of schooling (1) and their beliefs of their own language competence (2).

Section II.-consists of six questions that aim at knowing the students' opinions in relation to their competence, training, and current use of strategies to learn vocabulary. Item 3 focuses on the students' assessment of all aspects of language, obviously including vocabulary. Items 4, 5, and 6 are devoted to know about the training they have received and actual use of dictionaries as well as their availability. Items 8 and 9 focus on the strategies used by the students in order to learn vocabulary and the type of training they have received from teachers.

Section III.- All the items in this section aim at knowing the students' conceptual framework of idiomaticity including examples (10, 11) they elicit as well possible strategies to identify and to learn idioms (12, 13). This section also contains the beliefs the students have concerning the importance of learning idioms (13) and difficulty (14).

This instrument was administrated in Spanish to help the students feel more at ease and more confident to provide answers.

4. Results and discussion

The summarized results on the answers provided by the students are reported in this section. One must consider that the aspects related to idiom issues will be paid more attention to.

The students' answers in section I indicate that most of them have an upper-intermediate level after studying English for approximately 8 years. It has to be taken into consideration that in secondary school and high school the English language courses are focused on the comprehension of technical readings and not on the four skills. The students have not been exposed to the language intensively in an immersion environment

60% of the learners claimed they had received some training in vocabulary strategies such as: 'trying to understand the meaning of words from context, making associations, relating words with synonyms and antonyms, writing word-webs about a unitary topic, writing lists of vocabulary, labelling objects, inferencing the meaning from context and co-text , paraphrasing, choosing words and defining them, using a list of related words in a letter or composition, using mnemonic techniques to remember words, using the dictionary'.

More specific information about the training in the use of the dictionary indicated that only 47% of the learners claimed to have received it, basically in order to: try to look for meanings according to the context (polysemous words), pay attention to the phonetic representation for pronunciation, look for the grammatical categories to get the right meaning, try to find the difference between homographs, explain the different sections (of the dictionary) and the kind of information we can get out of it. The availability of dictionaries and their frequency of use were explored as well, 70% of the learners had a bilingual dictionary and only 30% had a monolingual dictionary (then as a consequence a bilingual dictionary as well). In relation to their use, 53% of the learners claimed using the bilingual dictionary as their first option and 26% said the same with regards to the monolingual dictionary.

The beliefs of the learners were expressed in relation to principles of autonomy connected to the learning of vocabulary. They were asked if the learning of vocabulary was the teacher's responsibility through his/her teaching or rather an independent activity that learners can carry out on their own. More than 50% of the learners, (56%) think it is the learners' responsibility and the rest think it is a shared responsibility between the learner and the teacher. These are some of the views of those who think it is the learners' responsibility to learn vocabulary: *'The teacher is not a dictionary and he is not always at hand to solve our comprehension problems. The students should be responsible for their own progress. The student must have motivation and interest to study by himself. It's the student who has to find useful information. The teacher cannot provide everything learners might need'.* The learners who thought that learning vocabulary is a shared responsibility expressed the following: *'Good principles can be provided in the class which can be extended by the students in self-study. The teacher is a good guide but nothing can be done if the student is not interested. Students can do much by themselves but there are difficulties they cannot solve alone. At the beginning it is the teacher's responsibility because of his expertise then it is the students. The teacher should provide the students with different ways to approach the learning of vocabulary as a consequence the students should feel ready to learn on their own. The teacher could influence the way we learn but we as students are more aware of our needs. The teacher can cater vocabulary for general needs but it is the student's responsibility to broaden that basis'.* All in all, a very mature thinking is shown through the learners' responses. They are aware that it is their own needs which would determine the vocabulary they have to learn but at the same time they recognize the value of the teachers' guidance in selecting vocabulary and in providing training to learn it.

One of the questions was addressed to collect the learners' views on the importance of learning idioms as a type of lexical item. A four point scale was used for this purpose. 53% expressed idioms are very important while 47% said that idioms were important to a certain extent. Nobody said that idioms were a little important or unimportant. The learners that considered idioms very important to learn explained that idioms should be learnt in order to: *to know the target language fully and to speak it naturally and appropriately / the real language is different from the language we learn at school, native speakers use them very often.* The learners who thought that idioms were important to a certain extent explained that their teaching depended on the following aspects: *Depending on how necessary they are and depending on the level of competence of the learners.* These results on the learners' views on idioms are closely related to the results found in Liontas (2002b). The subjects in this study used a scale from 1-5 to measure the importance of learning idioms and the mean was 3.83. Some of the opinions in Liontas' study were: *'idioms are an important mode of expression among native speakers and can provide insight into the target culture. Idioms help one become immersed in a culture. Without idioms one cannot fully understand a language. Being fluent means knowing and using idioms as well. Idioms are what is used in the real world'.* As one can see the subjects in both studies concede great *importance to idioms since mastering them helps to be fluent and to speak the language appropriately as a native speaker does.*

In this preliminary study, the learners' intuition or rather knowledge (Note 1) about the circumstances when the learning of idioms could be more productive is in line with the principles expressed by Pawley and Syder (1983). Their arguments relate to the level of proficiency that language learners must reach when trying to acquire the native-like features of the language in relation to word selection and fluency, as described by Pawley & Syder (1983) who support this statement when describing two often quoted notions: 'native like selection' and 'native like fluency'. The first is according to the authors the ability of the native speaker to convey his meaning by an expression that is not only grammatical but also native like. The second is the native speaker's ability to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous connected discourse.

The importance of teaching idioms was very strongly endorsed by the learners. 80% of them thought that teaching idioms was very important or important to a certain extent. The reasons expressed had to do as well with acquiring a native-like capability to use the language and in this sense improve communication (Note 2) 80% of the learners thought that learning idioms was very difficult or difficult to a certain extent for the following reasons: *'They reflect a cultural situation that could only be perceived in the native country. We need an immersion situation to learn them. The*

cognitive ability to learn idioms is more complex. We have to know in detail in what context or situation those phrases are used'.

The learners' responses evidence that idioms are lexical items they consider very important to learn in order to acquire a high level of proficiency but they are also aware of the effort and time they have to invest in learning these vocabulary items. Learners do not have the possibility to travel to English speaking countries hence their concern about providing an immersion situation that favoured their learning is remarked on here. Their views on the cultural content involved in idioms are also found in the responses given by the learners in Liontas (2002) as expressed above.

The questionnaire also explored the concept of idiom that the learners had. The learners' answers gave non-compositionality as the most remarkable feature since 60% of them mentioned this aspect, e.g. a) *Language forms with a non-literal meaning, their meaning depend on the context, b) Fixed expressions. Combination of various words that together have a different meaning than the meaning they would have when being alone, c) It is a linguistic expression that entails a non-literal semantic connotation that is used in a colloquial linguistic register, d) Linguistic forms that are used in special places in a frequent form independently of what the phrase means literally.* Another important feature contained in the learners' definitions was their colloquial aspect as in c) and e) A non-formal or familiar way of speaking. Fixedness and institutionalization were also present in the students' views on idioms, for example, b) and f) The use of determined words that belong to a special linguistic community. Some learners however (13.5%) did not have a clear idea of what an idiom was and appealed to a literal translation of the word to infer its meaning, g) newly introduced forms to the daily speech, newly created language forms. Idioms can be called 'expresiones idiomáticas' or 'modismos' in Spanish, and these learners were biased by the second term which implies a sense of 'new' or 'modern' expressed in g).

The subjects in this preliminary study concede great importance to the learning of idioms. Their opinions are in line with Liontas' students since both groups of learners claim that learning idioms approach them to the 'real language' used in real life. They think as well that their use enhances fluency and natural use as native speakers of a language.

The results in this preliminary study show that learners are aware of the main characteristics of idioms (non-compositionality, figurativeness and colloquialism), their learning complexity and their importance in the mastering of a foreign language. It would be important to emphasize at this point why it is worth exploring the students' views on idioms and their main features.

It is commonly agreed that in incidental or non-incidental learning of vocabulary, it is necessary to identify the unknown words in order to get their meanings that, after a certain number of encounters could eventually be retained. Therefore, knowing what characterises idioms might help students first, identify them as an unknown unit (Note 3), then use word attack strategies to get their meaning and later become familiar with syntactic restrictions that might allow the students retain and produce the idioms.

Results of a study on idiom identification (Dominguez 2008) show that transparency correlated negatively with a product score on idiom identification, see table 2.

Table 2. Correlation of the percent of idiom identification with idiom-type variables

Idiom-type variable	n	r	p
Contextual guessability	21	.541*	.011
Transparency	21	-.447*	.042
Interlingual similarity	21	-.160	.488
Familiarity of the words in the idiom	21	.267	.242

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)

A significant negative correlation was found between the identification of idioms and 'transparency' ($r = -.447$, $n = 21$, $p = 0.042$, two-tailed). This correlation indicates that opaque idioms were more easily identified by the subjects than transparent idioms. The explanation of this negative correlation is presumably that more transparent idioms have a smaller distance between the literal and idiomatic meanings than do opaque idioms.

Among the comments made by the learners in Dominguez (2008), it seems that the common strategy to identify the idioms was to seek an idiom with a certain degree of opacity (Note 4) and whose context clues did not help to clarify it.

Other researchers have found that opacity (transparency) has played a major role in idiom identification. Liontas (2001) for example, explores the identification process of American university students of 146 Greek idioms. He also found

that opacity and figurativeness were the two most frequent aspects that students appealed to in the successful identification of idioms, see table 3.

Table 3. Liontas (2001). IDT (idiom detection test) data

No	Strategy	Success	Metacognitive comment
1	Literal meaning does not make sense	23.81%	I picked this because literally it did not belong with the rest of the context. Another clue is the word (nose), because often body parts, or irrelevant objects are used in the expression. By irrelevant objects I mean those that do not fit in the context.
2	Translation	17.00%	Because the translation 'had put two feet in one show' is figurative. Also, it comes at the end, which is an indicator because the speaker is more likely to sum up the whole situation with an appropriate quote.

These two studies support the importance of two idiom features found in our students' concept of idiom: the non-compositionality and figurativeness as playing a central role in idiom identification, hence we can assume this could also influence their successful decoding as well as their successful retention.

5. Conclusions

Most teachers and textbook writers consider that idioms must be part of the content of the upper-intermediate or advanced syllabi. They often consider that idioms are low-frequency words that should only be taught when language learners have reached a high proficiency level. Our students' intuition highlights the importance of learning idioms regardless of any frequency analysis and only guided by the type and amount of language they are exposed to in the 'real world' basically portrayed in movies, T.V. programmes and all input contained in the internet.

The remarks above merit two basic reflexions, first, we may take into consideration with regards to frequency aspects, that high or low frequency words are categorized with the help of corpora which is made up 90% written speech coming from the press and printed literature and 10% from oral speech collected for this specific purpose. Hence this unbalanced percentage of the two types of speech makes the frequency aspect invalid. Second, students nowadays have access to the target language in an uncontrolled form. Teachers do not control the input that students receive in the classroom any more, hence the most we can do is guide our students' notions for them to grasp and take advantage of the language they encounter on a daily basis and which motivates their learning a great deal.

We must recognize that idioms involve a greater teaching and learning load than normal lexis, therefore it is necessary to determine what idioms should receive special attention in a determined language course. Hence, a selection of idioms made up of high-frequency component words can be made in order to include those idioms in the lexical syllabus of beginner and lower intermediate learners provided they are important and frequently used by native speakers. This frequency can be determined by the speakers themselves and compared with the information obtained when checking corpora frequencies. Moreover, the incorporation of idioms with a high level of interlingual similarity can be of great help as well to increase the students' confidence and to raise their level of idiom knowledge.

Another aspect that merits attention is the awareness raising about the 'deceptive transparency' of single words and lexical units and favouring the use of global and local context in order for the learners to test their hypotheses. This will surely help in achieving a higher level of accuracy when identifying and code-breaking idioms.

Incorporating a good amount of idioms in very early stages of language learning also implies raising awareness about the presence of metaphor. It is essential to show how metaphor is 'intrinsic to the nature of the language itself' (Lewis 1993) p. 112 and that understanding metaphor in daily communication is not limited to students with a high proficiency level. The learners training in the comprehension of metaphor implies the understanding that metaphor involves a process of inferencing where a relationship is established between the two elements being compared (Lazar 1996) p.45 Thus, learners should be encouraged to code-break figurative language by 'a) comprehending that two things which do not normally collocate together are being compared , b) deducing which features are salient in the comparison, c) reinterpreting how the meaning of the other is altered when these salient features are applied to it'. Cooper (1999) p.256 suggests the adaptation of the think-aloud technique to an instructional setting. Hence, with the guidance of the teacher, learners can rehearse a 'heuristic approach' to idiom comprehension, especially with those containing metaphors.

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Notes

Note 1. Since the learners were about to graduate as language teachers, they were already familiar with certain didactic principles related to the teaching of grammar and vocabulary.

Note 2. To avoid confusions in communication, the more we know the less misunderstandings we have / idioms are necessary to understand the language and to communicate messages effectively / to enable the students identify special usages of the language , it is important to know peculiarities of the target language / they make communication with native speakers more natural / if native speakers use them often, we should use them as well/ it is part of the acquisition of a language /to avoid using the language partially (2)

Note 3. Or they may fall into the phenomenon called 'deceptive transparency' words that learners think they know and they do not.

Note 4. Semi-opaque (semi-transparent) idioms are usually those with a metaphoric meaning.