

PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAPS: DIFFICULTIES FACED BY NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN THE COMPREHENSION OF IDIOMS

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Abstract:

Idioms are phrases, or groups of words that imply something very different from what the phrase explicitly says. It has been observed that language acquisition for non-native speaker (in terms of the English language) can be relatively easy when compared to some other languages like French, Kannada or Spanish, but to acquire and master the nuances of the language, like idioms, are quite difficult. This research studies if there are any difficulties faced by the non-native English speakers in comprehending and using idioms. A quanti-quali study was undertaken, using a questionnaire and the data collected was analysed. It was observed that although there are variations among the two different groups of people from different streams of study who were taken as the sample, there is not much difficulty faced in comprehending simpler idioms. It is concluded that as a result of a highly English language focused teaching in in the Indian education system, the comprehension of idioms has become easier for Indians.

Keywords: *Idioms, quanti-quali, non-native, English.*

It is said that well begun is half done. The comprehension of the essence of this paper, while not rocket science, is definitely not a piece of cake either. To make a long story short one has to stop beating around the bush and go back to the drawing board.

It is time to address the elephant in the room: idioms.

To put it very simply, idioms are phrases, or groups of words that imply something very different from what the phrase explicitly says. For example, the idiom “beating around the bush” does not involve beating a bush, rather it means that one should get straight to the point. It has been observed that language acquisition for non-native speaker (in terms of the English language) can be relatively easy when compared to some other languages like French, Kannada or Spanish, but to acquire and master the nuances of the language, like idioms, are quite difficult.

What are the reasons for difficulty, if any, faced by the non-native English speakers in comprehending and using idioms?

According to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, attempt to boil down the complexity of idioms into a single-criterion definition is confusing and erroneous. Idioms are dependent on a number of factors such as inflexibility, conventionality, figuration, etc. They further elaborate by saying that idioms are sometimes derived from metaphors (figuration), that their meaning cannot be predicted when the individual constituents of the idiom appear in situations other than as part of the idiom itself (conventionality) and that the constituents of the idiom more often than not, need to remain in the same structure for it to make sense. Any distortion in the structure of the idiom will lead to either a change in meaning, or will not offer any meaning (Nunberg, Sag, Wasow, 1994).

Benczes, in her article says that according to the Frege's principle, the meaning of any sentence can be derived and comprehended by splitting the sentence into its individual constituents and looking at them in isolation. The problem however arises when idioms are brought into the picture. Like mentioned before, idioms exist on the premise that they imply something that is very different from what the constituents of the phrase mean. Most linguists look at idioms as polylexemic, which basically means that idioms cannot

be understood from the meaning of its parts (Benczes, 2002).

A review by Matlock of a book “Idioms: Structural and Psychological Perspectives”, looks at all the studies conducted on idioms till now and explores the gap in research. Arguments which support compositionality which means that individual constituents also contribute to the meaning of the idiom. Both figurative and literal meanings are immediately formed in one's mind when an idiom is read. Flexibility is again dealt with in the book where the argument is that it is possible in some idioms to rearrange the words and still retain the meaning, but in most cases, it will lead to a phrase that makes no sense. Various arguments dealt by various critics appear in the book, but Matlock says that many of the key areas of research are left unexplored in this book. For example, the connection between idioms and phrasal verbs is not addressed at all. There is no knowledge provided of how idioms are imbibed by children, and most importantly, how idioms and polysemy are so closely related. (Matlock, 1998).

Another problem associated with idioms is polysemy. Polysemy occurs when a word has more than one meaning, and these meanings are systematically related (Lakoff, as quoted by Csabi, 2004). This becomes especially evident in idioms. Another related concept is that of homonyms. Homonyms are words that possibly have the same spelling and sometimes are even pronounced the same way, but have different meanings. For non-native English speakers, it becomes especially difficult to comprehend idioms because of homonyms and polysemy. For example: if we look at the idiom “make hay while the sun shines”, we can see that the word 'make' can have multiple meanings that are related. It could refer to the physical act of making something, or it could also lie along the lines of the sentence “make a confession”, which refers to simply saying something. However the meaning of the idiom itself, is that if one is presented with an opportunity, then one should utilise it to the fullest potential, or 'make' the best use of it.

Another example to explain homonyms can be the idiom “a heavy purse makes a light heart” in this scenario, for a non-native English speaker, light could mean something along the lines of daylight, the weight of an object, or feeling dizzy (light-headed). In such cases, it is possible that the individual gets confused with the ambiguous nature of the idiom. Through this perspective, it is understood that the basic nature of idioms is their vagueness. The idiom unless spoken in a context will give no indication of its implied meaning to the reader. In such a case, if two of these research gaps are combined, how do non-native English speakers comprehend idioms, and what are the inherent problems of idioms that affect their understanding of it?

Yandell and Zintz performed a study with 390 students from the sixth grade, all of whom were non-native English speakers, where in the students were given 90 questions on idioms commonly used in fourth, fifth and sixth grade students' textbooks in America. As expected, it was found that non-native speakers of English found difficulty in grasping the meaning of idioms, even though the idioms were used as parts of longer sentences, within a context (Yandell, Zintz, 1961). In a similar study conducted by Lorenz, a school teacher, idioms were taught to non-native speakers of English by asking them to visually represent idioms. For instance, the idiom “Cracks me up” was represented by showing a human body laughing, while it is cracked in half. “Money talks” was represented by drawing faces on money bills. (Lorenz, 1977) The drawback of this study is that it uses a story-telling narrative, and does not delve into the results of such an experiment. It is unknown if this method of teaching idioms to the students was effective or not.

The major limitation faced is that there isn't enough evidence to validate the arguments presented, as only a few studies conducted previously has been analysed. The use of idioms is an area of study that has been extensively researched, and there is a mine of unexplored information left to study. With more information, the arguments presented will have a more solid foundation. Another limitation, which can also be considered a strength is that not many researches have been done in the Indian context. The studies conducted till now have not focused on the Indian population, so, using those results as a backing for this area is not advisable. Therefore, it can be said that this area is one that has a lot of scope. From the analysis

of the limited number of studies, it seems that the comprehension of idioms still appears to challenge non-native speakers of English. This is because of the very fact that idioms do not mean what they say. In such a situation, how will this study be relevant?

In a country like India, which is the true epitome of a 'melting-pot' of cultures and languages, and where, of the 22 spoken languages, English is not recognized as one of the official languages, this study becomes especially relevant. Globalization and Westernization has definitely led to a dramatic increase in the English speaking population in the country, with English as a core subject in almost all the schools, but the fact remains that Indians are learning a language that is not native to them. In such cases, even if one masters the pronunciation, grammar, and accent of speaking the language, intricate aspects of the language like idioms, metaphors, metonymy, etc. become slightly more difficult to comprehend and imbibe.

This is an area of research that has a lot of scope because although idioms are taught as literary devices in schools; as part of poems, prose or even in isolation, it is unclear if the individual simply rote learns the idioms, or if he actually understands the meaning of the idiom, and is capable of using it in real life. This brings in another problematic area does the use of idioms in conversations make the speaker more proficient in the language? Is it possible to convey the same meaning in simpler words? Nonetheless, this area is relevant in country that is full of non-native speakers, many of whom wish to settle in countries where idioms are used as part of casual conversation. The methodology used in the following study is that of a quanti-quali study. The questionnaire developed has two types of multiple choice questions the first 8 questions will analyse the respondent's understanding of slightly complex idioms and the subsequent 8 questions will analyse the understanding of simpler idioms. The idioms are presented in isolation, and not placed within a sentence. The options given will contain both the literal and figurative meaning of the idioms. The questionnaire will also contain a demographic profile which consists of questions relating to age, field of study, and boards of education (medium of instruction in previous institutions). These questions are asked in order to understand if early exposure to an 'English-language-based-teaching' has an impact on the respondents' understanding of the idioms. The final question is whether the respondents, themselves feel that usage of idioms is necessary or not. The results would then indicate clearly if there is any difficulty faced by people in understanding idioms. The results could then be analysed in terms of whether people chose the implied or figurative meaning, or the literal meaning of the idiom. By analysing the answers within these parameters, one may understand where the difficulty, if any lies, in comprehending idioms. The reason that this study would not be considered as a purely quantitative or a purely qualitative study is because at its core the research still deals with language and art which is something very subjective, and can never be 'quantified'. Even after the results are obtained, the analysis will be done in a qualitative manner. That is why this research would be a quanti-quali study.

As mentioned before, because of globalization and westernization, Indians, especially those residing in cities, not only have access to Western media, which uses idioms aplenty, but also the educational system emphasizes and gives importance to not just learning, but actually imbibing the meanings of idioms. So it is possible that the results of this study may be completely different from the results of the previous studies. While previous studies showed that non-native speakers found it quite difficult to grasp idioms, it is very likely that the scenario has changed now. That is why a possible finding is that the current sample may be very proficient in idioms.

The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 20 individuals (which was split into 2 different groups). Among these 20 people, 10 individuals are from an Engineering background, and 10 are from a Humanities (students of English literature) background. All 20 individuals are students, of the same age group (21-22 y/o), and all of them have been exposed to English as a mode of instruction in their respective institutions. The reason for choosing students from two different backgrounds of study was to analyse if the background of study affects the comprehension of idioms.

The questionnaires were given as a hard copy to these students and they were given a time of 10

minutes to attempt these questions. The answers were analysed to show the following results. The first 8 questions were relatively uncommon idioms that could be perceived as complex by non-native speakers of English. A look at the Engineering sample of the students showed that exactly 80% of the sample scored less than 6 on 8. This implies that 8 students scored in the ranges of 1-5 in the 'complex' section of the questionnaire. The other 20% of the sample answered all 8 questions correctly. An in-depth analysis showed that these respondents faced difficulty in similar questions.

For instance, in question number 2, 'Not playing with a full deck', 8 students chose option (a), which was 'not fully prepared'. The reason for this could be that these respondents looked at the literal implication of 'not playing with a full deck', which is that a person is not prepared enough to play the game. However, the meaning of this idiom is that a person isn't smart, to the point that he may be called mentally deficient. Another question that most students answered wrong was question number 4, 'Cut the mustard'. 5 out of 10 respondents answered this question with option (d), which was 'come straight to the point'. This question is particularly interesting, because the literal meaning of this phrase would mean that a person is trying to avoid mustard. The reason they chose option (d), is not very clear, but it is possible that they understood this idiom in the same sense of 'cut the nonsense', which means that a person should stop speaking unnecessary things and get straight to the point. However, this is just an assumption.

Question number 3 was 'Don't give up the day job'. The correct answer was option number (b): 'Don't go after something you're not good at', but, 5 out of the 8 who answered this question incorrectly, chose option (c) which was 'Don't give away your only source of income'. The first notion that appears in a person's mind when the term 'day-job' is used is probably that this job is the main job, considering that the accepted norm and the majority population work during the day. In such a case, the first understanding of such a phrase would be that giving up your day job would mean giving up your source of income.

It is interesting to note that none of the respondents chose the literal meaning of the idiom as their answer. This implies that all respondents have understood the basic concept of idioms. However, in questions such as the 2 shown above, respondents have chosen the literal *implication* as an answer. A literal implication means that when a certain phrase is used, idioms mean something very different from what they may seem to imply.

In the other sample of the population (students from a Literature background), 100% of the population scored in the range of 6-7, on a total of 8 questions. Again the question that was answered wrong by almost all students was question number 2, as explained above.

It can be observed that the respondents from the second sample fared better than the respondents from the first sample. It is possible that because all the respondents from the second sample are from a background of English literature, they are well-versed in the comprehension and use of idioms. It is also interesting to note that all of these 10 respondents answered that they use simple idioms in their day-to-day speech. But a small percentage of them (30%) opined that the same idea could be conveyed in simple sentences rather than using idioms. In the other sample of students also, around 8 of the respondents answered 'Yes' to the question "Do you use idioms in your daily speech?", but the same 8 respondents also said that the use of idioms is unnecessary.

Moving on to the second set of questions which contained the relatively simpler idioms, the results were along the expected line. In both samples, majority of the respondents got either all or almost all the answers right.

Idioms like 'cutting some slack', 'get out of hand' and 'hit the sack' are common replacements for longer sentences that would explain the same thing. Instead of saying, "I'm going to get some sleep, as I am very tired", one can say "I'm going to hit the sack".

The idiom that most respondents got wrong in this set of questions was 'to go back to your drawing board'. (question number 10). Some respondents chose option (c), which was 'learning a new skill' and an equal number chose the right option which was option (b) 'starting over.' The ambiguity behind the choice

of the respondents cannot be determined with accuracy but it is possible that they associated going back to a drawing board, with starting on a blank slate, and developing new skills.

From the analysis of the data a few conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it is very clear that the exposure to English language from an early age is a significant contributor in the comprehension of idioms. All the respondents answered 'Yes' for the question regarding the mode of instruction in all their previous institutions. When one is exposed to a certain language for many years, and begins to speak in that language for communication, the nuances of the language, though not naturally, will get acquired in the individual. A major reason for even students who are not from an English Studies background performing in an above average manner in the questionnaire could be the fact that they have been exposed to English from a young age.

Secondly, even though the Engineering respondents performed fairly well; when their scores are placed against the scores of the Literature students, it is clear that there is a difference. A reason for this could be that, these students of Literature are exposed to literary texts from around the world, like American and British literature, and in such a case, they are also exposed to the idioms and phrases used in these literary texts. Also, since essentially they are connoisseurs of language, they tend to appreciate and understand the slight nuances of language more than others.

Closely related to the above conclusion is the fact that almost all the Literature students answered that use of idioms is necessary, contrary to the Engineering students who didn't feel idioms were necessary. However, a significant number of engineering students did admit to using simple idioms in their daily speech. This shows that idioms are not just being rote-learned by students, they are actually being imbibed, because when idioms are used as a part of daily speech, it does imply that one is comfortable with using idioms, and that one has understood the meaning of it.

The above two conclusions were made in regard to the complex section of idioms. Coming to the relatively simpler idioms, it was observed that both samples performed equally well. This clearly shows that the times have changed from the studies conducted many years ago. In a study conducted by a few scholars it was found that non-native speakers of English found difficulty in grasping the meaning of idioms, even though the idioms were used as parts of longer sentences, within a context (Yandell, Zintz, 1961). But this study was conducted in 1961, almost 60 years ago. Simple idioms have definitely become a part of the daily conversation of even non-native English speakers.

Finally, it can be concluded that the difficulty faced by non-native speakers of English in comprehending idioms has definitely reduced. This could be owed to the fact that in schools, while teaching English most of the stories and poems prescribed are by European and American authors. As a result, children are exposed to their culture and language from an early age. Other factors that could have contributed to this result are globalization and westernization.

This is only the first step of this study. The study is majorly limited in the fact that it was conducted with a very small sample size of educated individuals who live in an urban setting. The results will definitely vary if the same study was conducted in the outskirts of the city. There is a lot of scope for further study. Idioms are also present in the languages of India and there are a number of idioms in English which overlap in structure and meaning with other languages. A study can be conducted on this area. A slight expansion of this study can also include looking at some of the idioms given in the questionnaire and analysing them through the lens of polysemy, inflexibility and compositionality. This could shed more light on the construction of meaning of idioms. It is also possible to conduct a study to check if people think that use of idioms in speech means that a person is more proficient in the language. It would also be interesting to analyse culture specific idioms (culture specific to the USA and Britain, for example), and check if they are understood by Indians. Even if they are understood by Indians, how do such idioms become relevant to us?

Appendix

(Sample Questionnaire)

Age

Stream of Education -

Stream of Education till 12th standard (CBSE, ICSE, STATE Board)

Was the medium of instruction in your previous institutions English? (Yes/No)

Given below are a few idioms, and their meanings. Please choose the option that you feel explains the idiom correctly:

- 1) Take it with a grain of salt.
 - a) Add salt to your food.
 - b) To make matters worse.
 - c) To accept it but not really believe it
 - d) To take offence

Answer - c

- 2) Not playing with a full deck
 - a) Not well prepared
 - b) Not very smart
 - c) This is not an idiom
 - d) Not a sportive person he is a sore loser.

Answer b

- 3) Don't give up the day job.
 - a) Don't quit.
 - b) Don't go after something you're not good at.
 - c) Don't give away your only source of income.
 - d) Don't sleep during the day.

Answer - b

- 4) Cut the mustard
 - a) Avoid eating mustard.
 - b) Not meeting expectations
 - c) Meeting expectations
 - d) Come straight to the point.

Answer c

- 5) Take a rain check.
 - a) Being cautious and avoiding risky situations.
 - b) Checking if the weather is good.
 - c) Declining an offer now (maybe you'll accept it later)
 - d) Asking someone to mind their own business.

Answer - c

- 6) Take someone down a peg.
 - a) Ensuring that someone doesn't drink any more
 - b) Helping a person reduce their temper.
 - c) Bringing down a high opinion of themselves
 - d) Making someone shut up

Answer c

- 7) Talk out of the back of your head.
 - a) Talking rubbish
 - b) Talking without realizing that you're being overheard

- c) Gossiping about someone
- d) Talking fluently.

Answer - a

- 8) Take someone to the woodshed
- a) Teach someone carpentry
- b) Teach someone manual labour
- c) Make someone work hard
- d) Punishing someone.

Answer - d

- 9) Cut somebody some slack
- a) Be more strict
- b) Don't be so critical
- c) Give somebody more time
- d) Give somebody less time

Answer - b

- 10) Go back to the drawing board
- a) Learn drawing.
- b) Start over
- c) Learn a new skill
- d) Sharpen your existing skills.

Answer - b

- 11) Cutting corners
- a) Doing something poorly to save time/money
- b) To cut corners.
- c) Lying to avoid responsibilities.
- d) Skipping work

Answer - a

- 12) Get out of hand
- a) Something fell from the hand
- b) Going out of control
- c) Something that doesn't concern you
- d) Losing something on purpose.

Answer - b

- 13) Hit the sack
- a) Hitting the sack to get the dust out
- b) Go to sleep
- c) Raid the food supplies
- d) Being very sneaky

Answer - b

- 14) Seeing eye to eye
- a) Agreeing with someone
- b) In a romantic way, looking at someone
- c) Disagreeing with someone
- d) Liking someone a lot.

Answer - a

- 15) A piece of cake
- a) A very tasty cake

- b) Something very simple
- c) Something very common, not of much value
- d) Something that is superficial.

Answer - b

16) To hit the nail on the head

- a) To hit the nail on the head
- b) To hurt someone
- c) To be manipulative
- d) To describe exactly the cause of something

Answer - d

After answering these questions, can you reflect and answer if you use simple idioms in your daily speech?

(Yes/No)

Do you feel that idioms are necessary? (Yes/No)

Do you feel that the same thing can be explained using regular sentences too? (Yes/No)

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