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Fixed Expressions in English Teaching Environments

A B S T R A C T

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Learners of English language come from different parts of the world, whether native or non-native. Despite their different backgrounds, however, all English language users should be capable of producing and comprehending fixed expressions, which are used daily and spontaneously in everyday English. Fixed expressions, are various and of different types. Moreover, they are considered an indispensable part of the English language. Yet, learners of the English language, especially those of L1 Arabic mother-tongue, lack the ability to understand and use fixed expressions used in English verbal communication

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تعبيرات ثابتة في بيئات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية

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الخلاصة

يتعلم متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية من أجزاء مختلفة من العالم ، سواء كانت أصلية أم غير أصلية. على الرغم من خلفياتهم المختلفة ، ومع ذلك ، يجب أن يكون جميع مستخدمي اللغة الإنجليزية قادرين على إنتاج وفهم تعبيرات ثابتة ، يتم استخدامها يوميًا وتلقائيًا في الإنجليزية اليومية. التعبيرات الثابتة ، متنوعة وأنواع مختلفة. علاوة على ذلك ، يعتبرون جزءًا لا غنى عنه من اللغة الإنجليزية. مع ذلك ، يفتقر متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية ، خاصة متعلمي اللغة العربية L1 ، إلى القدرة على فهم واستخدام التعبيرات الثابتة المستخدمة في التواصل اللفظي باللغة الإنجليزية

Introduction

Fixed expressions are a part of every language's vocabulary and is based upon that language's history, heritage and culture. Fixed expressions in the English language are extremely important in verbal communication. English native speakers use fixed expressions when they communicate on a daily basis. In linguistic studies, it is said that fixed expression add flavor to communication and speech. Thus, learning and using fixed expressions is a necessity. Nevertheless, the acquisition and learning of such expressions is not as easy as one might think. Second and foreign language learners of the English language usually lack the ability to produce and understand the meaning of fixed expressions when communicating in the English language. Second/foreign English language learners find using fixed expressions to be a difficult and uneasy issue, unlike native English speakers, who use it subconsciously. Learning how to produce and recognize the meaning of fixed expressions should be regarded as an essential part of English language learning process. Nonetheless, and despite such facts, fixed expressions are found to be unenclosed in many English second/foreign language learning materials. Second/foreign English language environments and classrooms abandon paying attention to such important features of the English language. The aim of this paper is to emphasize that learning and using fixed expressions in English is obligatory. By showing second/foreign English learners' lack of knowledge in the subject of fixed expressions, dissimilar to their native English counterparts, it is aimed to arrive at a clear analysis of the requirements of such a problem.

Literature Review

In English language, fixed expressions are used in both formal and informal communication. Fixed expressions are highly important and are considered a basic part of English language. However, it is necessary to explain what is meant by "fixed expressions" first of all.

According to Sprenger (2003:107) fixed expressions are a group of two or more words that carry a specific concept. According to Hillert and Swinny (2005: 107) fixed expressions are expressions that have non-literal interpretations. For example, the expression "to kick the bucket" has nothing to do with the physical action of kicking a bucket with one's leg. This expression carries a non-literal interpretation in which "to kick the bucket" means is "to die". Also, the expression "it's raining cats and dogs" means "it is raining heavily". So, this fixed expression has an overall meaning that is not similar to the meaning of the words composing the expression. I.e., there is nothing similar between the words "cats" and "dogs" and the overall meaning of the expression which is "raining heavily".

Most English language learners lack the ability to understand and use fixed expressions. This, in turn, distinguishes English language learners from native English language speakers. English speakers of native origins are found to use fixed expressions abundantly, daily and spontaneously.

As such, there is a "need to focus on fixed expressions in English". (Alexander, 1984: n.p.)

According to linguists, fixed expressions include a variety of types. Fixed expressions are said to include metaphors, metonymies, idioms or idiomatic expressions, sayings, similes, phrasal verbs, etc. (Hradilova, 2011: 2)

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which we make an indirect or implicit comparison between two things that are dissimilar but share something in common. For example, "Ali is the black sheep of the family". Here, Ali is not black and is not a sheep, but the characteristic in common between the two is that they are unwanted or do not follow the group. The resemblance is that a black sheep usually stays away from the rest of the herd and does not follow it. Here, the comparison made is implicit, hidden and is considered an indirect comparison. ("Metaphor", 2017).

Metonymy, nonetheless, is a figure of speech in which a name of an object is used for another due to being a part of that item or due to a relation between the two. For example, referring to a monarch as "the crown". ("Metonymy", 2017).

Idioms are expressions that have a non-literal meaning in which its overall meaning is different from the meanings of its constituent parts. Example, "kick the bucket". (Cowie et. al., 1983:xi)

A simile, unlike a metaphor, is defined as a figure of speech that makes a direct comparison between two different things by using "as" and "like", in order to show the similarity between these two things and the resemblance between them. For example, "Sarah is as slow as a snail". ("Simile", 2017).

A saying, moreover, is defined as "any concisely written or spoken linguistic expression that is especially memorable because of its meaning or structure." A saying is "something said". It is like a proverb and is similar to an idiom. ("saying", 2017).

A phrasal verb is defined as "a phrase that consists of a verb plus an adverbial or prepositional particle, esp one the meaning of which cannot be deduced by analysis of the meaning of the constituents: *"take in" meaning "deceive" is a phrasal verb.*" ((Phrasal verb, 2017).

As seen from above, fixed expressions include a number of types and are various. Fixed expressions also carry indirect and implicit meanings. Therefore, fixed expressions are sometimes found hard to understand by second/foreign English language learners because they carry different meanings from the words that compose these expressions. I.e., fixed expressions as a whole are not interpreted literally. This is known, in linguistics, as decomposability. For example, the expression "to spill the beans" has a figurative meaning, not a literal one. That is, the expression "to spill the beans" does not mean actually spilling or dropping a can of beans. This expression means "to tell a secret" and not otherwise. This, in linguistic studies, is known as "non-compositional" expressions referring to a combination of words that carry meanings that are not to be interpreted by literally analyzing the meanings of the words composing such expressions. (Salakoski, 2006:88).

Fixed expressions are composed of a group of words that when analyzed individually mean rather

different meanings than when interpreted as a whole single expression. Fixed expressions have figurative meanings, not literal ones. (Sandy, 2002: 167).

Methods

The methodology this paper follows is a qualitative approach, relying on the analysis and description of previous researches and studies of fixed expressions and their importance. This paper relies on analysis of previous evidence and previous case studies. By analyzing and studying such data, results and data are collected.

Results

Teaching fixed expressions in English second/foreign language classrooms is a necessity. Teaching English language learners to use fixed expressions when verbally communicating and even when writing is a necessity. Teachers should become aware of the importance of using fixed expressions. Language learning materials, environments, and classrooms need to include fixed expressions as a worthy subject to be studied. Fixed expressions are undividable in both spoken and written discourse. Therefore, more care needs to be paid to this subject. Fixed expressions, of various types, are found to be a necessity of the English language learning process. Learning the meanings of the variable types of fixed expressions and learning to produce them correctly and adequately enough will help English language learners to attain a better English language proficiency. The more the learner is capable of using fixed expressions correctly, the better.

Native English language speakers learn to use fixed expressions naturally due to the fact that they grow up in environments in which these expressions are heard daily. However, second/foreign English language learners, specifically L1 Arabic learners of the English language, are found ignorant when understanding and producing fixed expressions in discourse.

Lacking the skill of using and understanding fixed expressions is a lapse in that learner's second/foreign language knowledge. An inability to perform properly when using fixed expressions in everyday English discourse could result in a lack of English language knowledge, in general.

By studying the findings of previous researches regarding fixed expressions in the English language, this paper points to the need and necessity of including fixed expressions and the knowledge of them in English educational systems and English language teaching environments.

The paper identifies the reasons behind the lack of knowledge with concern to fixed expressions and the inability of English language learners to use fixed expressions spontaneously, similar to native English speakers. This is a problem to be taken into consideration, especially when it comes to L1 Arabic learners' comprehension and competence in such a subject.

There are many suggested reasons to such a problem. Reasons behind such lack of competence could be due to differences between languages and the culture of these languages. Differences between the learner's mother-tongue and the target language is known to be a source of plenty of

errors and mistakes. Also, the culture behind these languages could also lead to misinterpretations, misunderstandings and confusion of the target language's culture. For example, the Arabic language uses a number of fixed expressions, however, differences between the Arabic culture and the English culture includes differences in the interpretations of the meanings of shared fixed expressions. The Arabic language culture and English language culture have a number of shared fixed expressions but the meanings of those expressions are interpreted differently by both cultures. For example "to look someone in the eye" in the Arabic language has a different meaning than what is meant, by the same expression, in the English culture. In the English culture "to look someone in the eye" carries the meaning of "trying to convince her/him that you are telling the truth". However, In the Arabic culture "to look someone in the eye" means "to defy" that someone.

Fixed expressions carry figurative meanings, not literal ones. Fixed expressions are composed of a group of words that when analyzed individually mean something different than the meanings interpreted as a whole single expression. All this could lead to language learning problems, especially when it comes to knowledge and competence abilities in the use of fixed expressions.

Failure to adequately comprehend and, therefore, produce fixed expressions proficiently, similar to native English speakers, is also due to the lack of exposure to fixed expressions in English language learning environments. Native English speakers are exposed to fixed expressions naturally and daily. Learners of English, especially those from a native Arabic tongue, lack such an advantage.

English teaching environments, such as language teaching classrooms, English teaching materials, books and teachers neglect the presence of fixed expressions as a subject worthy of studying. As a result, learners of English do not possess such necessary language skills and knowledge.

Discussion

All learners of a new language encounter and face diverse difficulties in their new target language learning attempts. Regardless of their backgrounds, learners of English language face many difficulties when trying to learn English language. Learning a new language requires learning new language sounds, rules, features and so on. Part of the English language learning process should require learning fixed expressions that are a crucial part of English language. The lack of adequate knowledge of English fixed expressions is a lack of adequate knowledge of English language itself. English language learners' inability to use fixed expressions in English is a failure in native-like ability and thus a shortage in those learners knowledge of English, in general.

English language learners encounter difficulties in comprehending the meanings of fixed expressions used in English language. Fixed expressions are found difficult for second/foreign English language learners, especially L1 Arabic learners of English. These difficulties need to be taken into consideration. For instance, due to the differences between both languages and due to differences in the culture of these languages, differences in interpretations of the meanings of fixed

expressions could arise. The Arabic language also uses fixed expression, nevertheless there are different interpretations to some fixed expressions that are used by both languages. Such issues are found to cause difficulties in learners comprehension of fixed expressions used in the English language.

Furthermore, learners of English language find it uneasy to link between the fixed expression and its metaphoric meaning. The link between the fixed expression and its meaning is hard to be pertained because this expression carries words that mean other than what they seem. That is, the overall meaning of the fixed expression is not easily realized from the meaning of its parts.

English second/foreign language learners are unexposed to fixed expressions, unlike their native counterparts, who grow up using fixed expressions regularly. English language learning classrooms and materials also lack the presence of fixed expressions abundantly enough. Teachers of English language do not expose their students to fixed expressions and do not teach them well enough. All these issues are suggested to be causes of the insufficient knowledge of fixed expressions used in English language. English language learning materials and environments are found to be a serious cause of such language inefficiencies.

Due to these reasons, it is suggested, here, that fixed expressions are to be taught more frequently in second/foreign language classrooms. Teaching fixed expressions, especially those that are used commonly by native English speakers should not be neglected and should not be taken for granted. English language teaching environments should include the subject of fixed expressions and should try to improve learners' skills in understanding and using fixed expressions in everyday English discourse.

Fixed expressions that are used frequently by native English speakers should be included in English language teaching environments. Fixed expressions that are used in television programs, music, books, and both spoken/written discourse ought to be taught to English language teaching environments. ("Teaching Idiomatic Expressions", n.d.).

Using fixed expressions in English verbal communication is a must and should not be neglected. The more fixed expressions are comprehended and produced, the better and more native like the speaker will appear. The less the learner's ability to understand fixed expressions used in daily English verbal communication, the greater the lapse in that learner's second/foreign language knowledge. When learners of the English language encounter fixed expressions they usually lack the ability to perform properly either due to their inadequate knowledge of commonly used fixed expressions or their inability to use such expressions in communication.

Deficiency in English language learners' knowledge and production of fixed expressions is considered to be a cause of language performance incapability, as well as language incompetence, in general. Therefore, second/foreign language learners' incompetence of the English language, besides being asserted to a number of reasons, could be also asserted to incompetence in the use and comprehension of fixed expressions. Not only is this a lack of English language competence

but also a lack of knowledge of English culture and heritage.

It should be taken into consideration that the use of such expressions by second/foreign English language learners is not easy. However, this is not an illegible excuse to neglect teaching fixed expressions in English language teaching classrooms and materials. Causes of such difficulty should be taken into consideration and attempts to overcome them should be considered. Knowledge of the meanings of the variable types of fixed expressions and using them daily in discourse and verbal communication allows users to sound more native-like. And, as a result, the more creative and natural English language capabilities appear. Learners of English, from non-native origins, who use fixed expressions when communicating, not only become more fluent and sound more native-like but will increase their vocabulary and lexicon of the English language as well. Second/foreign English language learners, who possess knowledge of various types of fixed expressions used in English daily communication will also reach a better understanding of the English people's culture and customs. In turn, this leads to comprehensive and broad competence in the field of English language learning and teaching.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that the various and different types of fixed expressions are used repeatedly, daily and spontaneously by native speakers of English, unlike non-native English speakers who lack such an important language skill.

As mentioned before, fixed expressions are a part of every language's vocabulary and is based upon that language's history, heritage and culture. Fixed expressions, despite being variable and numerous, are extremely important in English language, especially verbal communication. Therefore, fixed expressions should not be neglected in English language teaching environments and should not be taken for granted.

Despite the fact that it may not be easy for English language learners to understand and use fixed expressions when communicating in English, teachers should not overlook such a fundamental issue. In order to reach better language proficiency and more unified language skills, it is important that English language teaching systems, materials, classrooms and teachers become aware of the necessity of such a subject.

In conclusion, English language teachers should highlight, to their students, the importance of using fixed expressions in communication and the importance of recognizing their meanings. Teachers should explain the meanings of frequently used fixed expressions in order to help learners of English acquire and learn these expressions. Teaching fixed expressions, of various types, is necessary. English second/foreign language classrooms, textbooks and materials should include these expressions. All in all, education systems should consider the needs of teaching fixed expressions seriously and should place more focus on learners' comprehension and production abilities of daily used fixed expressions in the English language.

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