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SLA Students' Understanding of Idiomatic Expressions in English at a Costa Rican Public University

Comprensión de expresiones idiomáticas en inglés por parte de estudiantes de segunda lengua en una universidad pública costarricense

A compreensão de expressões idiomáticas em inglês por estudantes de Aquisição de Segunda Língua em uma universidade pública da Costa Rica

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Abstract

This article examines students' production of idiomatic expressions and some aspects of the training received. Idiomatic expressions teaching has received great attention in recent years; however, it has not been fully incorporated in the present context. This study involved 26 TESOL students enrolled in a BA in English or English Teaching at a Costa Rican public university. It used a quantitative, direct needs assessment design. The researcher collected data through a survey designed to elicit students' opinions on this issue and a test to determine their ability to recognize English idiomatic expressions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data analyses indicate that: 1) students' ability to produce idiomatic expressions is low ($\bar{X} = 4.31$; $SD = 2.64$); 2) the more opaque the idiomatic expression compared to their native language, the more difficult it is for students to produce its equivalent in English; 3) students consider the instruction of idiomatic expressions very important ($n = 16$; 61.5%) or important ($n = 9$; 34.6%); and 4) the curriculum does not meet students' needs in terms of idiomatic expression training. Finally, the findings suggest that explicit instruction may improve students' understanding of idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: Colloquial language, educational reform, higher education, language barriers, second language instruction

Resumen

Este artículo examina la producción de expresiones idiomáticas por estudiantes y algunos aspectos de la capacitación recibida. La enseñanza de expresiones idiomáticas ha recibido gran atención en los últimos años; sin embargo, no se ha incorporado completamente en contextos actuales. Este estudio involucró 26 estudiantes de EILE inscritos en un bachillerato en inglés o enseñanza del inglés en una universidad pública costarricense. Se utilizó un diseño cuantitativo de evaluación directa de necesidades. El investigador recopiló datos utilizando una encuesta diseñada para obtener opiniones de estudiantes sobre este tema y una prueba para determinar su habilidad para reconocer expresiones idiomáticas en

inglés. Los datos se analizaron utilizando estadística descriptiva. El análisis indica que: 1) la habilidad de los estudiantes para producir expresiones idiomáticas es baja ($\bar{X} = 4.31$; $SD = 2.64$); 2) cuanto más opaca es la expresión idiomática en comparación con su lengua materna, más difícil es para los estudiantes producir su equivalente en inglés; 3) los estudiantes consideran muy importante ($n = 16$; 61.5%) o importante ($n = 9$; 34.6%) la enseñanza de expresiones idiomáticas; y 4) el plan de estudios no satisface las necesidades del estudiantado en capacitación de expresiones idiomáticas. Finalmente, los hallazgos sugieren que la instrucción explícita mejoraría la comprensión estudiantil de las expresiones idiomáticas.

Palabras clave: Educación superior, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, lenguaje familiar, obstáculo lingüístico, reforma educativa

Resumo

Este artigo examina a produção de expressões idiomáticas por parte dos alunos e alguns aspectos da formação recebida. O ensino de expressões idiomáticas tem recebido grande atenção nos últimos anos; no entanto, não foi totalmente incorporado ao contexto atual. Este estudo envolveu 26 alunos da área de ensino de inglês (TESOL) matriculados em cursos de Bacharelado ou Licenciatura em Inglês em uma universidade pública da Costa Rica. Utilizou-se um delineamento quantitativo de avaliação direta de necessidades. O pesquisador coletou dados por meio de um questionário elaborado para levantar as opiniões dos alunos sobre o assunto e de um teste para determinar sua capacidade de reconhecer expressões idiomáticas em inglês. Os dados foram analisados utilizando estatística descritiva. As análises indicam que: 1) a capacidade dos alunos de produzir expressões idiomáticas é baixa ($\bar{X} = 4.31$; $SD = 2.64$); 2) quanto mais opaca for a expressão idiomática em comparação com a língua materna, maior a dificuldade dos alunos em produzir seu equivalente em inglês; 3) os alunos consideram o ensino de expressões idiomáticas muito importante ($n = 16$; 61.5%) ou importante ($n = 9$; 34.6%); e 4) o currículo não atende às necessidades dos alunos em termos de formação sobre expressões idiomáticas. Por fim, os resultados sugerem que o ensino explícito pode melhorar a compreensão dos alunos sobre expressões idiomáticas.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem coloquial, reforma educacional, ensino superior, barreiras linguísticas, ensino de segunda língua.

Introduction

Mastering a language presents several difficulties for the learner. However, it is widely known that learning English as a second language (ESL) has a number of advantages over learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Although both terms are sometimes used interchangeably, EFL contexts rely heavily on books and standard materials. As a result, students frequently miss out on exposure to less formal languages, such as slang and idioms. In addition, languages are always evolving. Thus, expressions and words are continually emerging, dying, or changing meaning. Immersion helps learners be in constant contact with those changes, making them part of their working linguistic repertoire. Also, the semantic aspects of the language may be vague or elusive for ESL learners. Since they are not in constant contact with the language, they may not recognize how to use some expressions according to the context or situation. For Liu et al. (2017, p. 1204), "idioms are peculiar linguistic constructions that impose great challenges for representing the semantics of language." As such, an EFL learner may need greater incidental exposure, more detailed explanations, and further intentional practice to learn or reinforce idioms. By themselves, idiomatic expressions also present some inherent difficulties. For example, Ayto (2020) explains that trying to interpret an idiom word by word does not provide good results. For native and non-native speakers alike, understanding each word in an idiom does not guarantee a proper understanding of its meaning. Nonetheless, it is only through exposure that its meaning can be decoded appropriately. For a language learner, translation may not always seem feasible (Sánchez-Benedito, 2017). In most cases, literal translations make no sense, whereas in others, cultural differences limit the intended meaning of the utterance linguistically. Therefore, while some idioms have more than one meaning depending on the context in which they are used (Sánchez-Benedito, 2017), the same idiom would have very different connotations depending on the situation, which may complicate students' understanding of idioms.

Since idioms represent a challenging linguistic component for students, the Council of Europe (2020) defines proficient students as those who, among other skills, can use common idiomatic expressions or have “a good command of a very broad lexical repertoire, including idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms” (p. 131) for students who demonstrate mastery in their vocabulary range. Therefore, the present study explores students’ understanding of idioms and their perceived preparation for this topic in their language courses. The results will broaden the current perspectives on idiom understanding and use and, at the same time, may encourage curricular changes in the language program. Currently, no BA in English or English Teaching course includes idioms, slang, proverbs, or other colloquial expressions as part of their content, and textbooks do not offer guided instruction about understanding or using them. Moreover, since there are no official or educational policies on the teaching of idioms, some professors may discourage their use as informal, while others may accept or teach them, as the CEFR recommends. Therefore, as stated above, such a challenging topic cannot rely solely on incidental acquisition; it requires a systematic and planned organization, especially in EFL contexts.

Two groups will directly benefit from the outcomes of this study. First, the course program will rethink its current practices and materials about idioms and their place as both vocabulary structures and cultural components. Lontas (2017) mentions that “the study of idioms in the classroom can help the SLA profession to build a systematic program for the development of idiomatic competence in second language learners” (p. 16). However, this systematic program is absent from language programs, especially where academic production is emphasized. Moreover, besides language, idioms provide an opportunity to teach “culture from a multitude of sociocultural perspectives, leading to learners’ development and attainment of idiomatic competence” (Lontas, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, including idioms strengthens the curriculum from a linguistic and cultural perspective. In addition, students will benefit from these results. First, they will become aware of possible deficiencies when communicating in English. Moreover, as has been seen, the inclusion of idioms will provide students with more linguistic tools to comprehend and produce language at more advanced levels and in diverse contexts. Finally, the acquired cultural insights will allow them to widen their perspectives on how other people interpret the world and communicate daily.

Literature review

Few attempts have been made to investigate the role of idioms in students' understanding and production of language. As Lontas (2017) mentions, "idioms, part and parcel of human languages, have yet to receive the attention in second language acquisition (SLA) studies accorded to them by learners of second languages." (p. 6). Although little attention has been given to idioms and their instruction, Galantomos (2021) affirms that in the past years, the number of studies focusing on figurative language and the difficulties second language learners face when dealing with them has increased. Galantomos (2021) also mentions that some research focuses directly on improving instruction to make it more accessible to language learners. Therefore, this section explores the relationship between idiomatic expressions and language acquisition. It also intends to provide a general view of the sources of difficulties students deal with when learning idiomatic expressions.

Idiomatic expressions and language

Languages are replete with expressions that cannot be interpreted by their constituents alone. Besides, proverbs, slang, euphemisms, clichés, idioms, and phrasal verbs present several problems for English language learners. Although these expressions sometimes overlap or are difficult to classify, Crystal (2008) defined idioms as "a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit" (p. 236). Additionally, other authors (Brown & Miller, 2013; Matthews, 2014) concurred that idioms work as a single unit. For Bussmann et al. (2011), idioms have three main characteristics. First, the meaning of an idiomatic expression cannot be derived from its constituents. As previously stated, in the case of ESL or EFL students, a word-by-word translation does not suffice to decode the speakers' intended meaning. Second, replacing one element does not necessarily interfere with the meaning of the expression. For example, one could say to hunt / search / look for something high and low. Those variations do not alter the meaning, and non-standard variations may still convey the exact intended meaning. Third, the first and second conditions do not apply when the phrase expresses a literal sense. For

example, hold your horses or to have one's hands clean may have a non-idiomatic connotation. Understanding that context and voice inflections play a role in set phrases becomes essential for the learner.

Because idioms are considered a component of vocabulary and are compared to words, they exhibit some lexical properties. Nation (2013) established three criteria that define mastery of a word. Moreover, other scholars have concurred with this division (Milton, 2009, Pavičić Takač, 2008). First, words have a given form. Besides their given spelling and pronunciation, idioms also have a word order that should be respected to convey the desired meaning. Second, words have a semantic composition. The associations and meaning derived from words also apply to idioms since they too act as one unit of meaning in a particular linguistic context. Finally, vocabulary includes its use. In this case, it is possible to distinguish its registry, level of formality, or the humorous implications that a particular word or idiom may have. Likewise, idioms may have equivalents with an idiom in another language, thus facilitating language acquisition.

A cognate is a word whose meaning and form resemble another word in a different language (Matthews, 2014; Nation; 2013). This similarity often represents common ancestry between both words (Matthews, 2014); however, they could also be a calque or a direct translation from a language into another one (Matthews, 2014). Thus, when students can identify cognates, they can take advantage of them to understand and learn vocabulary (Pavičić Takač 2008). Conversely, some authors (Hamel, 1998; Matthews, 2014; Nation; 2013; Prado, 1997) caution us about false cognates. For these authors, false cognates (also known as false friends) may confuse learners of a second language since these words or expressions may look similar yet have different meanings. For example, the idiom look over one's shoulder means to worry or believe that something bad could happen. In Spanish, the word-by-word translation *mirar por encima del hombre* means treating someone as an inferior and often with disdain. The expression *be bitten by the bug* conveys an idea of enthusiasm, whereas, in Spanish, if someone has been bitten by a bug (*picado por un bicho o insecto*), people imply that that person is acting in an unusual and often weird way.

Therefore, as a language component, idioms are subject to more or less the same advantages and disadvantages as learning other types of vocabulary. Additionally, since idioms are composed of multiple words, they could also present an added problem for students, especially those who are not in constant contact with the foreign language.

Linguistic interpretation of idioms

For some authors (Espinal & Mateu, 2019; Nunberg et al., 1994), idioms have three specific properties. First, idioms are conventional, indicating that the units that form the idiom do not contribute to determining its meaning. For example, the expressions water under the bridge or a big wig are conventional since their meaning ("past problems" or "an important person," respectively) cannot be extracted from the isolated words alone. Second, idioms are compositional or noncompositional. This distinction relates to the extent to which idioms can be analyzed once the meaning is understood. Meaning could be distributed along with the idiom (compositional), or the idiom could work as a whole (noncompositional). For example, the idiom dodge the bullet could be analyzed as two parts: dodge (avoid) the bullet (a bad situation). Therefore, it is classified as compositional. On the other hand, the set phrase bull session (an informal discussion) cannot be analyzed from its constituents. Thus, it is classified as noncompositional. Finally, idioms can be transparent or opaque. In contrast to compositional properties, the entire idiom, in this case, provides semantic information. For example, Gibbs (1995, 2007) mentions that idioms such as blow your stack, flip your lid, hit the ceiling, get hot under the collar, and get steamed up convey images of anger to which most of us can relate. Espinal and Mateu (2019) argue that idiom families exist and share common semantic features. Thus, this feature may help learners acquire them more easily.

In addition, other authors (Liu et al., 2017; Salton et al., 2014; Villavicencio et al., 2005) classify idioms according to three distinct properties. First, the invisibility property states that idioms always present themselves as multi-words in sentences. No intrinsic syntactical feature provides clues to detect idioms. Second, idiomatic expressions present idiomaticity. This concept is related to the transparency/opacity property

discussed above. The specific parts of the idiomatic phrase do not necessarily provide information to realize its meaning. Finally, idioms are flexible. Thus, removing, substituting, or adding words do not alter the speaker's intention.

As a result, analyzing idioms from a linguistic perspective presents several challenges. First, the meaning is arbitrary and, since it cannot be predicted from its constituents, it makes interpretation more difficult (Baker, 2018). On the other hand, because many idioms are opaque, they may mislead a speaker who has never encountered them (Nunberg et al., 1994). In both cases, culture plays a significant role in deciphering meaning. Accordingly, Wang (2018) mentions that "language is a social phenomenon, a communication tool between people and people and also a medium of integration between people and culture. Language is the carrier of culture and an important means of spreading it" (p. 297). Therefore, interpreting and using idioms correctly usually comes from constant contact with the target language and the idiomatic expressions in specific and varied linguistic contexts.

Idioms across languages

The linguistic interpretation of idioms often causes more problems if one interprets them using one's existing first language (L1) patterns and our reference culture. For example, Baker (2018) mentions that "a person's competence in actively using the idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language hardly ever matches that of a native speaker" (p. 70). The author also explains that non-native speakers of a language may encounter other obstacles when analyzing idioms in a foreign language. First, recognizing that the expression under analysis is an idiom poses some challenges. Thus, this may be difficult since there are no linguistic clues that reveal the presence of an idiom. Second, some idioms are misleading. They are difficult to interpret since they "have both a literal and an idiomatic meaning, for example, go out with ('have a romantic or sexual relationship with someone') and take someone for a ride ('deceive or cheat someone in some way')" (Baker, 2018, p. 72). Third, some idioms look similar but have different meanings. An example was mentioned earlier: look over your shoulder. Finally, some idioms may be incomprehensible in the

speakers' first language. This could be a problem since learners may not know the necessary cultural clues to understand said expressions.

According to Barcroft et al. (2011), another problem with analyzing idioms across languages comes from regional variations. The authors mention that idioms have variants just like words or are used in certain contexts but not in others. For example, the expression "estoy en el quinto cielo (literally, 'I am in the fifth heaven') might be used to express 'I'm in seventh heaven' in Spain but not in Mexico" (Barcroft et al., 2011, p. 575). Therefore, learners of a foreign language should be aware of some of these variations to be open to novel encounters in the target language. These novel encounters may also be hindered by the register. For Richards and Schmidt (2013), "idiomatic expressions are mainly used in informal situations with friends, fellow workers, and members of the family" (p. 96). This limits the socio-linguistic contexts where idioms occur, making learners encounter them in fewer situations and more challenging linguistic environments. Finally, there is the issue of nonnative speakers interpreting expressions from a foreign culture. Smith (2011) explains that "analyzing them can show revealing elements about culture" (p. 262). However, a superficial analysis may increase or produce bias. Therefore, although they are part of a culture, "they should not be used to judge a culture" (Smith, 2011, p. 2011).

Idioms and second language acquisition

Several studies (Aljabri, 2013; Forssten et al., 2017; Prentice, 2021; Smadi & Alrishan, 2015) have explored the teaching of idioms in the ESL/EFL context. Krashen (1985) mentioned that students are often exposed to simplified input when learning a language. Simplified input includes more high-frequency vocabulary but fewer colloquialisms (slang, idioms, etc.). However, advanced students should demonstrate mastery of idiomatic expressions (Council of Europe, 2020). Therefore, materials, professors, and activities should improve students' understanding and production of idioms, especially at higher proficiency levels.

As previously mentioned, idioms occur in natural and informal contexts. Thus, foreign language contexts should focus on various activities to promote learning.

For example, Liontas (2017) recommends that learning idiomatic expressions be “anchored in language materials and situations that are both authentic and purposeful” (p. 17). Other authors (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Guduru, 2012) pointed out that conversations, rote memorization, guided analysis, and group discussions promote the acquisition of idioms. However, they still recommend the use of idiom books and notebooks. According to Yağiz and Izadpanah (2013), the role of policymakers consists of designing materials with culture in mind, preserving equality, and developing respect and a positive attitude toward the target culture. In this regard, Amer (2010, 2014) argues that students learn idioms better with technology, especially mobile apps. In summary, no single activity or material promotes the acquisition of idiomatic expressions, and only a combination of techniques may help students acquire idiomatic expressions.

Furthermore, professors play a critical role in promoting students' acquisition of idioms. Thus, to support students' learning, professors should have a good command of the target culture (Alhaysony, 2017, Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). In addition, teachers should focus on the etymology of idioms as this seems to aid students' learning (Alhaysony, 2017; Gatambuki-Gathigia & Njoroge, 2016). Similarly, Liontas (2021) recommends that language instructors select high-quality materials, model using figurative language, encourage the independent search of idioms, and provide structured practice to foster retention. According to Gatambuki-Gathigia and Njoroge (2016), one of the main problems with idiom instruction is that “teachers are apathetic to the teaching of idioms” (p. 38) perhaps because some of them may also have difficulties understanding them. Alhaysony (2017) also indicates that, in many language courses, “idioms are not part of the courses' syllabi” (p. 81) since curricular designers often omit them in different courses.

As can be seen, the teaching of idioms has received substantial attention in recent years. However, idioms are challenging for students to master (Cedar, 2008; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Sparado, 2013), even for advanced learners (Eyckmans & Lindstromberg, 2017). Several factors contribute to this issue, including the role of idiomatic expressions in the language, the linguistic interpretation of idioms, how idioms differ across languages, and their role in SLA scenarios. However, since idioms are essential for communicating effectively in a foreign language (Khan & Daşkin, 2014), there is a need

to improve students' idiomatic proficiency (Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2020). Thus, identifying students' challenges with idioms and offering targeted instruction on how to deal with idiomatic expressions remains relevant in SLA contexts (Oakhill et al., 2016).

Method

Participants

The population of this study includes adult Costa Rican students currently enrolled in the course Intercultural Communication. The researcher created an electronic mailing list of 33 students who agreed to participate in the study. Of those 33 students, 26 responses were analyzed. The participants were selected because they are taking their last oral course in the major. In previous studies (Charpentier-Jiménez, 2023), other students with the same affiliation as the target population of this study indicated that idioms should be taught in oral courses. The final mailing list created included every student who agreed to participate in the study. All students speak Spanish as their first language.

Materials

The materials include written consent, a list of 30 idioms, and a 10-item descriptive survey. The written consent was sent to students electronically, and a checkbox labeled "agree to terms and conditions" was included to certify voluntary participation in the study. The list of 30 idioms was created after reading several dictionaries on idioms in English. It includes the following: a) ten transparent idiomatic expressions that can be translated literally and have the same meaning, b) ten semi-transparent idioms that share the same meaning but that differ in one of its constituents from its counterpart in Spanish, c) ten idioms that share the same meaning but whose constituents do not share similarities with its Spanish counterpart.

On the other hand, the 10-item descriptive survey was created to analyze if students could provide the English version of an idiom presented in their native language and establish their perspective on idiomatic exposure and training in the BA in English and English Teaching. The survey was developed based on a pilot survey in which ten students pre-selected the most common samples of idioms that had an equivalent in the students' L1. The final version of the survey was pilot-tested with eleven third-year students in the major. The survey was later revised based on the pilot testing.

The survey was divided into four sections: a) demographic information, b) translation of idiomatic expressions from Spanish to English in context, c) perceived idiom instruction received in the program, and d) an optional open-ended question. Additionally, the survey used two question formats: forced-choice and open-ended questions. For the perceived training section, most items included checklists or Likert scales. For example, some items asked the participants to rate the program's idiomatic instruction quality. These items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). This type of format, or a similar one, was also used for other survey questions.

The last part of the survey contained one optional open-ended question. This question invited participants to comment freely on their perspective on idiomatic expressions and the training they received. The total time to complete the survey was estimated at 35 minutes.

Procedure

This study used a quantitative, direct needs assessment design. The researcher created a list of more than 1,400 idioms in English. The list was shortened to include only expressions with an idiomatic equivalent in Spanish. Afterward, the idioms were translated into Spanish, and ten students selected the most common ones. From this sublist, 30 expressions that met the required criteria were extracted. Ten idioms were transparent, while ten were semi-transparent. The other ten did not have a morphological relation to their counterparts, but an apparent semantic similarity

existed. The number of idioms was limited because of time constraints and to elicit as many responses as possible.

To collect data, the researcher asked for voluntary participation from students in a survey. The purpose of the study was explained via Zoom. Subsequently, students were directed to a link to submit an email indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Afterward, a first email was sent with the written consent and a hyperlink to the online Web survey. Next, students were instructed to read the survey carefully and either complete the translation or select the best option, depending on the section. The survey was designed in the following order: 1) demographic information, b) idiom translation, c) perceived idiom instruction, and d) an optional open-ended question.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2016. Since most items in the survey included Likert scales or completion questions, the analysis carried out included a quantitative summary of students' answers. The data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, including the minimum and maximum parameters. Additionally, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation were included to compare students' answers.

Analysis of the Results

The following result analysis describes students' perceptions of idiomatic expression training. It also includes students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions in English. The first section includes participants' demographic information. The second section summarizes students' results on idiomatic expression recognition. Finally, the third section describes participants' perceptions of the idiomatic expressions training they received during their major.

Demographic Information

Of the 26 students who answered the survey, 18 (69.23%) were female, and eight (30.77%) were male. Overall, 18 students (69.2%) reported their ages between 25 and 34. In addition, 19 students (73.08%) belonged to the 18 - 24 age range, five (19.23%) were between 25 and 34, and one (3.85%) was between 35 - 44. All of the students are native Spanish speakers and use English as a foreign language.

Participants' Scores on Idiomatic Expressions

To explore students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions, the researcher selected 30 idiomatic expressions. For each idiomatic expression, students were given the expression and its use in a sentence in Spanish. Students had to write the equivalent idiomatic expression in English, and they could also acknowledge that they did not know the answer. After completing each item, students received one point per each correct answer and zero points for an incorrect answer, including the I don't know option. The data set, originally in Excel format (xls), were subjected to computational analysis using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) Version 26.

Students' scores were generally poor. Only five students obtained a grade above seven, which is a passing grade in this context. The minimum grade was 0.00. In this case, the student admitted to not knowing the answer more than 20 times. Although the highest score was 9.33, this was the only score above 8. The mean score was 4.31 (SD = 2.64). Consequently, students have not yet mastered the use of idiomatic expressions in English. In several cases, they acknowledged not knowing the equivalent idiomatic expression in English.

When analyzing scores based on students' basic characteristics, the data reveals that although male students' grades are more dispersed, they have a lower median than women. In addition, the similarity of the arithmetic mean demonstrates that, on average, women outperform men by a small margin. In terms of age, the dispersion rate is lower than for gender; nevertheless, the median for people between 25 and 34 years is two points higher than for people between 18-24 years. This indicates that, on

average, students between 25 and 34 outperformed students between 18 and 24 by a significant margin. Table 1 provides a summary of the key findings of this section.

Table 1

Summary of students' scores based on baseline characteristics

Baseline characteristic	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}$	Median	SD
Gender					
Female	0.00	8.00	4.44	4.83	2.41
Male	0.33	9.33	4.00	2.67	3.24
Age					
18-24	0.00	9.33	4.27	4.67	2.56
25-34	2.00	8.00	5.20	4.67	2.81
35-44	0.67	0.67	0.67	0.67	-

Note. N = 26. Min. = Minimum; Max. = Maximum; $\bar{X}$ = arithmetic mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Compiled by the author based on test responses.

Rank of idiomatic expressions

The second analysis was conducted to determine which idiomatic expressions were more challenging for students. On average, the analysis showed that all idiomatic expressions presented some difficulty to students. Only three idiomatic expressions were correctly translated more than 70% of the time. The easiest idiomatic expression for students was To give the benefit of the doubt. No student correctly translated the idiomatic expression any/every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Consistent with students' scores, results for idiomatic expressions displayed a mean of 4.31 and a lower standard deviation (SD = 2.27). Table 2 summarizes the results obtained and organizes the idiomatic expressions from the easiest to the most difficult.

Table 2

Summary of scores per idiomatic expression: mean and standard deviation, Costa Rica, 2022

Idiomatic Expression	n	%
To give the benefit of the doubt	20.00	7.69
To be set in stone (or concrete)	19.00	7.31
A stab in the back	19.00	7.31
An Achilles heel	18.00	6.92
To play devil's advocate	18.00	6.92
To play hard to get	17.00	6.54
To ring a bell	17.00	6.54
Finders keepers losers weepers	16.00	6.15
The third time is the charm	16.00	6.15
To be armed to the teeth	15.00	5.77
A man or woman of few words	14.00	5.38
To speak of the devil	14.00	5.38
To get one's wires crossed	13.00	5.00
A lump in the throat	13.00	5.00
To cost an arm and a leg	12.00	4.62
To be at a crossroads	12.00	4.62
To add fuel to the fire	12.00	4.62
To sell or go like hotcakes	11.00	4.23
To be alive and kicking	10.00	3.85
To beat about the bush	9.00	3.46
To pull someone's leg	8.00	3.08
To be between a rock and a hard place	7.00	2.69
To tighten your belt	5.00	1.92
By the skin of one's teeth	5.00	1.92
A bird of passage	4.00	1.54
Birds of a feather	4.00	1.54
A tough or hard nut (to crack)	4.00	1.54
To make mincemeat of someone	3.00	1.15
To know something inside out	1.00	0.38
Any/Every Tom, Dick, and Harry	0.00	0.00

Note. N = 30.; n = correct responses; SD = 2.27; Median = 4.62. Compiled by the author based on test responses.

In addition, responses were also analyzed according to their subcategory. As mentioned earlier, ten of the 30 idiomatic expressions were transparent, meaning they could be translated word for word. Another group of ten idiomatic expressions was semi-transparent. In this case, a part of the expression could be translated directly. Finally, none of the remaining ten idiomatic expressions had any words corresponding to the students' native language. This group was labeled "non-transparent idioms." As expected, students struggled with idiomatic expressions that were not similar in form to their semantic equivalents in Spanish. For example, transparent idioms had higher minimum and maximum scores. In addition, the mean and the median were also higher when compared to the semi-transparent and non-transparent idiomatic expressions. These results are consistent with the three subcategories: type of idiomatic expression, transparent idioms, and non-transparent idioms. The less transparency idiomatic expressions have, the more difficult it is for students to obtain better grades. Table 3 presents the analyses of idiomatic expressions according to their subcategory.

Table 3

Summary of scores per idiomatic expression: mean and standard deviation, Costa Rica, 2022

Type of idiomatic expression	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}$	Median	SD
Transparent idioms	1.54	7.69	5.31	5.58	2.14
Semit-transparent idioms	0.38	7.31	4.27	4.62	2.10
Non-transparent idioms	0.00	6.54	3.35	2.88	2.32

Note. N = 10. Min. = Minimum; Max. = Maximum; $\bar{X}$ = arithmetic mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Compiled by the author based on survey responses.

As can be seen, most idiomatic expressions are challenging for students. Only three idiomatic expressions ranked above seven on average. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that transparent idioms are easier for students. The level of transparency of idiomatic expressions influences how well students are able to interpret and translate them.

Students' perceptions of idiomatic expression training

Besides the idiomatic expressions test, the researcher inquired about students' perceptions of the training they received during their major. Although the majority of students consider idiomatic expressions instruction very important ($n = 16$; 61.5%) or important ($n = 9$; 34.6%), eight students (30.8%) consider this type of instruction very poor, while nine students (34.6%) consider it to be poor. Nine students (34.6%) believe that the instruction in idiomatic expressions they received during their major was acceptable.

The data collected also indicates that most participants ($n = 10$, 38.5%) did not believe that professors restricted the use of idiomatic expressions in any situation. However, a similar number of students ($n = 9$, 34.6%) stated that professors have indeed restricted the use of idiomatic expressions, while some ($n = 7$, 26.9%) were unsure about any restriction. In addition, 23 students (88.5%) believe that idiomatic expressions should be taught in oral courses. Only two students (7.7%) mentioned that idiomatic expressions should be taught in grammar courses. One student (3.8%) indicated that they should be incorporated in the first introductory courses, which focus on the four skills.

The lack of direct instruction of idiomatic expressions provided to students in this major was a recurring issue in the responses to the optional, open-ended question.

Example 1. I think it is important to include idiomatic expressions in the oral courses since they can improve people's conversational skills.
(Participant 2)

Example 7. Even though I feel proud of how much my english (sic) has improved, idiomatic expresions are a reminder that I'm not 100% there yet. (Participant 25)

Example 9. We do need more exposure to idiomatic expressions to at least be exposed more to the culturw (sic). (Participant 26)

Other comments indicated that, while some professors teach some idiomatic expressions, this is inconsistent. When professors teach idiomatic expressions, they do it because they consider it something that is lacking in the course syllabus.

This analysis provided insight into students' perceptions and knowledge of English idiomatic expressions. The findings also showed which areas required a more detailed emphasis or a more direct approach to improve the curriculum in general and the teaching of idiomatic expressions in particular.

Discussion

Limitations

The author would like to point out three main limitations of this study. First, this study included a small sample size. The number of students who participated is relatively low compared to the number of students enrolled in the major. A second limitation was the size and scope of the instrument used. For practical purposes, the survey and test were limited to a number of questions and items to guarantee adequate participation. However, the time needed to complete the instruments might have increased the chances of students not answering or guessing the answers. Finally, this study included expressions equivalent to Costa Rican Spanish. Idiomatic expressions from different regions may change. They can also be culturally bound or have specific semantic properties. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize these results to all the idiomatic

expressions in English or to the ones students need to know. Each language program should institutionalize content that suits their students' needs better.

Conclusions

This study has contributed to our understanding of students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. In addition, it has drawn attention to some aspects of idiomatic expressions training in the second language acquisition context. In accordance with the reviewed literature, idiomatic expressions are not always an integral part of language programs (Alhaysony, 2017; Gatambuki-Gathigia & Njoroge, 2016; Liontas, 2017). Neither the curriculum nor professors pay sufficient attention to these expressions. However, proficient students need to master these expressions in order to interact properly in real-life situations (Council of Europe, 2020). Therefore, students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions constrains their ability to communicate effectively.

Students' average scores demonstrate that their ability to produce idiomatic expressions falls short of what is expected of advanced students. In line with these findings, research has established that idioms pose difficulties for non-native speakers (Baker, 2018; Galantomos, 2021). Although gender may not be an essential factor for acquiring idiomatic expressions compared to other characteristics, age seems to play an important role. For example, older students achieve better results than younger students, even if they are enrolled in the same courses. Since, as will be explained later, the instruction does not seem to impact students' learning of idiomatic expressions, this improvement may be caused by experience and natural exposure to idiomatic expressions. Finally, considering the number of times that students opted out of answering a question, it is possible to infer that they are aware of their own gaps, which could constitute a real issue in other linguistic contexts.

In terms of idiomatic expression difficulty, these findings suggest that not all idiomatic expressions present the same difficulty to students. As research has suggested (Galantomos, 2021; Nunberg et al., 1994), less transparent idioms may either mislead a non-native speaker or cause a breakdown in communication. The findings of

this study are consistent with those of earlier studies (Ayto, 2020; Galantomos, 2021; Nunberg et al., 1994); however, they also focus on students' specific linguistic backgrounds. Since more opaque idiomatic expressions cause more problems for students, a possible approach may be to direct students' attention to the definition of idiomatic expressions and their importance in everyday communication and academic settings. After that, students may practice with transparent idioms and advance to more opaque ones in future courses. Since learning idiomatic expressions is challenging (Cedar, 2008; Council of Europe, 2020; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Sparado, 2013), students need to be exposed to them in various ways and consistently so they can become proficient English language users who can recognize and use idiomatic expressions properly.

As stated by students, the instruction received in English courses is sporadic or nonexistent in relation to the training of idiomatic expressions. In addition, according to Gatambuki-Gathigia and Njoroge (2016) and Alhaysony (2017), students state that, despite their importance, idiomatic expressions are not incorporated in language courses. While some professors restrict the use of idiomatic expressions or do not teach them, the ones who do teach them do so in isolation and on their own account. As mentioned earlier, students suggest that idiomatic expressions may be a suitable component for oral courses. Oral courses may include idiomatic expressions since they are commonly used in conversations. They may also serve as segmental and suprasegmental phonological models for students to imitate while learning about their meanings and how to use them in appropriate contexts.

Researchers should replicate this study in other language programs and according to students' particular linguistic context. Depending on students' native language and country of origin, idiomatic expressions may vary greatly. In addition, some expressions in English may be more transparent depending on the particular linguistic background of a foreign population. Further research should also be undertaken to determine the impact of including idiomatic expressions as part of the contents of a language program. Professors' and policymakers' opinions should be explored to discover why idiomatic expressions are not a standard component of the course syllabi. These results call for a thorough analysis of the curriculum and should serve as a basis for curricular reform in the language program.

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