

The comprehension of English Idioms and the Strategies used by Yemeni Learners of English in Translation

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Abstract

Idioms play an important part in any language. They make a language artistic, dramatic and lively. However, the competence of second/foreign language learners of English in this area is quite weak. This weakness could be attributed to the fact that only minor attention is given to English idioms in schools and universities syllabuses. This study aims at finding out to what extent the Yemeni learners majoring in English comprehended English idioms and the strategies they use to translate them. For this purpose a 30 items test containing 30 English idioms was developed by the researcher. Participants were asked to translate the idioms from Arabic into English. The sample of this study consisted of 60 students English major from the Faculty of Education, Sana'a University. The results were analyzed, discussed and reported. On the light of the findings of the study, recommendations were suggested for including and teaching English idioms in schools and universities syllabuses

الملخص

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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

استيعاب المصطلحات الانجليزية والطرق التي يستخدمها دارسي اللغة الانجليزية اليمنيين في الترجمة تلعب المصطلحات دوراً مهماً في أي لغة من اللغات حيث تجعل اللغة فنية ومثيرة ومفعمة بالحياة. ورغم أهمية المصطلحات نجد أن كفاءة دارسي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة ثانية أو أجنبية في هذا المجال ضعيفة إلى حد ما ويعزو هذا الضعف إلى حقيقة أن المصطلحات الانجليزية لم تحظى إلا باهتمام ضئيل في خطط مناهج اللغة الانجليزية في المدارس والجامعات. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة مدى استيعاب دارسي اللغة الانجليزية اليمنيين للمصطلحات الانجليزية والطرق التي يلجئوا إليها لترجمة هذه المصطلحات. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف طور الباحث اختبار مكون من 30 فقرة وكل فقرة تحتوي على مصطلح انجليزي. وقد طلب من المشاركين في الدراسة ترجمة هذه المصطلحات من اللغة العربية إلى اللغة الانجليزية. وتتكون عينة الدراسة من 60 طالب تخصص لغة انجليزية من كلية التربية، جامعة صنعاء. تم تحليل ومناقشة النتائج والتي على ضوءها تم اقتراح بعض التوصيات لتضمين وتدريب مصطلحات اللغة الانجليزية ضمن خطط مناهج اللغة الانجليزية في المدارس والجامعات.

Introduction

Idioms are figurative expressions that make a language artistic, dramatic, colorful and lively. Their figurative meanings are different from their literal meanings. Their meanings cannot be deduced from their individual components. Linguists provide various definitions to idioms. Richards et al (1985) define an idiom as "an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate part". An idiom cannot be understood from the meaning of its separate word i.e. the idiom doesn't mean exactly what the words say but it has hidden or figurative meaning which can only be understood in its appropriate context. For example, the idiom "I was pulling his leg" could be interpreted literally as "I was jerking on his ankle". The idiom, however, means, "I was teasing him". Another example is "to spill the beans". Its literal meaning is "to scatter the beans over an area or surface". Its idiomatic meaning is "to tell people secret information". This definition focuses on the semantic aspect of language. So the idiomatic meaning has nothing to do with the meaning of the separate words which composed the idiom. Ghazala (2003), on the other hand, defines idioms as "special, metaphorical fixed phrases whose meanings and forms are not negotiable" (p.204). This definition is to some extent comprehensive in a way that includes semantic and syntactical aspects. Semantically, idioms should not be understood literally, in other words, their meanings are not the outcome of

the individual meanings of their constituent words that are taken collectively. Their syntactic forms are fixed. That means we can not change the order of the words in the idioms; delete a word from them, add a word to them, replace a word with another or change their grammatical structures. These idioms are fixed in meanings and forms and should not be change because they include many cultural aspects in the lives of the nations such as religious beliefs, superstitions and ideologies.

Idioms are considered to be a very important part of any language. They usually make a language more alive and rich. The use of the idioms makes speech in any language more vivid, emotional and significant. John and Smithback, (1991) consider idioms as "vivid, verbal images which add life and verve to speech and writing. Without them language would be very bland and unexciting". Furthermore, idioms share cultural and historical knowledge which broaden learner's understanding and manipulation of a language. Second/ Foreign language learners are expected to be exposed and understand a variety of common idioms in the target language. This would broaden their knowledge about the history and culture of the target language. McPartland (1981) indicates that since idioms are used in spoken and written mode of the native language, language learners need to develop competence in idioms. Moreover, he asserts that idioms must play as an integral element in the syllabus design of the second language.

Idioms constitute a problematic area for foreign language learners in general and Yemeni learners of English in particular. This is due to the fact that minor attention is given to idioms in the syllabus of the English language, the lack of sufficient input in the classroom environment and the lack of English language contact outside the classroom.

When foreign language learners try to interpret the meaning of idioms in the target language, they may tend to recall the pervious strategies acquired during their first language learning. So they rely on the literal meaning of these idioms. Irujo (1986) indicates that the second language idioms are difficult to learn because their meanings are not literal and do not mean exactly what they say. Furthermore, Irujo attributes the difficulty of idioms to three reasons. First, native speakers of the target language tend not to use idioms when addressing second language learners; they rather use simple everyday vocabulary. Second, there are various

idioms such as slang, colloquial and formal idioms. When learners rely on transfer from their first language to interpret these idioms in the target language, they only succeed in only a few instances in applying the same strategy and in other cases they will produce incorrect interpretations. Third, many second language learning materials ignore idioms in their syllabuses. Al-Haddad, (1994:218), on the other hand, mentions four difficulties for learning idioms. These are insufficiency of teaching techniques in this area, inadequacy of the criteria of textual frequency, the foreign learning situation in English learnt and the lack of cultural assimilation on the part of the learners.

Kabakchy, (1980) who conducted a study on the use of idioms by Russian students of English, mentions one factor that is responsible for learning idioms which is how accessible they are to students. He then classifies idioms into four types: Idioms which have semantic counterparts in Russian, idioms which have semantic Russian counterparts, but they have different syntactic forms, idioms which have no counterparts in Russian, but their meaning can be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents and idioms which do not have counterparts in Russian and their meaning can not be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents. He considers the first group to be the easiest to learn, then the third group comes second, the second group comes third and the fourth group is the most difficult for the learners.

Irujo, (1986a) in her study classifies idioms into three groups: those which are identical to Spanish idioms, those which are similar to Spanish idioms and those which are very different from Spanish idioms. She found that the participants easily comprehended and produced the idioms that were identical to Spanish idioms.

Awwad, (1990) introduces a useful framework that can predict difficulty of translating idioms from one language to another. In his framework, he classifies four correspondence groups of idioms. He puts them in a descending order of difficulty as follows:

- idioms with no correspondence between expressions and functions,
- idioms with correspondence functions in both languages, but with different expressions,

- idioms with correspondence functions in both languages, but with slightly different expressions and
- idioms with correspondence functions and expressions in both languages.

To sum up, idioms play an important part in any language and at the same time, they are the most difficult and confusing part of that language. English idioms are difficult for foreign language learners due to many factors. Most often they lack equivalents in other languages and their meanings are not transparent and can not be inferred from the meanings of their individual words. They are also known as language and culture-specific which make them syntactically and semantically more complex. Furthermore, the absence of idioms in most schools and universities syllabuses, lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of target language contact outside the learning environment makes the situation worse.

Only few studies have been conducted in idioms in foreign language learning. This study is an attempt to shed light on English idioms comprehension by Yemeni learners of English at the university level.

Objectives

The study aims at:

- finding out to what extent English idioms are difficult for Yemeni learners of English,
- identifying Yemeni learners' strategies in translating English idioms from Arabic into English, and
- suggesting some procedures for overcoming these difficulties.

Methods

participants

A total of 60 students from level four in the English Department, Faculty of Education, in Arhab in Sana'a University are chosen randomly as a sample for this study; 30 male and 30 female. All of them are speakers of Arabic majoring in English as a foreign language. They have studied in the faculty for about four years during which they have studied courses in English language skills, English grammar, English linguistics, English literature and educational courses in Arabic. They are supposed to have an adequate linguistic competence in both Arabic and English with some knowledge in English culture and idioms.

Materials and procedures

The instrument of data collecting was adapted from Hussein, Riyad et. al. (2000) and then modified to suit the purpose of this study. In this instrument, 30 English idioms (15 similar in meanings and forms with Arabic idioms and 15 similar in meanings, but not with forms with Arabic idioms) collected from various sources were developed into a test containing 30 items. Each item consisted of an Arabic sentence containing an idiom in its linguistic and cultural context and an English translation of the sentence with the idiom missing. The participants were asked to write the English idiom which is equivalent to the idiom in the Arabic sentence. After administrating the test, the responses were corrected, listed into two groups and analyzed.

Results and discussion

Table (1) shows the percentages of the correct responses for the English idioms which are similar in meaning and forms with Arabic idioms.

No	Idiom	Percentage
1	from the bottom of my heart	78 %
2	to fish in the troubled water	76 %
3	to give the green light	74 %
4	the lion's share	73 %
5	on the tip of my tongue	70 %
6	to be all ears	68 %
7	to kill two birds with one stone	66 %
8	a man of his word	64 %
9	to catch one's breath	50 %
10	to turn over a new leaf	48 %
11	to shed crocodile tears	45 %
12	to tighten one's belt	40 %
13	to try one's luck	35 %
14	A matter of life and death	34 %
15	the lesser of two evils	32 %

The idiom "from the bottom of my heart" has got the highest correct responses in this group 78 % and 22 % substitute the word "depth" for the word bottom. The word depth is more commonly used in Arabic. For the idiom "to fish in the troubled water" 76 % of the subjects used it correctly and 18 % used "to hunt in the troubled water" and this is due to the transfer from Arabic where in Arabic the word 'hunt' is used to fish either in sea or to hunt in land. The other 6 % substituted the word dirty or unclear for the word troubled. Seventy four percent of the respondents used the idiom "to give the green light" correctly and 26 % used incorrect forms such as "to give permission " or " to give approval". The idiom "the lion's share" was used correctly by 73 % of the sample and 27 % paraphrased the idiom by saying " the biggest part" or "the biggest piece". "On the tip of my tongue" was used correctly by 70 % of the participants and 30 % used literal language translation such as "on the head of my tongue" or " on the side of my tongue" which are commonly used in Arabic language. The idiom "to be all ears" was used correctly by 68 % of the sample whereas 32 % worded the idiom incorrectly by using forms like "to listen carefully" or " to listen with attention". The idiom "to kill two birds with one stone" was translated correctly by 66 % of the subjects and the other 34% of the subjects simply substituted the word kill for the word get which is more commonly used in every day Arabic in Yemen. "A man of his word" was correctly used by 64 % of the sample and the other 36 % of the sample used other forms such as "a man with his word", "a man who respects his word", " a man who fulfills his promise" and " a man who keeps his word". These forms may be literal Arabic translation used in Yemen. The idiom " to catch one's breath" was used correctly by 50 % of the participants and 50 % did not translate the idiom correctly but rather used different forms where 32 % of them used the form " to take one's breath" and 18 % used the form " to return one's breath". These two forms are commonly used in Yemeni Arabic. For the idiom "to turn over a new leaf" forty eight percent of the sample provided the correct answer and 52 % used other forms such as "to start a new page" or" to begin a new page". These two forms are literal translation of the equivalent Arabic idiom. Forty five percent of the participants used the idiom "to shed crocodile tears" correctly and 55 % used incorrect forms such as "to cry with crocodile tears" and " to drop crocodile tears". With regard to the idiom "to tighten one's

belt" 40 % of the sample provided the correct form and meaning of the idiom and the other 60 % failed to use the correct idiom but rather used different forms such as "to fasten one's belt" and "to tie one's belt closely". "To try one's luck" was used correctly by 35 % of the participants and 65 % substituted the word luck by faith or fortune. "A matter of life and death" was correctly used by 34 % of the subjects, 23 % substituted the word matter for the word issue or subject and 43 % paraphrased the idiom by saying "a very serious matter". Thirty two percent of the respondents provided correct translation for the idiom "the lesser of two evils" and 68 % worded the idiom by using forms such as "the minor of two evils" or "the lesser of two bad things".

The second group of idioms includes the idioms which are similar in meanings but not in forms. We usually find some English idioms which have the same or similar meaning in the equivalent Arabic idioms, but they consist of different lexical items. A word for word translation does not work in this case. When translating this type of idioms, a translator should have cultural background in the target language. This cultural background enables the translator to provide the original text of an idiom or to find the equivalent idiom in the source language which has the same or similar meaning in the target language.

Table (2) shows the percentages of the correct responses for the English idioms which are similar in meanings but not in form with Arabic idioms.

no	Idiom	Percentage
1	to throw dust in someone's eyes	50 %
2	to build castles in the air	47 %
3	to back the wrong horse	46 %
4	to beat around the bush	40 %
5	to make a mountain out of a molehill	39 %
6	to carry coal to Newcastle	38 %
7	to cut one's coat according to one's cloth	34 %
8	to add fuel to injury	33 %
9	To move earth and heaven	30 %

10	at sixes and sevens	28 %
11	A necessary evil	25 %
12	To take the rough with the smooth	22 %
13	To rain cats and dogs	20 %
14	On pins and needles	18 %
14	a word in season	17 %

The idiom which got the highest correct responses in this group is "to throw dust in someone's eyes" which was used correctly by 50 % of the sample whereas 50 % used the word ash instead of dust which is widely used in Arabic. "To build castles in the air" was used correctly by 47 % of the sample. The other 53 % of the subjects used other form where they substituted the word castles for palaces which are commonly used in Arabic. With regard to the idiom "to back the wrong horse" 46 % of the subjects used it correctly. The other 54 % of the subjects used the form "to gamble on the loser horse" which is a literal translation to the equivalent Arabic idiom. Forty percent of the subjects used the idiom "to beat around the bush" correctly and 60 % used other forms such as "to turn around the topic" or "to turn around the matter" which are analogous to the idiom used in Arabic. Thirty nine percent correctly used the idiom "to make a mountain out of a molehill" and 61 % used other forms such as "to make a dome out of a grain" and "to make from a grain a dome". The former is a direct translation to the equivalent Arabic idiom and the latter is a word for word translation negative transfer from Arabic. The idiom "to carry coal to Newcastle" 38 % of the subjects translated it correctly in form and meaning and the other participants used totally different forms; "to sell water in the water sellers' zone" and "to sell water in the water dealers' area". These expressions are widely used in Arabic and give the same contextual meaning and this is due to the difference between the two cultures. The idiom "to cut one's coat according to one's cloth" was correctly used by 34 % of the subjects and 66 % used different forms such as "to spread one's leg according to one's cover/ carpet" and "to stretch one's legs according to one's rug". These forms are parallel to the forms used in Arabic. They almost give the same meaning. The idiom "to add fuel to injury" was correctly by 33 % of the participants, 37 % used the expression "to add wet to mud/clay" which is

commonly used in Arabic and nearly gives the same meaning and 30 % used other forms such as "to add water to mud" which is literal translation to the equivalent Arabic idiom. These differences in forms are probably due to the difference between the two cultures. "To move earth and heaven" was correctly used by 30 % of the sample and 70 % used the expression "to raise earth up and don't let it down" which is a literal translation to the equivalent Arabic idiom. The idiom "at sixes and sevens" was correctly used by 28 % of the subjects. This low percentage of the correct usage of the idiom is due to the Arabic interference. The Arabic equivalent of this idiom does not use the words sixes and sevens but rather fifths and sixes instead. It also uses the word multiple. The other 72 % of the participants used the expression "to multiple fifths by sixes". The idiom "A necessary evil" was used correctly by 25 % of the sample and 75 % could not provide the correct translation. Some of them used literal translation for the equivalent Arabic idiom "An evil that must be" and some other substituted the word necessary for the word obligatory "An obligatory evil". The idiom "to take the rough with the smooth" was correctly used by 22 % of the subjects and 78 % used the forms "to take the green with the dry" and "to take the green and the dry" which are literal translation to the equivalent Arabic idiom. "To rain cats and dogs" was correctly used by 20 % of the participants and the other 80 % failed to provide the correct translation. They either used word for word translation of the equivalent Arabic idiom "to rain like the mouths of the bottles" or paraphrased the idiom "to rain very heavily". The idiom "on pins and needles" was correctly used by 18 % of the sample and the other 82 % of the sample did not use correct translation. Some of them used the form "to be on hotter than firebrand" which is word for word translation of the equivalent Arabic idiom and some other paraphrased the idiom and provided the forms "to be on a hurry" and "to be impatient". Only 17 % of the subjects provided the correct translation of the idiom "a word in season" and the other subjects failed to use it correctly where they used word for word translation to provide expressions such as "for every occasion a speech", "a word for every context" and "a word for every event".

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study shows that the students did not perform well in translating and using idioms in English and this due to their low pragmatic competence in

this respect. The performance of the students in translating the idioms which have similar forms and meanings to their Arabic counterparts is higher than in translating the idioms which have similar meanings but not forms in Arabic. English idioms which have established equivalents in Arabic in both groups were translated properly by the students. The percentage of correct responses in idioms which have similar forms and meanings was ranged from 78 % to 32 % whereas it was ranged from 50 % to 17 % in idioms which have similar meanings but dissimilar forms. The students found the first group easier to translate may be due to the positive transfer from Arabic. These idioms have semantic Arabic counterparts and at the same time identically worded. In many cases, the students tend to use literal translation which, to some extent, gives meanings which are similar to the original meanings in the target language. The poor performance in translating idioms which have similar meaning but dissimilar forms attributed to the lack of pragmatic competence in general and familiarity with the original forms of these idioms in particular. Generally speaking when a match of an idiom or an idiomatic can not be found, students tend to use variety of strategies; negative transfer from mother tongue, paraphrase , literal translation or they stick to word for word translation.

Due to the important role that idioms play in social communication and the convergence among nations' cultures, it is recommended that idioms should be included and presented systematically in the syllabuses of English language courses in schools and universities. At the classroom level, it is recommended that teachers should expose their students to more various idioms throughout providing them with various tasks and exercises such as inferring idioms and their meanings from texts, using idioms in meaningful contexts and mastering idioms in their situational occurrences.

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