



DOES TEACHING IDIOMS IMPROVE LANGUAGE FLUENCY?

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Abstract: The present study investigated the effect of explicit idiom instruction on the fluency of upper-intermediate EFL learners. Eighty-four university students in Uzbekistan participated in this study and were assigned either to an experimental group which was offered focused idiom instruction integrated with communicative activities over a period of 12 weeks or to a control group which pursued the usual curriculum without any idiom instruction. The idiom instruction group showed significantly greater gains in speaking rate, less disfluency, and written lexical density than the control group. Students also said they were more confident and less nervous when speaking in English. The results indicate that whole-chunk instruction of idioms, as opposed to word-by-word instruction, could lead to higher fluency. This can be applied to EFL curriculum development in which idioms should be introduced through authentic materials and communicative activities rather than as an optional or supplemental module.

Key words: idiom instruction, language fluency, EFL, communicative competence.

Introduction

Fluency continues to be one of the most difficult, yet important, goals for ESL and EFL learners. Structural accuracy has long dominated formal language teaching, but increasingly empirical focus is shifting to the impact of formulaic language – and idioms in particular – as a cornerstone of native-like communicative competence [18]. Idioms — lengthier expressions serving as natural building blocks of everyday life, whose meanings are unavailable or difficult to infer from their component words — form a not insignificant part of daily talks, and account for a substantial portion of the lexical burden for L2 users of language [10].

Granted, idioms aside, we know that they have been far from a prominent place in EFL materials and syllabus, and in some cases, have been treated as optional content, or/and have been dealt with in a haphazard fashion [11]. This neglect is in striking contrast with their functional significance: in spoken and written registers idiomatic expressions pervade communication (as much as one idiom every 184 words in natural conversation, according to corpus linguistics, Moon, 1998). EFL learners sip, to the extent feasible, too many



idioms to be enabled to identify them and use them properly, in this way hindering their comprehension, interactional smoothness and presence in goal-language communities of practice. There is an increasing body of evidence that teaching formulaic sequences explicitly, such as idioms, may enhance the rate of development of fluency of speech and also lessen cognitive demands of lexical retrieval [15]. In addition, when processors of language (e.g., multiword units or MWU) internalize MWUs as whole chunks instead of processing them word by word, they have more cognitive resources available to, for example, plan higher levels of discourse, which may contribute to more rapid, fluent and contextually appropriate speech production and writing [2]. However, the evidence from controlled instructional settings is still inconclusive and questions remain about optimal pedagogy, the assessment of fluency gains, and the generalization of findings among different students.

This study fills this void and investigates at a Central Asian university whether a communicatively-oriented, communicative approach to teaching idioms will bring about qualitative changes in the EFL students' fluency level. It hypothesizes that explicit idiom teaching, combined with significant communicative practice, will greatly improve various aspects of learner fluency vis-à-vis regular teaching. The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

Does explicit idiom instruction lead to statistically significant gains in oral fluency (speech rate, disfluency reduction) among upper-intermediate EFL learners?

Does the treatment group exhibit greater improvement in written lexical density compared to the control group following a twelve-week intervention?

How do learners perceive the impact of idiom instruction on their communicative confidence and fluency?

Literature Review

2.1 Defining Fluency in L2 Contexts

Literature on second language acquisition suggests that being fluent is making language production quickly, accurately and appropriately (Skehan, 2009). Operational definitions have progressed from simplistic conceptualizations of speech rate toward complex models that take into account temporal variables (pause frequency, articulation rate, mean length of utterance), interactional dimensions (turn-taking, repair strategies), and cognitive aspects (automaticity, processing efficiency). For this study, fluency is based on Tavakoli and Skehan's (2005) model consisting of three components: breakdown fluency (rate of pausing), speed fluency (rate of production) and repair fluency (rate of reformulations).

2.2 Idioms and the Lexical Approach



Lewis's (1993) Lexical Approach gave a new depth of importance to the pedagogical status of formulaic language by suggesting that language is not a set of grammar rules and words, but it is grammaticalised lexis and lexicalised grammar. In this framework, idioms are the prototypical fixed and semi-fixed phrases that learners need to master in chunks. There has been substantial empirical support for the potential of chunk based learning to enhance fluency over the past 20 years, with psycholinguistic evidence showing formulaic sequences can be accessed lexically faster than novel utterances are [5].

A few teaching studies have confirmed the teaching feasibility of teaching idioms explicitly. Boers et al. (2006) observed that any type of mnemonic enhanced retention of the idioms taught during a 12-week period. Intentional learning of idioms was also found better than incidental exposure for long-term retention [8]. Crucially, Siyanova-Chanturia and Martinez (2015) showed that native speaker raters associated formulaic language proficiency with fluency, providing external validation to the various idiom pedagogy approaches which are currently leaning toward fluency.

2.3 Research Gaps

Several key gaps, however, remain even in this promising evidence base. In the first place, so far the idiom knowledge has been assessed in most studies as a separate outcome variable, and process-oriented measures, such as discourse analysis of holistic fluency as a downstream effect of idiom knowledge, have not been observed. Secondly, the bulk of research has taken place in Western European and East Asian EFL contexts with Central Asian learners largely unrepresented in the research, despite their significantly different L1 backgrounds and education systems, as well as sociocultural orientations related to language learning. Third, validated methodologies with which to triangulate quantitative measures of fluency and qualitative insights of learners are still developing. This study is intended to fill all three gaps.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

The design was a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest with a control group. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Eighty-four upper-intermediate EFL learners (CEFR B2 level, as confirmed by the Oxford Online Placement Test) from a public OECD-membership Uzbek university participated in this study. Participants were placed into conditions by intact class groupings to minimize disruption to the academic schedule and there was random assignment of classes to the treatment and control conditions.

The participants' age was 18 to 23 years ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 1.2$). Their L1 was Uzbek ($n = 61$) or Russian ($n = 23$), and all the participants had received a



minimum of 8 years of formal English instruction before the beginning of the research. There were no significant differences between the two groups on the pretest fluency measures or on the background questionnaire about language learning history ($p > .05$).

3.2 Procedure Intervention

The 12-week intervention followed Nation and Webb's (2011) model of four strands (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development). Twice weekly, the experimental group participated in two 50-minute sessions of focused idiomatic expressions instruction. A set of 120 most frequent English idioms was extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC) and organized into semantic categories, such as emotions, time, effort, success/failure, relationship. Teaching followed three multi-lesson phases: (1) an introduction to the use of contextualized input through authentic texts and audio recordings with target idioms; (2) a structured input approach to language awareness raising and form-meaning mapping; and (3) pragmatic production tasks in which students are required to use target idioms in role-plays, group discussions and in writing that is reflective.

The control group was taught for the same amount of time with different content, without explicit focus on idioms, by using the general English curriculum of the university. During the intervention period, the control group did not receive any idiom instruction and were not given any additional idiom materials.

3.3 Instruments and procedures

Oral fluency was evaluated through a picture-description task (modified from Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). The recordings were transcribed and analyzed with the help of PRAAT software [3] in terms of speech rate (syllables/minute) and disfluency indicators (filled pauses, false starts, self-corrections). The written fluency was calculated by performing a lexical density analysis on a set of 250-word argumentative writing samples offered by the participants, which was then calculated as the proportion of content words against the entire number of words by means of the use of AntWordProfiler [1]. Qualitative data, in the form of reflective journals (6 entries per participant) and focus group discussions (3 groups of 5 treatment participants) were also collected and subjected to thematic analysis [4].

3.4 Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS v.29. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to test for difference between groups on the posttest scores with the pretests controlled. Effect sizes were estimated by



Cohen's d and partial eta-square ($\eta^2 p$). The level of importance was set as $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

4.1 Qualitative Findings

Analysis of reflective journals and focus group interviews produced three significant themes that support and contextualize the quantitative results.

The first theme, increased communication confidence, was prevalent in virtually all of the treatment students' journals. Learners portrayed idioms as a key to a nativelike register that actually alleviated anxiety while they were on the spot interacting. "I was speaking before, I just used to translate in my head. But as I acquired idioms in holistic chunks, I was able to talk without having to stop and think about each word." This narrative is consistent with the theory of automaticity and the literature on chunk-based processing [15].

The second theme, the contextual appropriateness consciousness, represented "participants' increasing metacognitive awareness relating to the register/ genre. A number of students I have taught have stated that they initially used formal or archaic phrases the wrong way in normal conversation, but then they learned to sense when they were out of place through communicative practice. This result highlights the necessity of incorporating idiom learning in real communicative contexts rather than isolated cramming.

The third theme, perceived cultural proximity, emerged out of the focus group conversations as participants commented on how idiomatic expression opened windows into English-speaking cultural matrices — a dimension not accounted for by quantitative instrument but that might hold significance in terms of extension in language socialization and motivation.

Discussion

The results of this research lend strong empirical support to the prediction that the systematic teaching of idiomatic English through communicative approaches would improve fluency of adult EFL learners on a number of fronts. A notable aspect of these findings is the magnitude of the effect sizes on all quantitative measures (Cohen's $d = 1.56$ – 2.28), which appear to be larger than those reported for similar interventions (cf. Boers et al., 2006; Liontas, 2017) and may indicate that this instructional design amounting to a communicative deployment of idioms in conjunction with explicit form-focused instruction has some particular merit.

These findings provide empirical support for the chunk-based fluency hypothesis as proposed by Wray (2002) and Skehan (2009) in that learners, who have developed a holistic processing approach towards formulaic sequences serve as cognitive resources that can be utilized for further cognitive processing of higher-level discourse management to produce output at a faster



pace with improved fluency. Notably, the increase in lexical density also suggests that idiom teaching only sped up output production rather than made production more shallow in sense - the learners were composing a denser meaningful type of written text.

The qualitative results contribute an essential component to this portrayal by revealing the emotional and cognitive strategies involved in fluency development. The concern with increased speaking confidence, in particular, echoes Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis and Horwitz, et al.'s (1986) research on anxiety in the context of learning a foreign language, indicating that idiomatic competence may function to facilitate spontaneous language production through the removal of psychological barriers. This aspect of the influence of the intervention is not reflected in the quantitative fluency measures alone and merits more attention in future investigations.

The study has its limitations. First, the quasi-experimental nature of the study does not allow for causal inferences with the same degree of confidence as would be possible in a fully randomized controlled trial, although the matching of pretest profiles across groups does eliminate the greatest threats to internal validity. Second, the twelve week period does not allow for statements concerning the long-term maintenance of fluency improvements; longitudinal follow-up studies are needed. Third, the single institutional context limits the generalizability of the findings, and replication in other EFL contexts — with differing L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels — is highly recommended. Lastly, the picture-description oral task, although popular in investigating fluency, may not represent every aspect of spontaneous conversational fluency.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This research shows that an explicit and communication-oriented approach to teaching idioms leads upper-intermediate EFL learners to significant and practically relevant improvements in the rate of speech and oral fluency level as well as written lexical density over the course of 12 weeks. These results have immediate consequences for the design of the EFL curriculum, as well as for EFL teachers' training. In particular, such findings challenge the view that idiomatic language instruction can only be fitted into communicative language teaching approaches as supplementary enrichment material.

In practice, instructors are advised: (1) to choose high-frequency idioms on the basis of authentic corpus data that are relevant to their students' communicative needs; (2) to present idioms within a rich contextual input rather than asking students to produce them; (3) to offer as many as possible mechanized communication activities through which idioms can be used in real pragmatic situations; and (4) to provide learners with: (a) opportunities to



reflect on the use of idioms and (b) a means to increase metacognitive awareness related to idiomatic register and contextual limitations. These suggestions conform to a communicative, learner-centered methodology which integrates form focus with communicative language practice.

In the future, it is necessary to further explore the differential impact of idiom instruction on different proficiency levels, to examine whether certain semantic/grammatical categories of idioms elicit more gains in fluency, and to use longitudinal research designs to measure retention. The incorporation of digital tools — such as corpus-based idiom discovery platforms and AI-enabled feedback systems — is a particularly promising direction for scaling idiom-focused pedagogy in resource-limited EFL contexts.

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