

The Teaching of English Idioms in Kenyan Secondary Schools: Difficulties and Effective Strategies

Moses Gatambuki Gathigia (Karatina University)

Martin C. Njoroge (Kenyatta University)

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Introduction

- Idioms are **inalienable part of a language** that fall under the lexicon (lexis) of a language.
- The **meaning of idioms** was taken to be arbitrary, unpredictable and an alternative way of expression given the existence of literal equivalents (Irujo 1993, pp. 216-217). That is, there is **incongruity between form and meaning**.
- The **acquisition** of idiomatic expressions is one of the primary challenges to learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). Idiom learning constitutes a difficult part (**a thorny issue**) in second language acquisition because they are not always easily predicted from the literal meanings of their constituent parts.
- Idioms are an indicator of **one's fluency** in a particular language

Introd. Cont.

- The difficulties connected with teaching idioms can be avoided if **suitable methods** that make the learners more aware of potential problems in using idiomatic language are used.
- The research on which this paper is based investigated the **difficulties** faced in the teaching of English idioms in Kenyan Secondary schools and **recommend** suitable strategies of teaching English idioms to ESL learners.

Methodology

- A qualitative research design
- **Ten** teachers of English from **ten** schools from both **rural** and **urban** secondary schools in Kenya were interviewed to find out the actual practices in their classrooms, the difficulties they face, and the effective strategies they employ.
- An **interview schedule** employed.
- Data analyzed **qualitatively**
- **Tables and percentages**

Results

- The tables and the graph below present the results of data analysis
- The interpretation and the discussion of the emerging patterns are based on these results.

Table 1: A summary of effective strategies employed in the teaching of English idioms

No	Strategy	No of Teachers for the strategy		Percentage Count %	
		Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1	Use of Context	5	4	50	40
2	Discussion	4	5	40	50
3	Etymology	5	5	50	50
4	Grouping	4	4	40	40
5	A Cognitive Approach	-	1	-	10
6	Compositional Approach	5	5	50	50
7	Other Strategies	2	2	20	20

Strategies – Cont'd

- **Use of Context:** Nine teachers (five from rural and four from urban secondary schools) reported that for a better understanding of an idiom, teaching should always occur in a linguistically supportive context. This finding corroborates Thornbury (2005) and Mäntylä's (2004) opinion that without context, **language is not fully understood.**
- **Group Discussion:** The teachers argued that group discussions assist learners in the understanding of non decomposable idioms.

Strategies – Cont'd

- **The Etymology of an Idiom:** delving into the etymology of an idiom enhances retention and comprehension
- For example, the idiom, “**Pandora’s box**” has its origin from a character in Greek mythology who opened a box containing troubles and let the troubles come into the World (Rundell and Fox, 2007). Another idiom like a “**Sisyphean task**” also has its etymology from the Greek myth in which Sisyphus was punished for the bad things he had done in his life.
- Sometimes, the Bible is needed to understand the etymology of an idiom. For example, “**by the skin of one’s teeth**”, will require one to understand its etymology.

Strategies – Cont'd

- **Grouping of idioms:** The teachers proposed that grouping of idioms may be based on thematic areas like idioms on *emotions, Biblical idioms, idioms on farm animals, body part idioms* etcetera.

Strategies – Cont'd

- For example, a teacher can classify idioms which refer to ***farm animals***, for example, “the black sheep of the family,” “don’t count your chickens,” etcetera.
- Idioms from which *body part* represents a particular quality or ability, for example, “use your head,” “the idea never entered my head,” “she broke his heart,” “he opened his heart,” “I speak from the bottom of my heart,” “the news finally reached her ears,” “give / lend an ear,” “split hairs,” “keep your mouth shut, ” “keep an eye on something.

Strategies – Cont'd

- ***A Cognitive Linguistics view on idioms***
- For example, when the idiom “**spit fire**” is used to express one’s anger, one is unconsciously treating his or her body as a container full of emotions. Likewise, the idiom, “his ideas have finally come to fruition,” falls under the conceptual metaphor, IDEAS ARE PLANTS since plants give rise to fruits.
- An idiom like, ‘a snake in the grass’ may be said to be based on A HUMAN BEING IS AN ANIMAL conceptual metaphor.
- The idiom, ‘hot under the collar,’ may be said to fall under ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE conceptual metaphor.

Strategies – Cont'd

- **The compositional analysis model:** *Decomposable or compositional idioms* are those whose figurative and literal meanings are close to each other (for example, “out of the woods,” “hot potato,” “walk on eggshells,” “a bitter pill (for somebody) (to swallow),” and “rub salt into the wound”),
- *The non-decomposable or opaque idioms* are those whose literal meaning offers no clue for the construction on the figurative meaning (for example, “(buy) a pig in a poke,” “dressed up like a dog’s dinner,” “to cleanse the Augean stables,” “the black sheep,” “bite the bullet,” “pull a rabbit out of a hat”).

Other strategies

- Matching of idioms with their meanings
- The use of crossword puzzles.
- Use of idioms as a motivational tool by taking advantage of the entertainment factor to make the study of idioms easier.

Table 2: A summary of difficulties faced in the teaching of English idioms

No	Difficulty	No of Teachers		Percentage Count %	
		Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1	Paucity of Suitable Materials on Idioms	6	4	60	40
2	Grammatical Errors	4	5	40	50
3	Opacity of Idioms	5	5	50	50
4	Attitudinal Problems	4	4	40	40

Difficulties faced

- **Paucity of suitable materials on idioms:** Six teachers from rural and four from urban secondary schools noted that there is glaring paucity of suitable materials for teaching English idioms in Kenyan Secondary schools. One teacher noted that he normally collects idioms for learners from newspapers, novels and other literary materials
- **Attitudinal Problems:** Eight teachers (four from rural and four from urban secondary schools) argued that students had attitudinal problems towards the learning of English idioms. A teacher recalled that a student had branded idioms as *esoteric* and *difficult*.

Difficulties faced– Cont'd

- **Grammatical errors:** Nine teachers (four from rural and five from urban secondary schools) noted that most idioms are relatively frozen and have severe grammatical restriction. As such, they do not permit any **lexical** or **syntactic modification**.
- A teacher noted of a case when a student formed a plural form for the idiom 'kick the bucket' to 'kicks the buckets.' Another teacher noted of a case when a student instead of using the idiom "a sacred cow," used an "evil cow."

Difficulties faced– Cont'd

- **Opacity of Idioms**

All teachers (five from rural and five from urban secondary schools) noted that learners of English as a Second Language experience greater difficulties learning the meanings of **opaque idioms**, than they do acquiring **transparent** ones. This is because the meaning of opaque idioms cannot be retrieved by means of the meaning of their constituent parts. For example, the idioms, "Pandora's box," "to kiss the blarney stone" and "pick up / take up the gauntlet" pose a great challenge to their comprehension.

Implications

- The findings could, therefore, persuade teachers of English in Kenya on the importance of teaching English idioms, and how to effectively teach them using the strategies highlighted in this paper. Specifically, the use **of etymological elaboration** is an effective strategy of teaching English idioms and especially when dealing with non compositional idioms.
- Second, the government and non governmental agencies need to **support, finance and provide grants** for the publication of literature on idioms since there is paucity of suitable materials on idioms.

Implications- Cont'd

- In addition, the government in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and other stakeholders in education should frequently **organize workshops and seminars** on the best and current strategies of teaching English idioms.
- Linguists, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and assessment specialists and other stakeholders in language learning and teaching should also consider giving idioms a **more prominent role in second language learning** by revising and modernizing the entire language education curriculum in Kenyan secondary schools.

Conclusion

- The findings reveal that idioms are an important part of English teaching and learning
- The paper also notes that it is **possible to infer semantic relations between the literal** sense of individual parts of an idiom and its meaning when interpreting compositional idioms.
- Further, the paper points out that the strategy of delving into **the etymology of English idioms is one of the most effective teaching strategies** and especially so when idioms exhibit incongruity between form and meaning.

Conclusions – Cont'd

- The research also notes that there is **paucity of literature** on idioms, teachers are **apathetic** to the teaching of idioms, **opaque idioms** are difficult to comprehend and **grammatical errors** bedevil most learners' books.
- There is incongruity between **form** and **meaning** when dealing with **non compositional idioms** since their semantic interpretation cannot be retrieved by means of their constituent parts.

Conclusions – Cont'd

- Despite these challenges, it is the recommendation of this paper that idioms should be taught effectively in schools because the acquisition of these idioms by learners will be important indicators of their mastery of the English language.

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Contact:

mgatambuki@yahoo.com

martin.njoroge@gmail.com