INCORPORATING A COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF A SELECTION OF FIGURATIVE IDIOMS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: Prodromou (2003: 43) states that "the way for a student of English to become more fluent in the language is not only to have a good command of grammar and vocabulary but also a good command of the 'idiom principle' and there is "the need for idiomatic competence is precisely what linguists propose for the non-native speaker". In addition, research shows that idioms are among the biggest challenge for EFL/ESL learners. The aim of this paper is to *shed some light* on ways to deal with a selection of figurative idioms by employing a CL perspective and to suggest some pedagogical implications. The paper attempts to examine a small number of Vietnamese EFL learners in the use of a non CL and a CL activity to evaluate its effectiveness and learning gains. The results could be used to further explore the use of CL to the teaching of idioms.

Key words: *cognitive linguistics, figurative idioms, corpora*

INTRODUCTION

Twelve idioms used in the current paper (see the following sections) were taken from Liu's (2003) study, Simpson and Mendis (2003) and Grant (2007). More specifically, Liu (2003: 677) used "three corpora of Spoken English which include Barlow's (2000) corpus of spoken, professional American English, a corpus of spoken American media English and Simpson et al.'s (2002) Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English". Due to the duration of a course unit, a limited number of idioms were selected from Liu's (2003: 692) study. That is – "Appendix B which is the most frequently used idioms across three corpora of spoken American English (in order of frequency)".

Liu (2003: 677) argues that "the corpora in combination contain about 6 million tokens and 72,402 types and constitute is the largest available spoken American English corpus to date". In addition, all the three corpora are made up of contemporary, everyday, semiformal spoken American English (Liu, 2003: 678). The data in the corpora are primarily the type of spoken language students learning American English as a second language will likely to be exposed to.

Simpson and Mendis (2003) chose figurative idioms based on the Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English (MICASE). MICASE which is freely available and searchable via the web, contains 197 hours of recorded speech, totalling about 1.7 million words in 152 speech events (ranging from larger lectures to dissertation defences, to one-on-one office-hour interactions and small peer-led study group sessions)" (Simpson and Mendis, 2003: 422). These two researchers found 238 idioms types (unique idioms), with 562 tokens in the corpus, that met criteria such as frequency ranges and the number of types in each range. Two idioms were selected from Grant (2007). These idioms

are from the British National Corpus's figurative idioms.

The above mentioned can partly answer to the question of why I chose these idioms for the current paper. Besides, communicative competence is still a challenge for many Vietnamese EFL students. One of the reasons for this can be found in a study by Tomlinson and Dat (2004: 199). These researchers argue that Vietnamese students are reluctant to participate in classroom interaction in English. There is the need for students to use idioms in spoken English as a way to enhance their communicative competence. Prodromou (2003: 43) states that "the way for a student of English to become more fluent in the language is not only to have a good command of grammar and vocabulary but also a good command of the 'idiom principle'. Further, Prodromou (2003: 43) argues that "the need for idiomatic competence is precisely what linguists propose for the nonnative speaker".

In line with Prodromou (2003), Yorio (1989: 68) claims that idiomaticity becomes an excellent indicator of bilingual system proficiency. In other words, idiomaticity is regarded as an indicator of second language proficiency.

COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS (CL) APPROACH FOR TEACHING FIGURATIVE IDIOMS

Most of the selected idioms involve the use of imagery processing (Boers and Demecheleer 2001,

Szczepaniak and Lew 2011) or visuals (Irujo 1986). Some of the selected idioms employ both the imagery and etymological origin (Boers 2001 & Boers, Eyckmans and Stengers 2007).

The following sections discuss the teaching of selected idioms inside the classroom.

The big picture

The teacher can show a photo of panorama that can help students see the overview of the picture. The teacher can explain in a way that looking at the panorama students can see the overview of the picture, not focus on the detailed things. Therefore, this idiom means that the overall perspective or overview of something, not the detail.

Fight like cat and dog

The teacher shows a photo of a cat and a dog. The teacher can elicit questions and descriptions from students by asking about the relationship between these two pets. The teacher asks students to depict the relationship between cats and dogs. The figurative meaning is that argue/quarrel violently all the time, e.g.: *They used to fight like cat and dog, but now they get on well with each other*.

as "which came first, the chicken or the egg". Additional information is that to ancient philosophers, the question about the first chicken or egg also evoked the questions of how life and the universe in general began. The teacher makes sure that he/she needs to go over the new words if students struggle to understand. Then teacher gives an explanation of this idiom that "*a situation in which it is impossible to say which of two things existed first and which caused the other*".

Hand in hand

The teacher first presents a photo of three people shaking hands. The teacher depicts the literal meaning of *hand in hand*. Then the teacher introduces the idiom *hand in hand* by taking an example: "*We have worked hand in hand to obtain the best result*". In this example, the idiom means that we have worked cooperatively.

Go off the rails

The teacher shows a picture of a train that is "going off the rails". The teacher first asks learners to elicit

possible descriptions of the train. This is to try to depict and elaborate the core/literal meaning. "*going off the rails*" means the train is out of control. The teacher makes sure that students know the meaning of "rail" by showing them the photo. Boers, Demecheleer and Eyckmans (2004) found that "by associating idioms with their source domains, learners are likely to encode the items in their memory in a dual fashion, both as a verbal form and as a mental image of a concrete scene".

Boers (2001: 39) explores the contribution of imagery processing (the association of an idiom with a concrete image or vivid scene). After going over with learners about the core meaning of this idiom, the teacher takes an example with such an idiom, e.g., *Kids often go off the rails after leaving home*. This means kids lose their control or behave in a strange and unacceptable manner.

Over one's head

First, the teacher also brings a photo that describes the core meaning of "over one's head". Learners are asked to depict the photo. One clue is that this idiom associates with the word "head". The teacher can ask the question of what such as "what can you see in this photo". One of the possible answers is that the boy cannot get the bowl held over the girl's head because he is too short to get it or literally it is over his head. Then the teacher elaborates the figurative meaning of "over one's head". This means it is beyond one's comprehension or it is

hard to understand. Again, elaboration of the core meaning of this idiom and associating the photo can make help students understand this idiom.

On the horizon

The teacher shows a photo of horizon and elicits descriptions from students. The teacher explains the literal meaning of this idiom which refers to "the place in the distance where the earth and sky seem to meet". This idiom means "likely to happen or appear soon". E.g., A big ship could be seen on the horizon.

Hit the headlines

The teacher presents a photo (see Appendix 2) that has lots of headlines. Those headlines are all about a world celebrity's news. First, the teacher can ask students to think of an idiom that contains the word "headlines". The teacher introduces the idiom "hit the headlines" by explaining that all of the headlines are news about Prince Williams. He has received a lot of

attention in new reports through the globe.

Shed light on

The teacher can show a photo and explain the meaning of light which refers to the energy from a lamp or from the sun that makes it possible to see things. There is a relationship between the meaning of *light* and the idiom *shed light on*. The teacher can associate the meaning of *light* and this idiom by explaining that light can help us see things. The girl in the photo is reading a book with the aid of light (a flashlight). This idiom refers to make something clearer or clarify something. There is a loose association and a fairly clear relationship between the literal and figurative meaning.
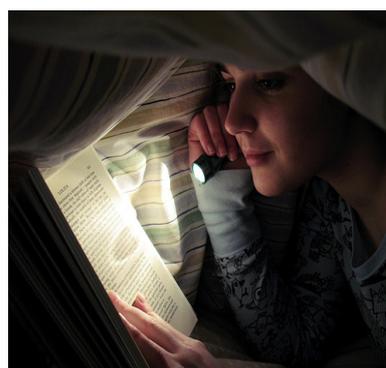
Give (somebody) the green light

The teacher can show a photo of the traffic light to the students. This idiom can be adopted the approach suggested by Grant (2007: 180). Such a

suggestion is that students are "taught the skills to recognize the untruth in the figurative and pragmatically reinterpret it to find the intended truth whenever and wherever figuratives occur" (Grant, 2007: 180). The teacher can explain the purpose of the traffic light (red, green and yellow). Students may be familiar with the operation of a traffic light. People can go when the green light appears. Therefore, the figurative meaning of *give (somebody) the green light* means *to give (somebody) permission to do something*. Students who are familiar with traffic lights are likely to figure out the figurative meaning of "give the green light".
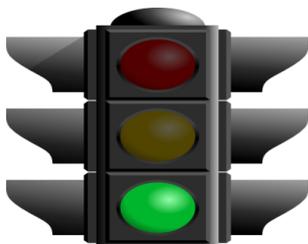
Carrot and stick (approach)

The teacher shows a photo of carrot and stick to the students and elicits questions from them. The teacher makes sure that students know what the carrot and stick are by showing the photo. The teacher elaborates the etymology of this idiom. In other words, the teacher describes the original meaning of this idiom which refers to the reward of a *carrot* and the punishment of using a *stick* to encourage a horse to move. Then the teacher introduces the meaning of this idiom which refers to "offer rewards and threaten punishments".

Touch on/upon (a topic/issue)

The teacher can show a photo of a person touching the screen of a laptop. The teacher can depict the literal meaning of "touch" and introduces *touch on/upon* which refers to "*mention briefly or talk about something briefly*". E.g., today the teacher has *touched on* the teaching of idiom through the use of imagery processing.

Another activity that the teacher can do in the classroom is that the teacher can ask students to work in pairs/groups to make an example with each idiom. Once finishing, they can swap their examples with contextualized idioms.

SMALL PILOT TESTING

I did a pilot testing in order to compare a non CL activity to evaluate the learning gains. The pilot testing involved two Vietnamese EFL learners. First, I taught a Vietnamese EFL learner by merely using verbal explanation of all the selected figurative idioms (a non CL activity). Three days after the idiom teaching, this learner was asked to do a small test to see whether she could remember the taught idioms.

Second, I also taught another learner the same idioms with the use of a CL approach including imagery process and etymological origin as discussed above. Finally, three days after this idiom teaching, the learner was required to do another test to examine whether he could remember all the taught idioms with the use of a CL approach. In general, the results showed that the learner taught with the use of a CL approach remembered more idioms than the one with a non CL approach.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of using a CL approach and the learning gains, there is the need to design exercises and tests for learners to do. First of all, after being introduced and taught the selected idioms, learners do idiom exercises to be examined whether they could remember the taught idioms in terms of both form and meaning. Four or five weeks after the idiom exercise, learners are asked to do a test which is to examine to what extent learners can also remember the form and meaning of selected idioms taught earlier. Besides the learning of idioms inside the classroom, one of the activities that learners are strongly encouraged to do outside the classroom is to write a story or some paragraphs in which some or all of the taught idioms are included. Once they finish, students bring their writing to the classroom for peer reading. The teacher plays as a facilitator to go ever each group to check whether learners have any difficulties regarding the use of any taught idioms.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the current paper is to *shed some light* on the teaching of figurative idioms through a CL approach. The paper has *touched on* the employment of pictures and etymological origin to help learners deal with figurative idioms. It is noted that "If the pictures were not fully congruent with the source domain entailments of idioms, then the teachers "actively exploit pictures for the purpose of raising learners' awareness of the deep semantics of idioms" (MacArthur and Boers, forthcoming, pp. 27). Depending on each idiom, different types of investment of imagery processing or etymological origin are adopted.

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