Idiom Comprehension using Multimodal Teaching Approach among Zanzibar University Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at investigating idiom comprehension through multimodal teaching approach among Zanzibar University students. The participants of the study were 120 male and female students and selected randomly. All of the students speak Swahili as their first language. The participants enrolled in a 3-year English program at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Zanzibar University, divided into two groups, the control and experimental groups. There were 60 students in each group with an age range between 20 to 30. Both groups were presented with the same twenty English idioms through different methods. The control group was advised to review the list of idioms using a traditional method, while the experimental group was presented with the idioms using a multimodal teaching approach. An idiom comprehension test was administered to both groups. The results showed that from a comparative t-test indicated that the students taught idioms comprehension using multimodal method had recorded a higher mean score (37.7) as compared to the use of a traditional method of teaching of idioms (25.55). This implies that to increase EFL/ESL students' proficiency in idiom comprehension, teachers should implement more multimodal activities in the classroom so that the students will have better opportunities in comprehending and applying idioms. The study provides pedagogical suggestions for using a multimodal approach to teaching English idioms.

INTRODUCTION

Language consists of various types of meaning. Words vary from literal to figurative meanings and serve particular purposes in discourse. Figurative language, such as proverbs, metaphors and idioms, has become an interesting component of language. Idioms can be found in every language, used spontaneously by the native speakers of that language. According to Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012), idioms are used in all forms of discourse, such as conversations, movies, radio, television shows, lectures, and so forth. It is estimated that about 7,000 idioms are used by the native speakers each week (Cooper, 1999). Idioms can be defined as fixed expressions (Carter, 1998), phraseology (Howarth, 1998), multiword items (Moon, 1997), and multi-word expressions (Yi, 2006). This study defines idioms as "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (Larson 1984, p. 20).

Understanding idioms demands language learners to move past a simple word-per-word comprehension and incorporate figurative meaning into contextual discourse (Cornoldi & Colpo, 1998). Some studies (Aljabri, 2013; De

Caro, 2009; Liontas, 2002; Liu, 2008; Wray, 2002) suggest a positive correlation between idiom acquisition and communicative competence. Therefore, extensive knowledge of idioms for English proficiency and fluency is compulsory. Idioms are commonly occurred in daily conversation by the native speakers. The occurrence of idioms made it memorized units for the EFL students. EFL students incorporate these idioms only when they communicate with the native speakers. Therefore, EFL students learned idioms' meanings by memorizing what is repeated (Warren, 2005).

According to Gibbs (2011), one cannot claim to be fluent in the English language without insight and mastery of idioms. Idiom comprehension is challenging compared to other language elements. Gass and Selinker (2001) describe that L2 speakers are likely to find idiom comprehension challenging because of its rigid structure compared to other language elements. Idiomatic expressions differ substantially from literal language because of their structure, semantic, and discourse features and constraints. Several studies on idioms (Ghassan, 2014; Ngwoke, 1999; Zipporah, 2011) were conducted in Africa. However, how idioms are comprehended is still

lacking. In the case of Zanzibar, there is insufficient research that has been conducted on English idioms. Research on idiom comprehension, in this case, will be more valuable as it will help in bridging the gap of knowledge in English language mastery. This study is looking at idiom comprehension through multimodal teaching approach among Zanzibar university students.
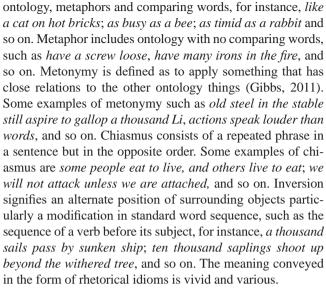
CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

Langlorz (2006) stated that idioms have some unique characteristics that often confused ESL students. First, idioms consist of semantic unity and structural stability (Gibbs, 1987). For example, *no practice, no gain in one's wit* means *a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit*. Idioms have a steady construction. The constituents of idioms cannot be substituted, removed or inserted to, not even an article. Gibbs (1987) argued that if the idioms got deleted or added a word, it may affect the meaning. The word order cannot be changed, or else, it may convey a different meaning (Gibbs, 1987, p. 23). For example, idioms such as *out of question* and *out of the question* have a separate meaning. Idioms cannot be grammatically analyzed.

The second characteristic is their concordance. Harris, Kruithof, Terwogt, and Visser (1981) define concordance as "the agreement of words, sounds and phrases in a given sentence" (p. 67). An example, of concordance characteristic, is phonological harmony. The concordance harmony is used to attain appealing, memorable and simple idioms. For instance, alliteration idioms such as *no root, no fruit*, *part and parcel*, and so on; end rhyme idioms such as *high and dry*, *by hook or by crook*, *man proposes, God disposes*, and so forth; repetition idioms *step by step*, *neck and neck*, and so on. These idioms were used to enhance the beauty of language phonetic and rhetorical effect in idioms. However, to make the idioms appealing, both alliteration and end rhyme applied simultaneously in one idiom, for example, *no money, no honey*; *no pains, no gains*; *no sweat, no sweet* and so on. The trait of concordance applied in idioms is to escalate the aesthetic value.

The third characteristic is transparency. Gibbs, Bogdanovich, Sykes, and Barr (1997) defined transparency as a measurement of the extent to which the meaning of a literal and figurative idiom is connected. This means when the literal and figurative meanings are directly connected, idioms are considered as transparent. On the other hand, when the literal and figurative senses are separated, idioms are considered opaque. For instance, idiom *to get away with murder* (to avoid a sentence for something serious) could be taken from the literal explanation of the words component. However, idiom *to keep one's shirt on* (to stay calm and not over-react) cannot be explained from the individual words.

Fourth, idioms possess rhetoric characteristics. Gibbs (2011) found out that both L1 and L2 idioms have varieties of rhetoric meaning, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, chiasmus and inversion. Gibbs (2011) highlighted that most idioms use a graphical consonance to create life-like expressions. Idioms with rhetoric have vibrant and colourful in meaning, which is rich and diverse. Simile consists of

ontology, metaphors and comparing words, for instance, *like a cat on hot bricks*; *as busy as a bee*; *as timid as a rabbit* and so on. Metaphor includes ontology with no comparing words, such as *have a screw loose*, *have many irons in the fire*, and so on. Metonymy is defined as to apply something that has close relations to the other ontology things (Gibbs, 2011). Some examples of metonymy such as *old steel in the stable still aspire to gallop a thousand Li*, *actions speak louder than words*, and so on. Chiasmus consists of a repeated phrase in a sentence but in the opposite order. Some examples of chiasmus are *some people eat to live, and others live to eat*; *we will not attack unless we are attached*, and so on. Inversion signifies an alternate position of surrounding objects particularly a modification in standard word sequence, such as the sequence of a verb before its subject, for instance, *a thousand sails pass by sunken ship*; *ten thousand saplings shoot up beyond the withered tree*, and so on. The meaning conveyed in the form of rhetorical idioms is vivid and various.

The other characteristic of idioms is that they are culture centred (Cellica, 2011). Comprehension of idioms is partly based on the demographics and linguistics aspects centred in that language (Cellica, 2011, p. 45). For example, if a given society practices agriculture then most idioms will tend to reflect agriculture. For example, Kenya is an agricultural country, surrounded by farming, mountains, hills, soil and plants which illustrated in metaphor such as *be as steady as Mount Kenya*, *spend money like soil* and so on. While, Zanzibar is surrounded by islands, seawater, and developed fisheries, described through metaphor, such as *the best fish swim near the bottom*, *spend money like water* and so on. Idioms such as *spend money like soil* and *spend money like water* present similar meaning.

Lastly, another property of idioms is independent and fixed part in language. Heinemann (2004), points out that idioms are a series of words that have collective meaning that is separated from the individual words. Moreover, idioms are sentences comprised of two or more words that which meanings were unpredicted from the literal meaning, such as in *He's pushing up daisies* for *He's Dead and Buried* (Heinemann, 2004, p. 344). In short, idioms are non-dependent and unchanged properties of a language. Some idioms originated from various historical reference and procedures. They should be taken as a unit to comprehend and interpret. For example, *to lose one's head* does not imply that somebody has misplaced his head; instead, it means to panic. Another example of an idiom is *to jumps off end the page*, which does not mean that somebody leaves the page quickly, but means that somebody is extremely intelligent or talented.

IDIOM TEACHABILITY

The teaching of idioms has been a debatable issue and investigation from different contexts. One of the issues is how idioms acquired, whether through social or in a more formal context, similar to how vocabulary and grammar taught in schools and universities (Al-kadi, 2015). There is no clear answer to this questionable issue. Researchers such as Nippoland (1991, as cited in Cooper, 1998, p.259) argue that "there seems to be no clear point in human development when it

can be said that idioms have been mastered." Advanced level students that are taught idioms were expectedly encountered difficulties in identifying, understanding and applying idioms. According to Chen and Lai (2013), lack of exposure to target language and culture made EFL learners acquiring idioms by learning both the language and cultural conventions. Moreover, the challenges in teaching idioms originated from the arbitrariness and non-literal forms (Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy, 2011). It implies that idioms are incomprehensible from their constituents' meaning. Therefore, idioms cannot be taught systematically.

According to McPartland (2000), the less challenging idioms to teach and learn are idioms with the exact equivalent in the student's native language, while the most challenging are those without equivalent in the student's first language, thus, its meaning cannot be drawn from the meaning of each word. Pimenova's (2011, pp. 117-119) suggest that the challenges in learning idioms could be credited to five challenges: 1) Foreign vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms; 2) No equivalent idioms in L1; 3) Cultural diversity; 4) Short of experience when coping with idioms; 5) Lack of context of a given idiom. Similarly, Nippold and Rudzinsky (1993) and Irujo (1986) described that idiom comprehension could be accelerated by idiom familiarity, transparency, and context. Lack of transparency or opaque idioms implies the complexity of explaining the connection of lexical structure and the actual meaning of the idiom. Lack of experience could cause by the fact that the L2 learners are only started to be taught idioms at an advanced level, thus, their native language interferes with mistakes/errors they made. For example, in the case for Swahili EFL learners, the absence of literal equivalent in Swahili as their L1, the idiom systems in Swahili and English are distinguishable. Swahili learners of English are not aware of this complexity.

Idioms are confusing and challenging. However, understanding the meaning of its constituent does not imply that it is sufficient to understand its complete meaning. Cakir (2011) suggested that idioms with exact equivalents in the students L1 are the easiest to teach and learn. Moreover, it is also suggested to teach frequently used idioms in meaningful contexts, such as pictures, video clips, dialogues, drawings, and role-plays (Cakir, 2011). Similarly, Wu (2008) proposed that interaction between students can be created using various collaborative activities through stories, illustrations, and role-plays in learning idioms. Other techniques were also recommended such as memorization, using an idiom notebook, and displays on the classroom board, poetry, and movie clips (Azar & Talebinezhad, 2013; Guduru, 2012; Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2015). Irujo (1986) indicated that by categorizing the idioms according to the topic, it would easier for the students and teachers to relate the activities to topic-based units. Culture is also needed to be considered in the teaching of idioms. According to Cakir (2011), one of the reasons why it is not always possible to find idioms' equivalents in every language is culture-specific. Therefore, knowing the target language's culture and intercultural differences is needed to understand its idioms (Taki & Soghady, 2013). According to Glucksberg (2001), lacking in cultural references made it even more challenging to learn idioms. Teachers must include some cultural aspects of the target language which in the end, will help to boost the students' confidence in using and understanding idioms (Boer & Demecheleer, 2001; Chen & Lai, 2013).

MULTIMODAL APPROACH

A multimodal approach is a method to understand various representations of knowledge and make meaning by examining the contribution of language, motion, and image (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). The multimodal approach also focuses on interaction and combination in the text-coherence process by considering how linguistic and visual choices fulfil the goal of texts, audiences and contexts, and how they collaborate in the composition and construction of information and ideas (Lim & Tan, 2017).

A multimodal teaching approach could develop the learning environment and be the source of creativity and flexibility. The advancement of technology is changing ways of communication. New approaches to engaging students in the learning process include the traditional printed text and multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996). Kress (2003) predicted that eventually, multimedia screens would rule the communication practices. The multimedia technologies can be categorized as modalities or modes of expression- aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic (Jewitt, 2006). These modalities combine in a digital environment to restructure the printed text and picture or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This combination encourages creativity, supports meaning-making, and strengthens the learning environment.

An integrated curriculum with reflection to real-life or authentic knowledge and experience could provide a compelling pedagogy. Gardner (2011) and Wilhelm (1999) proposed multiple intelligences, and among them, visual intelligence supports a student to use images to understand the world and communicate about it. Teachers should encourage visual communication, a process of sending and receiving information through images (Bamford, 2003). This implies that the images can induce students' attention and could be used to create substitutes to text-based learning instruction (LeCompte & Bauml, 2012). These images can also encourage less motivated students and allow them to reconsider learning in different ways (Wilhelm, 1999).

When the teacher introduces the lesson through various modes, students are inspired to progress to a more resourceful learning approach (Morrison, Sweeney, & Heffernan, 2003). The technologies encourage interactions and provide resources and opportunities that defy traditional teaching. Multimodal teaching approaches may incorporate digital storytelling, virtual gaming, kinetic typography, hyperlinked texts/stories, blending visual and print media, audio recordings, and writing and editing wikis. Traditional literacy, relying on the printed text, is a restricted approach. Therefore, teachers should develop new methods that require a pedagogy of multiliteracies, "by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). Xerri (2012) argued, "The notion of multimodality redefines pedagogy because learning itself is reconceptualized, partly because of the impact of

new technologies" (p. 508). A multimodal teaching approach can and should be integrated into ESL classrooms.

IDIOMS IN ZANZIBAR ESL CONTEXT

In Tanzania, specifically in Zanzibar, English is acknowledged as the most important foreign language. Dunlop (2015) argues that English has the highest status in the international political, economic, and education system. English is taught as a Major at the university level. The pre-university level curriculum includes English course as a compulsory school subject. Advanced English major students are presumed to have adequate knowledge of English idioms, considering that they have learned English for years. As English teachers with about eight years of experience, the researchers are aware that idiom acquisition has been a neglected area of English. In Zanzibar university syllabi, idioms are integrated with courses like English literature and writing skills. In most cases, students were unsuccessful in using or interpreting idioms. The researchers proposed that, as many other researchers would comply, this lack of success is because idioms are not incorporated into the context-sensitive environments of the language syllabus. Cooper (1998, p. 255) suggested that "since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum."

Similarly, idiom learning/acquisition of L2 research in Zanzibar context has received a lack of attention. Irujo (1986) argues

that many L2 materials, such as idioms, are either ignored or demoted as "other expressions" in a section of a vocabulary list with no exercises for practising them. Regarding the Zanzibar context, the challenge using idioms is noticeable when English students provide strange translations. For instance, some Zanzibarian students, translate some L1 expressions into English literarily, such as "*eat salt" which means "someone who has lived for a long time" or the expression, *apply oil, which simply means "to ordain somebody." They assume that (native) English speakers would understand such expressions which are direct transfer from Swahili. In short, neglecting idiom teaching in the Zanzibar context has caused inaccurate use of idiomatic expressions by the ESL students. This study attempts to investigate idiom comprehension and application.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 120 male and female students. All of the students speak Swahili as their first language. The participants are EFL students, enrolled in a 3-year English program at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Zanzibar University. They were voluntarily partaking in the study. The participants were divided into two groups, the control group and the experimental group. There were 60 students in each group with an age range between 20 to 30. The participants were randomly selected from the first-year to third-year students. These

Table 1. Idiom comprehension score using traditional approach

NN	Idioms Traditional	Raw scores/60 X	X^2
1	To be "a slippery slope"	19	361
2	To be "on a roll"	22	484
3	To be a "couch potato"	17	289
4	To "throw in the towel"	12	144
5	To "give someone a hand"	22	484
6	"At the top of one's lungs"	25	625
7	To be "at one's fingertips"	45	2025
8	"keep someone at one's toes"	31	961
9	"Over my dead body"	27	749
10	To "turn the tables"	25	625
11	"rule of thumb"	27	749
12	To "get a head-start"	33	1089
13	To "take charge"	41	1681
14	To "beat about the bush"	21	441
15	To "talk of the devil"	28	784
16	To "make up one's mind"	42	1764
17	To "roll up one's sleeves"	15	225
18	To "break somebody's heart"	12	144
19	To add an "icing on the cake"	25	625
20	To be "not my cup of tea"	22	484
		$\sum X_1 = 511$	$\sum X_1{}^2 = 14733$

$\Sigma X_1 = 511$
$\Sigma X_1{}^2 = 14733$
Mean = 25.55

Table 2. Idiom comprehension score using multimodal approach

No	Idioms multimodal	Raw scores/60	
		X	X²
1	To be "a slippery slope"	34	1156
2	To be "on a roll"	26	676
3	To be a "couch potato"	26	676
4	To "throw in the towel"	37	1369
5	To "give someone a hand"	42	1764
6	"At the top of one's lungs"	37	1369
7	To be "at one's fingertips"	51	2601
8	"keep someone at one's toes"	34	1156
9	"Over my dead body"	31	961
10	To "turn the tables"	26	676
11	"rule of thumb"	22	484
12	To "get a head-start"	39	1521
13	To "take charge"	50	2500
14	To "beat about the bush"	55	3025
15	To "talk of the devil"	40	1600
16	To "make up one's mind"	49	2401
17	To "roll up one's sleeves"	27	729
18	To "break somebody's heart"	44	1936
19	To add an "icing on the cake"	38	1444
20	To be "not my cup of tea"	46	2116
		$\sum X_2 = 754$	$\sum X_2^2 = 30158$

$\Sigma X_2 = 754$
$\sum X_2^2 = 30158$
Mean = 37.7

Table 3. Paired sample statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Pair	Traditional method	25.55	20	9.282	2.076
	Multimodal method	37.70	20	9.554	2.136

participants were assumed to be socio-linguistically homogeneous, considering that their English language level was estimated to be between elementary to high intermediate. They have taken English courses such as grammar, writing, phonetics, phonology, semantics, and syntax in the first, second and third year of their studies. Before joining the university, the participants had minimal knowledge of idioms. Their exposure to English is restricted to being a subject of study within the classroom context and limited practices.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was the idiom comprehension test. The test consisted of twenty multiple-choice questions, with four options available, and only one correct answer. The tests were distributed to both the experimental and the control group. The twenty idioms were selected from the Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English (1985) by Cowie, Mackin and McCaig as editors. The idioms were

selected because they showed a wide range of familiarity and transparency levels. Three English language professors were presented with the test to ensure the accuracy and adequacy of the idiom comprehension test prepared by the researchers.

Procedures

A list of idioms was given to both the control and the experimental groups. The control group participants were recommended to study the list for the test that would be given a week later. On the other hand, contrary to the traditional approach applied by the control group, students in the experimental group were introduced to the idioms through multimodal activities as follows.

First, Videos from YouTube about idioms in movie clips and TV shows were shown to the experimental group. These videos incorporated meaning-making proficiency through texts, images, and audiovisual. These activities aim to expose the students to English idioms and English culture. The participants were also presented with comic strips about idioms that required them to interpret. Next, the participants were required to create artistic interpretations of idioms selected randomly from digital collage. This activity was conducted in pair. Each pair had to predict the meaning of idioms created by the other pairs. The experimental group's last activity was to create a digital video role play in a group of five to seven students. Each group randomly chose two idioms to add in their digital video project. According to Doff (1990), bringing

Table 4. Paired sample statistics

					Paired Differences				
		Mean	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error mean**	**95% confidence interval of the difference**		**T**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
					Upper	lower			
Pair	Traditional method	-12.15	9.554	2.136			5.290	19	0.0001
	Multimodal method				42.17	42.17			

real-life situations into the classroom could be done through role-playing. This activity required the students to develop a role, setting, and conversation using the selected idioms. Role-play helps students to "communicate, express their feelings, enrich their vocabulary and appraise their existing knowledge" (Magos & Politi, 2008, p. 101). Role-play also present "safe environment where learners are relaxed, creative and inventive" (Magos & Politi, 2008, p. 102).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This study investigates the comprehension of English idioms through multimodal teaching approach. The participants in this study were 120 university students, divided into two groups, the control and the experimental group. These participants were randomly selected and assumed to be homogeneous in terms of their age and level of English. Idioms comprehension tests were given to both the control and the experimental groups.

Table 1 and Table 2 show the idiom comprehension score of the control group using the traditional approach and the experimental group using the multimodal approach.

The participants in the control group were required to review the list of the idioms for the test that was given a week later. The result shows that the idiom of "at one's fingertips", "make up one's mind", and "take charge" received the highest scores of 45, 42, and 41 respectively. The three idioms have a figurative and literal meaning. The mean score of idiom comprehension test for the control group was 25.55.

Table 2 above describes idiom comprehension test score of the experimental group. The participants in this group were presented with the list of idioms using a multimodal approach. The result shows that the idiom of "beat about the bush", "at one's fingertips", and "take charge", received the highest scores of 55, 51, and 50 respectively. The three idioms have a figurative and literal meaning. The mean score of idiom comprehension test for the experimental group was 37.7.

An independent samples t-test (as seen in Table 3 and Table 4) was performed to determine a significant difference in the test score between the control group using the traditional approach to comprehend the idioms and the experimental group using a multimodal approach.

In Table 3, the t-tests indicated a significant difference in the scores for students taught idioms using traditional methods (M = 25.55, SD = 9.282) and Scores for students taught idioms using multimodal approach (M = 37.70, SD = 9.554). Results from a comparative t-test indicated that the students taught idioms comprehension using multimodal method had

recorded a higher mean score (37.7) as compared to the use of a traditional method of teaching of idioms (25.55).

A general mean difference of 12.15 in terms of idiom comprehension was realized from the two teaching methods (as seen inTable 4). This result, therefore, suggests that there is a significant difference in the teaching of English idioms using a multimodal method of teaching as compared to the traditional method(s).

CONCLUSION

Many researchers such as Aljabri (2013), De Caro (2009), Liontas (2002), Liu (2008), and Wray, (2002), claim that there is a clear correlation between idiom acquisition and communicative competence. They also agree that substantial knowledge of idioms is essential for English proficiency and fluency. It is challenging for the L2 learners to comprehend and be competent in idioms because if its linguistic features. Similarly, the non-native English teachers are also finding it challenging to teach idioms. However, there is no definite answer in the best way to teach idioms. The findings in this study show that a multimodal approach in teaching idioms presented through various methods encouraged the students to construct a more practical approach to learning (Morrison, Sweeney, & Heffernan, 2003).

The multimodal approach, through technology-induced interactions, offers supports and resources that challenge the traditional teaching approach. Some multimodal approach instances may consist of digital storytelling, virtual gaming, kinetic typography, hyperlinked texts/stories, blending visual and print media, audio recordings, and writing and editing wikis (Freyn & Gross, 2017). This study employed YouTube videos, comic strips, artistic collage, and digital video role-play projects. The findings of this study suggested that the group who were given the multimodal teaching approach achieved a significantly higher score on the idioms comprehension test. On the other hand, the group that received a traditional teaching approach acquired lower scores. This implies that to increase EFL/ESL students' proficiency in idiom comprehension, teachers should implement more multimodal activities in the classroom so that the students will have better opportunities in comprehending and applying idioms.

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