

## The Effect of Etymology Elaboration on EFL Learners' Comprehension and Retention of Idioms

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reports on a study that investigated the impact of etymological elaboration on EFL students' comprehension and retention of English idioms. The participants for the study were 32 Iranian upper- intermediate EFL students. They were members of two intact classes randomly assigned to an experimental and a comparison group. The treatment lasted for six two-hour sessions, during each session of which the participants in both groups received five idioms which they were supposed to define. The participants in the experimental group received the idioms along with the pertinent etymological elaborations, while the participants in the comparison group received the same idioms without etymological elaborations. The results revealed that etymological elaboration has a positive effect on EFL students' comprehension and subsequent retention of idioms.*

*Keywords: idiom; etymology; comprehension; retention; EFL*

### INTRODUCTION

Figurative expressions in general and idioms in particular are inseparable and indispensable parts of human languages. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, an idiom is defined as a group of words whose meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words. For example, the phrase *to be in the same boat* has a literal meaning that is easy to understand, but it also has a common idiomatic or figurative meaning which cannot be guessed from its literal meaning. Abel (2003) defines idioms as phrases or sentences whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents.

Despite what most people think, the figurative meaning of such expressions is not arbitrary; instead, it is “motivated by their original, literal usage”, as Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007, p. 43) have argued. The majority of idioms have their own stories which throughout history have been forgotten, yet their traces are visible in their figurative aspects.

This hidden part of idioms makes it difficult, and in many cases impossible, for language learners to make a connection between an idiom's literary components and its figurative meaning. Therefore, reviving these stories may be the key to finding this missing link, which is the focus of the present study.

Idioms, though numerous and essential in each language, had been neglected in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) for many years. However, Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors we live by* (1980) drew the researchers' attention to this domain and since then idiomatic expressions have been the subject of many studies (Andreou & Galantomos 2008; Boers 2000, 2001; Boers et al., 2007; Cameron & Deignan 2006; Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska 1997; Philip 2005; Sacristan 2004; Ying 2007).

In recent years, different strategies have been suggested to aid language learners in comprehension, retention, and production of idioms, among which metaphor awareness-raising has been one of the most popular. In this approach, learners are familiarized with the concept or metaphor behind a group of idioms and this familiarization is assumed to promote their learning (Boers 2000, 2001; Boers et al., 2007; Guo 2008; Leng Tan 2002; Zyzic 2009). For example, the concept of "anger as fire or as a hot fluid" is the source of many idioms in the English language: *I was boiling with anger, anger welled up inside me, she erupted, she was breathing fire, she exploded, he's hot under the collar*, etc. Thus, knowing this concept can provide learners with a useful tool for understanding these related idioms.

Along the same route, some researchers started to extend this awareness to idioms which have an etymology or, in simple words, a story behind. According to Boers et al. (2007), this "etymological association is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form" (p. 43), and this pairing can in turn enhance learning. An example of this association is the idiomatic expression of *be waiting in the wings*, which is associated with reference to its original, literal counterpart in the theater (i.e. actors waiting in the wings of the theater before making their appearance on the stage), as mentioned in Boers et al. (2007).

*Metaphoric Competence*, a term coined by Low (1988), part of the communicative competence, is essential for achieving native like language proficiency. However, the superficial lack of link between the literary meaning of an idiom and its metaphoric meaning has led language teachers and students alike to ignore this beautiful aspect of language and take it for granted most of the time. Hence, those who rely on rote learning would find it hard when it comes to learning idioms, since they see no relationship between the linguistic form and metaphoric aspect of the idiom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphor is a tool for language learners to express their meanings indirectly, and idioms are a category of expressions which use metaphoric language for this purpose. Idioms are one of the inseparable and widely used components of every language, which are mostly neglected in the process of language teaching/learning by both teachers and learners.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, idioms in the English language were seen as strings of words with an arbitrary figurative meaning, unrelated to their literary surface meaning. This misconception caused students to view idioms as chunks of words that could be learned only by means of memorization. However, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) changed this picture and argued that idioms are not arbitrary and accidental strings of words, but totally rooted in human's thought. They proposed the *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, which indicates that metaphors can be essential and pervasive in language and thought. A metaphor is not only a matter of words but also a matter of thought (Lakoff & Turner 1989). According to Ying (2007), "Human thought processes are largely metaphorical, and the human conceptual system is structured and defined in a metaphorical way [Thus] metaphor plays a major role in people's everyday language using and thinking" (p. 75).

## CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Based on this theory, many idioms can be traced back to a common conceptual metaphor. One example of such conceptual metaphors is *anger as fire* or as *a hot fluid*; another is *body as a container*. Based on these two concepts, many idioms have been generated, as mentioned in Boers (2000):

*Anger as a Hot Fluid in a Container*

Anger welled up inside me	Simmer down!
I was boiling with anger	She flipped her lid
She was all steamed up	I was fuming
She erupted	She blew up at me

*Anger as Fire*

An inflammatory remark	She was breathing fire
Adding fuel to the fire	She exploded
He kept smoldering for days	He's hot under the collar

Thus, it is believed that by familiarizing language learners with such source concepts, they can better manage to comprehend and use idioms which are generated based on these concepts.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), there are two levels of metaphors: conceptual and linguistic:

At the conceptual level, a metaphor is a relationship between two concepts, one of which functions as the source and the other as the target. The relationship is in the form of “target domain is/ as source domain”. For example, argument is war (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The particular relation between source and target domains is based on the basic conceptual correspondences between two domains. The other level, the linguistic, is motivated by conceptual metaphor, and represents the realization on words. It appears in the forms of everyday written and spoken languages. Thus, for example, a variety of metaphorical expressions are developed from the conceptual metaphor “Argument is war”, such as “Your claims are indefensible”, “He attacked every weak point in my argument”, and “I demolished his argument. (cited in Ying, 2007, p. 75)

A study on the subject of idioms was made by Bailey (2003). This article overviews the theoretical foundations of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* and maintains that although fully well-established in theory, it has had little impact on language teaching and learning so far. It also highlights the importance of attaining a *Metaphoric Competence* as one of the prerequisites of developing a native like language proficiency. As Bailey (2003) argues, *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* is different from the traditional linguistic view which maintained a distinction between literal and figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions, and further comments that this meaning can be understood only by means of complicated algorithmic principles. He cites from *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* by Lakoff and Turner (1989) and mentions that metaphoric language is not something exclusive to poets and writers. In everyday language, speakers are constantly producing novel metaphors; however, most of these can be traced back to some predetermined mental conceptual metaphors.

According to Bailey (2003), recent insights into the nature of vocabulary in language have led researchers to a focus on strings of words or phrases rather than individual words, with an emphasis on functional and pragmatic awareness. This emphasis extends to metaphors and idioms. Such a focus calls attention to the different contexts in which such strings can be used, their extensions and limitations,

and their different aspects. These are things which are not mentioned in traditional non-communicative methods of teaching. One way to gain such abilities is raising metaphoric awareness of students. This is a strategy that has been the focus of many articles and which necessitates explicit teaching of the conceptual systems behind metaphors. Such an elaboration requires familiarizing students with cultural norms of the society in which the metaphors are used, because culture is a determining factor in shaping many of these conceptual systems. Moreover, cultural awareness can help learners gain intercultural awareness.

In the same vein, Ying (2007) tries to answer these questions: “what is the role of culture in metaphor? What is cross-cultural variation in metaphor? And are the results the same for other languages such as Chinese?” (p. 74).

As language is part of culture and tightly related to that, it can be hypothesized that culture may have a role in metaphor. Many researchers hold the opinion that culture plays a major role in metaphor. As Lakoff & Johnson (1980) claim, most metaphors are grounded in systematic correlations within our daily experience. Human experience consists of a large range of conventional models. These models are essential elements, which construct a conceptual system in human mind. According to *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, metaphors are able to reflect the ideas in a human conceptual system; so various cultural models are shown in a great number of metaphors. For example, in the conceptual metaphor *argument is war* what argument and war have in common is the notion of fighting (mental fighting versus physical fighting). However, if a culture does not consider arguments as a kind of mental fighting, such a metaphor cannot be used anymore in that culture. This and other similar arguments show that culture has a role in metaphor.

The second and third questions of Ying’s (2007) study can be answered with regard to three types of differences which exist among cultures, according to Boers (2003, p. 232):

- (1) Differences with regard to the particular source-target mappings that have become conventional in the given cultures;
- (2) Differences with regard to value judgments associated with the source or target domains shared mappings;
- (3) Differences with regard to the degree of pervasiveness of metaphor as such, as compared with other (rhetorical) figures.

According to the first difference, different cultures may have different source domains referring to the same target domain. For example, in western societies, *Lion* is the symbol of *Courage* and *Nobility*, so we can have the sentence “Achilles is lion”; however, in China the same function mostly belongs to *Tiger*, so the sentence “Achilles is tiger” is more common among Chinese. The second type of difference refers to different connotation of the same concept in different languages. Such connotations are socially and culturally specific, so they are one of the most difficult areas for language learners. For instance, *Dragons* in China are the symbol of *King* and have a positive connotation, while in the western culture *Dragon* implies the image of a *Monster* and has a negative connotation. The third kind of difference refers to degrees of pervasiveness of such metaphors in comparison with other types of figures of speech such as metonymy. Again, in this respect, Chinese show a higher degree of preference toward body-part metaphors than English (Ying, 2007).

One distinguished scholar who has focused a lot on the domain of idioms is Frank Boers. Boers (2000) conducted three experiments with students from Belgium, with the purpose of teaching idioms, and concluded that raising students’ metaphor awareness, or in other words, familiarizing them with the conceptual metaphors behind idioms could facilitate students’ comprehension, retention, and production of idioms.

In another study, Boers (2001) conducted an experiment to evaluate the effect of using imagery on students' retention of figurative idioms. In addition, this experiment aimed to see whether such techniques would be beneficial for the learners' future autonomy in associating imageries to new idioms which they may encounter. The students were divided into experimental and control groups. In both groups, they were given ten unfamiliar idioms and were asked to write their meanings. They could consult their dictionaries to do so. Apart from that, the participants in the control group were asked to supply a possible context for each idiom, while the participants in the experimental group were required to provide a possible origin of the idioms.

The results showed that the task assigned to the experimental group was more fruitful, since more subjects provided hypothetical origins than hypothetical contexts. Later, another task was given to both groups in which the meanings of the idioms were provided and participants were asked to write the original idiom for each meaning. This task was aimed to measure retention and the experimental group demonstrated higher gains in this regard.

In a third study, Boers et al. (2007) investigated whether the knowledge of the origins of metaphors, or their etymologies, can facilitate recall of idioms, and recognition of their degree of (in)formality. Two research questions were proposed:

- Can etymology awareness aid comprehension of idioms?
- Can etymology awareness guide toward usage restriction?

Two groups of participants, one experimental and one comparison, were given three sets of tasks in different orders.

- "Identify the meaning" task, in a multiple choice format
- "Identify the source" task, which aimed to create a mental image of a concrete scene that paired with the meaning could possibly enhance retention
- "Identify the informal idiom" task in which the students were supposed to choose one among four alternatives

The order of the tasks in each group was as follows:

- Experimental group: identify the informal, identify the source, identify the informal, identify the meaning, and fill in the gap
- Comparison group: identify the informal, identify the meaning, identify the informal, identify the source, and fill in the gap

The question was whether knowledge of origin would aid guessing the figurative meaning. The results showed that performance on the "identify the meaning" task was better after exposing the students to the source. Critics might say that the obtained results could be attributed to inauthentic tasks because in authentic situations, idioms were presented in context and this context could have aided comprehension without any need to etymology awareness.

To answer this criticism, another experiment was conducted with 22 third year students using 16 idioms other than the previous idioms. These idioms were presented in three ways:

- In isolation
- In context
- In context, along with explanations of the etymology

The third type of presentation was the most beneficial, supporting Boers et al. (2007)'s first hypothesis. With regard to the second research question, the "identify the informal idiom" task was



conducted along with the other tasks in the order mentioned. The results revealed that the experimental group did better on this task but not very significantly.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

Given the unresolved problems in the domain of idiom learning, and due to lack of sufficient research regarding this issue in the context of Iran, the researchers felt there is a need to conduct this study. *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* in the context of the present researchers has not gained much support and most Iranian EFL practitioners still adhere to outdated techniques such as memorization and translation when teaching idioms. The purpose of the present study is to determine the effect of etymology elaboration on idioms' comprehension and retention among Iranian EFL students. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do the learners who receive etymological elaboration for each idiom comprehend them better than the learners who receive no etymological elaboration?
2. Do the learners who receive etymological elaboration for each idiom have a better retention than the learners who receive no etymological elaboration?

## METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study were 32 Iranian EFL upper-intermediate students (18 females and 14 males) studying *American Headway*, an internationally well-known coursebook, in Payam Persa Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. The participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 28, were members of two intact classes under the instruction of the same teacher. The two classes were randomly assigned to one experimental (n=15) and one comparison group (n=17). The participants were at the same level of English language proficiency, since they had all gone through standardized achievement tests. However, to ensure their homogeneity regarding their knowledge of idioms, a pretest was conducted and those idioms which were new for at least 90% of the participants were selected as the main focus of the treatment.

### MATERIALS AND INSTRUMENTS

The main material used in this study was a number of English idioms selected from the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*. Prior to the treatment, there was a pretest, based on the results of which, the researchers selected the target idioms for the purpose of the study (Appendix). The test included fifty idioms, each presented in a short context and accompanied by four definitions. The participants were supposed to choose one among the four options which corresponded to the suitable definition. There were thirty idioms which were unfamiliar to more than 90% of the participants and hence were selected as the main focus of the treatment (see the Appendix). There was also a posttest in the same format as the pretest. The posttest idioms were those thirty idioms which were selected from the pretest and used throughout the treatment.

## PROCEDURE

The idioms used in this study were extracted from *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*. The second researcher selected idioms which were relevant to the participants' learning experience. Two factors were taken into account to determine this: first, having a connection with the content of the lessons which the students had studied so far, and second, being of interest to them. The teacher was a good source of help for the selection procedure because she was familiar both with the content of the lessons, due to her long teaching experience, and with the students' personality traits.

Another criterion for selecting the idioms was having an etymology or origin. The *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* presents the origins of more than 300 idioms, so it served as an appropriate reference for the purpose of the study.

The treatment period lasted for six two-hour sessions, in each of which the participants were exposed to 5 idioms. In the experimental group, each idiom was presented in a short text, followed by an explanation regarding its etymology or origin. The participants were asked to read the texts and the etymologies, and then write the meaning of the idioms in their own words in English. This explanation demonstrated their comprehension of the idioms. The acceptability of the definitions was estimated by the second researcher and an independent judge outside the class, using *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms'* definitions as criteria. The judge was an EFL instructor with a good command of English who was totally unfamiliar with the target students. She compared the students' definitions with *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms'* definitions and rated them as either *acceptable* or *unacceptable*. The same thing was done by the second researcher. Those definitions which were rated as acceptable by both the researcher and the judge were selected as the final correct definitions.

In the comparison group, the participants received the same idioms in the same texts, without any etymological elaboration. The participants wrote the definitions in their own words, and the same procedure was followed for evaluating the answers. After clarifying the meaning of the idioms, the participants in both groups were given explanations regarding the true definition of the idioms.

When all the idioms were presented during the six sessions, a posttest was given to the participants in the same format as the pretest, but with the presented idioms. This test intended to measure the retention of the taught idioms.

## RESULTS

Before starting the treatment, a pretest containing fifty idioms was given to the participants. Among the fifty idioms, 38 were unfamiliar to more than 29 (96.6%) students. Among those 38 idioms, 30 idioms which were assessed as more relevant and interesting for the participants were selected as the main focus of the treatment. Their definitions were rated as right or wrong, right answers were scored 1 and wrong answers were scored 0. At the end of the last treatment session, the students' scores were added up to gain a total, and a *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of the participants in both groups. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for both groups. The result of the *t*-test demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the scores of both groups in terms of their comprehension of the idioms,  $t(30)=14.60, p=.001$ . Thus, the first research question was answered positively, indicating that the etymological elaborations presented to the participants in the experimental group had played an important role in aiding them to comprehend the definitions of the target idioms.

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics for both groups on comprehension of idioms

Groups	N	M	SD
Experimental	15	20.92	4.96
Comparison	17	10.08	4.14

At the end of the experiment, a posttest containing the thirty idioms taught during the treatment period was given to the participants. Again, the participants were supposed to choose the correct definition of each idiom among the four alternatives. Each student's score was calculated and another *t*-test was conducted to see if there is any significant difference between the mean scores of both groups (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics for both groups on retention of idioms

Groups	N	M	SD
Experimental	15	13.37	3.19
Comparison	17	9.10	2.88

Again, the result of the *t*-test indicated a significance difference,  $t(30)=4.46$ ,  $p=.001$ , which suggests that the participants in the experimental group had a significantly better retention of the idioms than the participants of the control group. Therefore, the second research question of the study was answered positively, too.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the researchers investigated the effect of etymology awareness on comprehension and retention of English idioms in an EFL context. Two groups of participants, experimental and comparison, received the same set of idioms in the same contexts. The experimental group received the etymology or origins of the idioms along with the idioms, while the comparison group did not. In each session, both groups received five idioms which they were supposed to define. After the last session of treatment, their scores were added up and a *t*-test was conducted to see whether there is a significant difference between them or not. The results obtained revealed a significant difference between the two groups, that is, the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group with regard to comprehension of the idioms.

The retention of the idioms was evaluated through a posttest containing the idioms taught during the treatment. Again, the results obtained revealed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the comparison group.

The findings confirm *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, which suggests that idioms are not mere strings of words with an arbitrary meaning. Instead, their meaning can be traced back to a concrete scene representing the first source from which the idiom was taken. Moreover, the results are consistent with the *Dual Coding Theory*. According to this theory, etymology elaboration is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form (Boers 2007). This mental image provides a better condition for both comprehension and retention of new words in general and idioms in particular.

The findings are in conformity with many other studies made in the domain of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* and idiom learning. The promising results obtained via this experiment can be a



source of motivation for both teachers and learners to take advantage of etymological awareness to deal with this aspect of language. These results reveal that the figurative aspect of many idioms is not arbitrary; rather, there is an origin or story behind many of them, and reviving such stories can be a crucial factor in learning idiom.

Like any other study, the findings of the present study are also affected by a number of limitations. Therefore, caution should be exercised while interpreting the results. First, the number of idioms used in the treatment was not enough for a confident generalization. Second, the participants' ability to comprehend and remember the meaning of idioms does not necessarily mean that they will be able to correctly use them in productive skills. After all, it should not be forgotten that the ultimate goal of language learning is communication. Therefore, further studies need to be done to measure the students' ability to naturally produce idioms learned through etymological elaboration.

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APPENDIX

THE TARGET IDIOMS USED IN THE STUDY

1. Have all the aces
2. Give somebody the all clear
3. Get somebody's back up
4. Jump on the band wagon
5. Bite the bullet
6. Have all the aces
7. Give somebody the all clear
8. Get somebody's back up
9. Bite the bullet
10. A bolt from the blue
11. Break a leg
12. The buck stops here
13. A busman's holiday
14. Play cat and mouse with somebody
15. Catch-as-catch-can
16. Give somebody a cold shoulder
17. A dark horse
18. A dead ringer for somebody
19. A doubting Thomas
20. Eat humble pie
21. Face the music
22. A feather in your cap
23. Take a French leave
24. Full of beans
25. The gift of the gab
26. Kick the bucket
27. A kiss of death
28. Let your hair down
29. Lock horns with somebody
30. Once in a blue moon