RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED THE EFL LEARNERS IN ACQUIRING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this Study was to point out the challenges that face the EFL in acquiring idiomatic expressions. The researcher has adopted a descriptive analytical method via questionnaire, pretest, and posttest as main tools for gathering the data concerning the study. The sample of the questionnaire study is composed of 43 lecturers and assistant professors of English language in   Nile Valley University and other Sudanese Universities. The sample of the pretest and the posttest was a purposive sample of approximately 60 undergraduate university students. They were all third-year students. The data obtained from the questionnaire have been processed computationally with SPSS program to examine the correctness of the hypothesis of this study. The results from these tools have shown that lacking of the cultural background, the structure of idioms, Idioms with no analogue in the mother tongue, the ineffective teaching strategies and the marginalization of idioms in universities' syllabuses.

Keywords: Challenges – Acquiring -idiomatic expressions

Introduction

This Study would investigate the difficulties face Sudanese tertiary level students in acquiring idiomatic expressions. Idiomatic expressions are considered as problematic elements for language learners. Despite their pervasiveness in the English language, they confused the beginner learners to such a large extent. They might cause not only linguistic but also cultural and technical problems to non-English speakers who learn English as an L2, and these problems may jeopardize communication (Thawabteh, 2011). This brought about a common belief among several language researchers that a sound knowledge of idioms is inevitable for English proficiency and fluency (Wray, 2002; Liu, 2008; Shirazi and Talebinezhad, 2013), and a lack of knowledge of idioms most frequently poses big misunderstandings. Such idiomatic knowledge involves, according to (Guduru, 2011, p.540), "cognitive processes, complex relationships, and abstract concepts, which are difficult to see, point to, touch, or act out." Thus, ESL/EFL learners cannot help but learn idioms, not only for academic purposes but also for day-to-day communication.

Aims and scope of the Study:

The aim of this study is to find out the difficulties face Sudanese tertiary level students in acquiring idiomatic expressions. The scope of the study is limited to thirty lecturers of Linguistics and English with different qualifications and experiences who taught in various Sudanese universities. In addition to the students who were third-year students, Department of English, Faculty of Education; Nile Valley University , Sudan in the academic year 2015 – 2016.

Literature review

Definitions of the idiomatic expression

Although there is no general agreement on the exact definition of idiomatic expressions , Many attempts have been made to define this term 'idiomatic expression.So,in this section the researcher provides definitions of idioms that are understood and defined by linguists . According toMoon (1997: 46) "idioms are a very complex group: not least because the term 'idiom' frequently occurs in the literature with a variety of different meanings." Liontas(2002: 59) touches on the same point, observing that:

> *"the problem with idiomaticity today is that there are too many definitions for the cover term idiom to be of any practical use to second language acquisition researchers and language-teaching professionals working in second/foreign languages and applied linguistics."*

According to Fernando and Flavell (1981: p.7), adopting that criterion alone or any other single criterion in order to define idioms leads to the problem of having a definition that does not seem to help linguists identify a sample of language elements as *idioms.* This is due to two reasons: first, English, if indeed not all languages, is full of different sorts of peculiarities, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic. That is, much disagreement might arise when it comes to defining an idiom by using the criterion of peculiarity, a semantic, syntactic or pragmatic violation. Second, most English idioms are grammatically well- formed (Cruse, 1995). Definitions of idiom based on peculiarity are considered the "earlier" (Fernando &Flavell, 1981, p. 1) or the "classic" (Liontas,2002c, p. 60) definitions of idiom.

Another earlier view of idiom is preserved in Hockett's "extreme" definition of idiom, as Liontas described it (2002:p. *61). It* is extreme in the sense that it qualifies every morpheme to be an idiom. Hockett (as cited in Makkai, 1972:p.28) defines *idiom* in the following way:

> *Let us momentarily use the term Y for any grammatical form the meaning of I which is not deducible from its structure. Any Y. in an occurrence in which it is not a constituent of a larger Y, is an idiom. A vast number of composite forms in any language are idioms. If we are to be consistent in our use of the definition, we are forced also to grant every morpheme idiomatic status, save when it is occurring as a constituent of a larger idiom, since a morpheme has no structure from which its meaning could be deduced.*

This definition, once again, does not seem to help identify a specific sample of language as idioms. Nonetheless, Hockett's definition, as Fernando and Flavell (1981) point out, is an insightful one as it highlights the role of context in identifying idioms.

Moreover, Hockett's definition shares the focus on *non-compositionality* that many recently offered definitions of idiom have. *Non-compositionalily* may be defined as "the degree to which a multi-word item cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialized unitary meaning" (Moon, 2002, p. 44). Non-compositionality appears frequently in the traditional (or classic) definitions of idiom. Cruse (1995, p. 37) states that "a traditional definition of idiom runs roughly as follows: an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts." Indeed, non-compositionality seems to be the criterion on which most of the definitions of idiom are based, not only the traditional ones. A number of scholars share this position; for instance, Liontas (2002: p. 59) takes this position by observing that "it suffices to say that today a majority of researchers has reached the consensus that idioms are, by nature, semantically non compositional." Likewise,

Moon (2002: p. 47) notes that "idioms rate highly in terms of non-compositionality." Furthermore, Grant and Bauer (2004) touch on the same point, "idioms are widely defined as being non-compositional."

Features of Idioms

This sub-topic is closely related to the nature of idioms which causes difficulties in understanding idioms. The researcher explores   the contribution of scholars in this area.

Pulman (1986:1) asserts that

"what idioms have in common with other fixed elements is that their meanings are not deducible from the ordinary meaning of their components by the usual rules of compositional semantics."

This points to the fact that one of the commonest features of idioms is its fixity in terms of deduction of meaning.

Pulman notes again that "idioms are pervasive in all styles of language use." It is very clear that idioms exist in all language with varied styles. The problem is that most times, learners especially second language learners cannot recognize them. This, Pulman pinpoints that the problem is that unlike (most) lexical items, (most) idioms have a considerable internal structure which seems to interact with the usual productive syntactic and semantic mechanisms of language in ways that render a 'look-up' approach impossible in the general case.

Many idioms are used in various languages without recognition because of their peculiarity. And this has continued to pose many problems in the appreciation, use and interpretation of idioms.

Another feature emphasized by Loreto and Ian (1986:414) is that idiomatic expressions are peculiarly problematic. They state that

"because there are no general rules which we can analogize about idiomatic usages, this area can present particular difficulties for learners of a language."

They emphasize that many fluent users of English especially as second language users are aware of most idiomatic expressions.

Fowler (1986:410) draws the same line of thought when he declares that

"because they are not governed by rules, idioms usually cause particular difficulty for people learning to speak and write a new language."

Specifically, he notes that second language learners find it difficult to choose appropriate prepositions at a particular situation.

There are many other features of idioms which are however manifested in the different forms of idioms. From this angle, Pulman notes that some idioms can appear in syntactically variant forms while some seem to be a fairly resistant to some particular paraphrase". Ifill (2002) in the same way notes that

"we see a division between transparent idioms whose syntactic structure is the same as their counterparts and opaque ones whose syntactic structure is different from their counterparts."

Obviously, this division, to a large extent, dictates how the idioms behave as well as how they are characterized .Pulman (1986:8) introduces another feature taking cognizance of the said variation when he says that

"they are in the main capable of internal modification, that is, the components of the idioms which are being modified." Ifill (2002:17) also notes that"another way that idioms can show variability from frozen form is through modification.".

However, Gazdar 1985 in Ifill (2002:15) points out that

"the idioms in which modification works are transparent, so their elements correspond to the elements of the non-idiomatic reading."

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In this case, it is remarkable that the modification that works in the idioms make sense with the non-idiomatic paraphrases. Individual words within an idiom can also accept modifications but there are limits as to which ones can. Sometimes when modification occurs, the resultant effect is idiom breaking. Ifill (2002:18) supports this briefly when he says,

> *"the fixedness of idioms is a quality which not only characterizes them, but can*
> *fit in with a view of idioms as internally structural lexical items."*

The issue of fixedness is not contestable; hence, it is a feature that shows idioms as having an internal structure. The point is that, most cases, individual words in an idiom cannot be replaced by synonyms and still retains the idiomatic reading of the phrase fixed forms. It is for these situations that we can rarely find words for substitution, nominalization, comparatives or superlatives and change of number. Examples are shown this:

Kick the bucket	correct
Hit the bucket	wrong
Bite the dust	correct
Biting of the dust	wrong
One in blue moon	correct
Once in a bluer moon	wrong
Raining cats and dogs	correct
Raining a cat and a dog	wrong

A portion of idioms allows different degrees of internal variability

Methods of the study

The researcher used the descriptive analytical method in an attempt to describe the research problem as it is**.**

Tools of the study

Two instruments of data collection were used (i) a survey questionnaire; the questionnaire was conducted by 30 lectures at different Sudanese universities (ii) tests (pre-test and post-test). The tests were done by the third-year students, Department of English, Faculty of Education; Nile Valley University. Each instrument has an important role in the survey work, as each instrument is suitable for obtaining a specific type of data.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was the main data-gathering tool. It was administered to the lecturers of English language in different universities in Sudan. The aim of this questionnaire was to obtain data to find out   the difficulties that face Sudanese tertiary level students in acquiring   idiomatic expressions. The results were presented in form of tables and charts as shown below.

The analysis of the questionnaire in relation to the challenges that face Sudanese tertiary level students in acquiring   idiomatic expressions.

Statement No. (1):The idioms form and structure have a role in the idiom familiarity to learners.

Table and chart No (1) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No.(1).

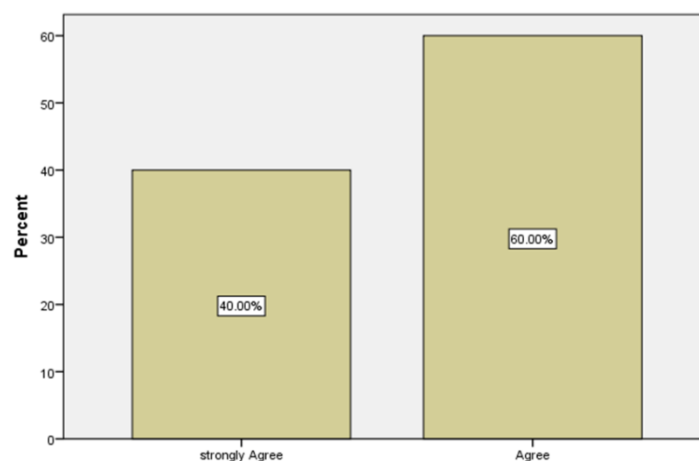| Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	12	18	-	-	-
Percentage	40	60	-	-	-

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Table and chart (1) display the statistical analysis on the idioms form and structure have a role in the idiom familiarity to learners. All the participants 100% strongly agreed and agreed that the idioms form and structure have a role in the idiom familiarity to learners. This shows that the form and the structure of the idioms is a real problem, which encounters the learners to understand and process idioms.

Statement No. (2): Idioms, which have unfamiliar words or have no equivalent in Arabic are difficult to be understood or processed.

Table and chart No (2) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (2)

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	13	14	2	1	-
Percentage	43.3	46.7	6.7	3.3	-
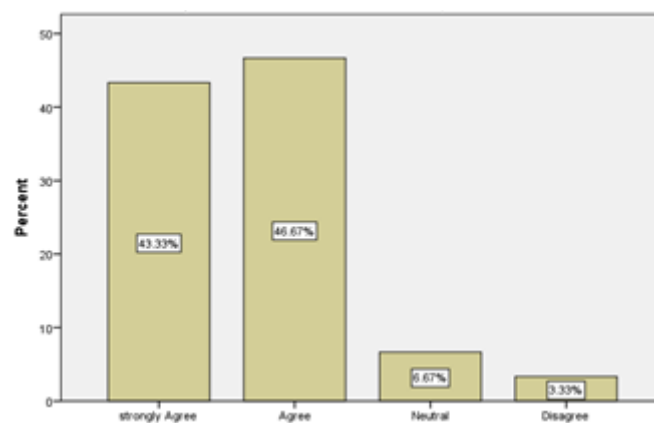
As shown in Table and chart (2) that 90% of the lecturers' responses agreed that mother tongue language contributes largely to learners' understanding and processing idioms. Only 3.3% of them disagreed and 6.7% were not sure

Statement No. (3):Idioms of preaching, idioms of social relation and geographical idioms are acquired better through stories, films, newspapers and videos

Table and chart No (3) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (3).

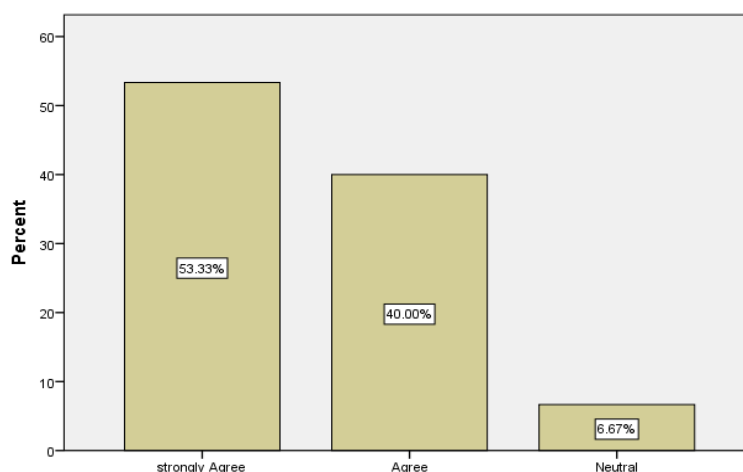| Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	16	12	2	-	-
Percentage	53.3	40	6.7	-	-

Table and Chart (3) reflect the results of acquiring idioms due to the teaching techniques. It is apparent that the learners have difficulties in acquiring idioms because of the teaching techniques. A vast majority of the lecturers' 93% strongly agreed and agreed, only 6.7% of them were not sure.

Statement No. (4):The lack of the English social culture leads to disability in acquiring idioms

Table and chart No (4) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (4)

| Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	19	9	1	1	-
Percentage	63.3	30	3.3	3.3	-
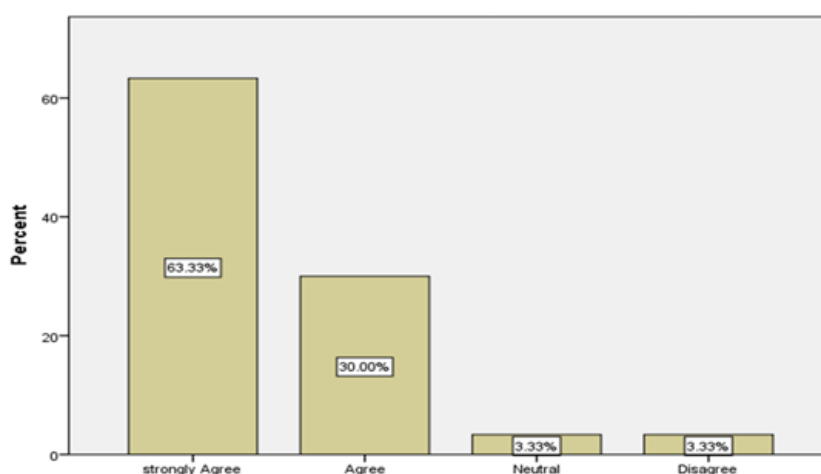
According to table and chart (4), it would appear that there might be a general agreement towards the importance of the English social culture on acquiring idioms, because 93.3% of the subjects were strongly agreed and agreed. Only 3.3% were not sure whether the English social culture has an effect on acquiring idioms or not. 3.3% were disagreed. Therefore, the lack of the cultural awareness is a big challenge to idioms acquisition.

Statement No. (5):Tteaching/learning of idioms using a categorization method makes them acquired easily and effectively

Table and chart No (5) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (5)

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	13	16	1	-	-
Percentage	43.3	53.3	3.3	-	-
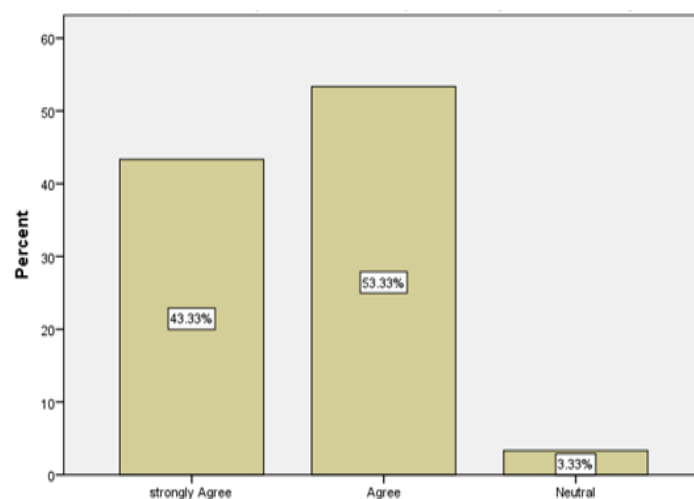
The result in table and Chart (5)reveals that almost all of the subjects, 96.6% strongly agreed and agreed that teaching/learning of idioms using a categorization method makes them acquired easily and effectively. Only 3.3% of the subjects were not sure. This indicates that the teaching/learning of idioms is affected by the techniques.

Statement No. (6): the syllabus lacks idioms so the students encounter difficulties in understanding the*m*

. Table and chart No (6) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (6)

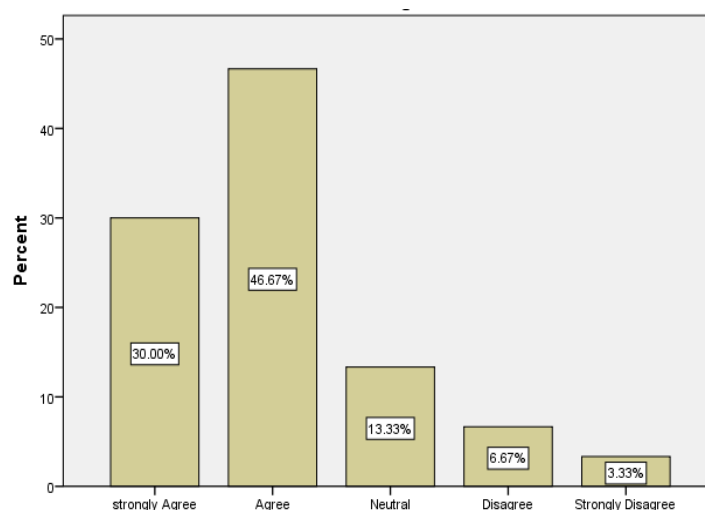| Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	9	14	4	2	1
Percentage	30	46.7	13.3	6.7	3.3

Table and Chart (6)reflect the result on the absence of idioms in the syllabus leads to difficulties in understanding and processing them. The majority of the lectures, 76.7% strongly agreed and agreed that the absence of idioms in the syllabus leads to difficulties in understanding and processing them. From 13.3% were not sure while only 10% were disagreed and strongly disagreed.

Statement No. (7):The idiomatic expressions aren't given enough attention in the syllabus in my department

Table and chart No (7) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No (7)

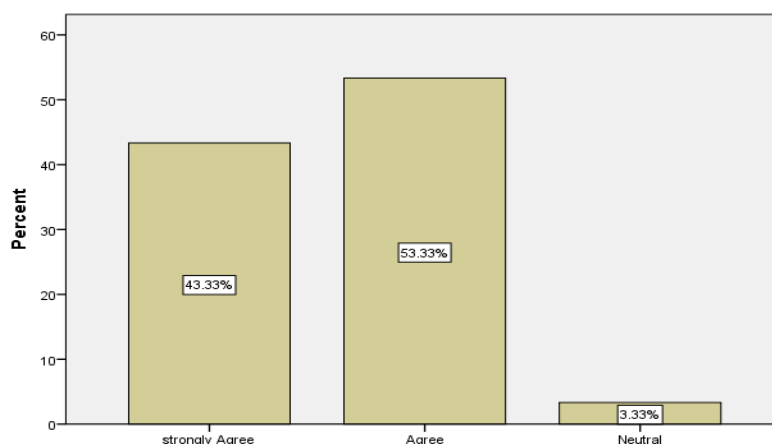| Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	13	16	1	-	-
Percentage	43.3	53.3	3.3	-	-

Table and Chart (7) displays the responses on the the importance of the idioms in the syllabus. The vast majority of teachers, 96.6% strongly agreed and agreed that there is no attention given to the idioms in the syllabuses. None of them disagreed and only 3.3% were not sure. This indicates all almost of the lecturers had general awareness about the extensive

Discussion

The data was collected and analyzed in relation to the hypothesis of the study. The data was collected via a questionnaire which had been distributed to lecturers and assistant professors of English language in Nile Valley University and other Sudanese Universities. Having analyzed and compared the results with the main hypothesis the results have shown in the following:

1.   Students lack of cultural background behind the idioms.

2.   Idioms with no analogue in the mother tongue are more difficult to grasp and to use. Besides that, the responses indicated that idioms with   unfamiliar words and those without context seem to be difficult to acquired   and processed.

3.   The students are not equipped with specific strategies for acquiring and using certain idioms.

4.   The form and the structure of the idioms is a real problem, which encounters the learners to understand and process idioms.

5.   Idioms expressions are not focused on and included within the syllabuses of universities in Sudan.

6.   Students had negative attitudes towards the important role of idioms expressionsin English language.

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