



Students' Ability to Comprehend English Idioms

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Article info

Submitted : 23 November 2021

Revised : 18 March 2022

Accepted : 14 May 2022

ABSTRACT

Using English idiomatic expressions fluently is not an easy thing for students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Attempts to translate literally from native speakers always lead to confusion and students are often forced to use language that is complex and difficult to comprehend. This research was conducted with the aim of describing students' ability to comprehend English Idioms and the factors that tend to influence the students' ability to comprehend idioms. The research population was the third year students of language department with census system. The research data obtained by using test and interview. The collected data from the test analyzed by descriptive statistic while the data from interview were identified to support explanation in relation to students' ability to comprehend English Idioms. The results of this study showed that the ability of the third-year students of language department to comprehend English idioms and to use in sentences is categorized into insufficient ability. At average the mean of the students' marks is 4, and the factors which tend to influence the ability of the third year students of language department included students' internal and external factors. The students' internal factor is students' perception on English in general and on English idioms in particular. The students' external factors are teacher and unavailability of books of English idioms.

Keywords: *Students ability; English Idioms.*

INTRODUCTION

When we learn a language, including English, it always means that we learn the words of the language. It would be better to say that words are essential to communicate, hence, it is impossible to communicate without using them. In fact, vocabulary is a very important point in all language teaching. Automatically, students must continually learn words as they learn Structure and as they practice sound system.

Despite that, words are important in learning language, many teachers of English do not realize it. Most of the English teachers concentrate on teaching how to read and explain much about the content of reading text rather than vocabulary, whereas probably vocabulary is a very important aspect of teaching English.



To put it more simply, many Indonesian teachers who teach their students vocabulary seem to think that it is possible to learn vocabulary by memorizing lists of isolated words with Indonesian translation or equivalent. As a result, students find it difficult to grasp the meaning of the conceptualized words because they only know the meaning, they obtain from the dictionary. In this case, the difficulty will also be faced by students when they come across with idiomatic expressions. Dixon(1983:xi) stated that:

“Using idiomatic expressions fluently is not as easy as task for the English as Second Language (ESL) or English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. Attempts to translate literally from the native tongue invariably lead to confusion and the student is often forced to resort to circumlocution.”

An idiom is defined as a group of words whose meaning must be known because it cannot be learned from the meaning of the same words used separately. Obviously, there is a problem when we cannot look up Individual words in a dictionary and find the meaning, the usual strategy we all employ when we come across a word or words that are unfamiliar. With idioms, however, we must learn the group of words. It is particularly important to recognize and comprehend idioms when we hear them or read them, when we can use them comfortably in our own speech and writing, then we have achieved a higher level of mastery and fluency in the language.

Native speakers of English use hundreds, even thousands of idioms daily in their conversation with others. Idioms are not separate part of the language which one can choose either to use or omit, but they form an essential part of the general vocabulary of English, that is why, having knowledge of comprehending idioms in English for the student is very important.

One of the factors the researcher presents about idioms in this study is because idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They can appear in formal style and in slang. Even they can appear in poetry. Without realize it, they use it in speaking the language. Let us take an example. The researcher believes that almost every student must comprehend the phrase “of course”. This word is an idiom, but the learner may not realize it.

The researcher realizes that the problem Is not as easy as described here. Consequently, researcher is interested in discussing this topic. She also believes that, by knowing some idioms a learner can freely express his thoughts, ideas, or feelings in English every day. The second thing that the researcher encourages to choose the topic is “the general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage. It is important that idiom should show the learner how the language is developing”. With these reasons, the researcher tries to explore the existence of idiom among the students of language department at MAN 1 Kendari. The researcher will measure the students” ability to comprehend idioms in English when they are used in context.

The last thing is the mean score of student's national examination of English subject at MAN 1 Kendari during the last three years is not often making any satisfactory, because the mean score is not always good, moreover last year the mean score was very low. This is approved by school's documentation of student's national Examination score. One reason of the students low English score is caused by the lack of students’ comprehension about idiom. Whereas English is very



important for the students to comprehend an English text and for the purposes of writing. In fact, many items in national English examination involve idiom or idiomatic expressions while idioms is not taught independently in a special theme and time, instead of, it always integrated to the teaching of language skill mainly reading and speaking. That's why, the students find difficulties in learning idioms deeply and the teacher find difficulties to establish the technique used in introducing English idioms. Considering the importance of having knowledge to comprehend idioms and unsatisfactory fact about the ability of the students to comprehend idioms, the researcher is motivated to do this research.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used convergent parallel design which the researcher collected and analyzed the qualitative and quantitative result separately. The design involved one class as its subject (Language Department) and it involved two instruments includes : Test and Interview. The test consisted of 100 items and examined the students' ability in comprehending English idioms which the form of the test was objective test with four option available on every item. The interview was addressed to students of language department which is in the sample group and the english teacher of language department as informant. The number of questions to students was 10 and question to teacher was 8. The informant of this study used to find out the data about factors influencing the ability of students of language department of to comprehend English idioms.

RESULT

The description of the ability of the third year students of language department at MAN 1 Kendari to comprehend English idioms

The data of the students' ability was analyzed by means of pequency and descriptive statistic analysis. The prequency analysis was undertaken in order to find out the distribution of the students' ability marks. The descriptive statistics analysis was done to observe the mean, median, mode, standard deviation, variance, range minimum and maximum marks. The frequency and the descriptive statistics was actually computed by means of SPSS. As shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics analysis of the respondents' marks of their ability to comprehend English idioms

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
	26	6.00	1.00	7.00	101.00	3.89	.39	1.99	3.95
Valid (list wise)	26								



Table 1 indicates that of the respondents' marks of their ability to comprehend English idiom, the range of the marks is 6 meaning the difference between the maximum score of 7 and minimum score of 1 is 6. With the total mark of 101 and the number of mark of 26, it is obtained that the mean of the marks is 3,89 The standard error of measurement is .39, standard deviation is 1.99, and variance is 3.95

On the basis the above description of frequency distribution and the descriptive statistics analysis results of the respondents' marks of their ability to somprehend English idiom, it can be generated that the ability of the third year students of Language Department at MAN 1 Kendari to comprehend English idiom is categorized into insufficient with the mean of their mark is 3.89 or 4 .

The description of factors are influencing the students' ability to comprehend English idioms

On the basis of the result of the interview with the respondents, there are two factors that influence the ability of the third year students of Language Department to comprehend English Idiom to be insufficient, ie. the students' internal and external factors. The internal factors are those that come from the students' inner and external factors are those that come from the students' outer.

a. Internal Factor

The students' internal factors include perception and readiness. Their perception influenced their ability to comprehend English idiom to be insufficient in which 84.62 % of them perceived that English is difficult to learn, 84.62% of them perceived that English idiom is sometimes important, 76.92% Of them have low interest in learning English idiom, and 80.77% of them perceived that English idioms are difficult to learn.

Readiness is another internal factor found influencing the students' ability to comprehend English idiom to be insufficient. This is supported by the findings that 69.23% of the students perceived that they study English at home only sometimes, 69.23% of them perceived that they never do self practice in using English idioms, and 61.549% of them perceived they rarely use English dictionary. This is reinforced by the information from the interview with the teacher as the informant:

"Saya sering mendapat kesulitan dalam mengajarkan idiom bahasa Inggris". (I often struggle in teaching English idioms to students)

"Kesulitan siswa dalam mempelajari idiom bahasa Inggris yaitu Siswa jarang mengerjakan tugas rumah untuk mencari makna idiom bahasa Inggris yang diberikan. dan Siswa jarang yang menggunakan bahasa Inggris di luar kelas". (My biggest challenge in teaching English idioms is the students seldom do their homework, especially when it comes to look for the meaning of the given idioms, and they seldom practice them outside the class)

According to the English teacher, the students' unreadiness to learn English idiom include the students who are rarely learn English at home, infrequently use of English idiom outside the class.



b. External Factors

The external factors that were found influencing the students' ability to comprehend English idioms to be insufficient include teacher and unavailability of books discussing English idioms. The teacher as one of external factors which influence the students' ability to comprehend English idioms to be insufficient is proved by the findings, i.e. inadequate planning for the teaching of English idioms in which the teacher inadequately gave homework about English idioms (69.23% of the students perceived "sometimes" and 11.54% of them perceived "ever"). This is supported by the result of interview with the teacher as informant as follows :

“pemberian tugas rumah tentang idiom tidak menentu diberikan kepad siswa” (giving homework about idioms to the students is irregular).

“saya tidak membuat daftar tentang idiom bahasa inggris yang ada dalam kurikulum”. (I did not make any idiom lists on curriculum).

According to English teacher, there is not any schedule of the homework giving about English idiom and the list of English idiom in English curriculum is not arranged, thus, it can be concluded that the inadequate planning for teaching English idiom covers the inadequate homework giving and unavailability of the list of English idiom in English curriculum.

Another external factor that influence the ability of students to comprehend English idiom to be insufficient is inadequate giving of explanation on English idiom on every class meeting (76.92 of them perceived the teacher gave explanation on English Idioms only sometimes). This is supported by the result of interview with the English teacher as informant as follows :

“saya memperkenalkan idiom bahasa inggris tidak menentu frekuensinya.” (I irregularly introduce English idioms to students).

According to English teacher, there not fixed time used to introduce English idiom. The last teacher factor which influence the ability of students to comprehend English idiom to be insufficient is inadequate method used by the teacher when teaching English idioms (73.08% of the students perceived the method of teaching English idiom is less interesting), and the unreadiness of teacher to teach English idioms (73.08% of the students perceived that English teacher rarely identified idiom in the teaching of English). This is supported by the result of interview with the English teacher as follows :

Teknik yang saya gunakan dalam mengerjakan idiom bahasa inggris :

1. memberikan secara langsung makna dari idiom yang di ajarkan.
2. Memberikan tugas rumah untuk mencari makna idiom yang diberikan”
“teknik yang saya gunakan memang belum memadai sebab sumber bacaan yang berhubungan dengan idiom dan cara mengerjakannya sangat kurang.”

(The techniques I used in teaching idioms are:

1. Directly give the meaning of the idioms
2. Giving homework to students to look for the meaning by themselves

I know these ways have not been adequate because the reading text containing idioms is still limited).



The English teacher informed that the method that is done in teaching English idiom include giving directly the meaning of the idiom and asking students to find out the meaning of giving idioms. Another external factor which influence the students' ability to comprehend English idioms to be insufficient is unavailability of books discussing English Idioms. This is supported by the findings in which 92.31 % of the students perceived that the school library inadequately provides books about English Idioms.

DISCUSSION

For many years vocabulary was seen as incidental to main purpose of language teaching. Vocabulary was necessary to give students something to hang on to when learning structures but was frequently not a main learning itself. However, methodologists and linguistics have increasingly been turning their attention to vocabulary, stressing its importance in language teaching and reassessing some of the ways in which it is taught and learnt. It is now clear, for example, that the acquisition of vocabulary is just as important as the acquisition grammar and the teacher should have the same kind of expertise in the teaching of vocabulary as they do in the teaching of structure.

There are some way to teach vocabulary included teaching idioms as bellows:

1. Mime, action, and gesture

It is often impossible to explain the meaning of words and grammar either through the use of realia or in pictures. Actions, in particular, are probably better explained by mime.

2. Explanation

Explaining the meaning of vocabulary items can be very difficult. Explaining the meaning of the words must include explaining any facts of the words use.

3. Translation

Translation is a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words but it is not without problems. In the first place is not always easy to translate words, and in the second place, even where translation is possible, it may make it a bit too easy for students by discouraging them from interacting with words.

Where translation can quickly solve a presentation problem it may be a good idea, but we should bear in mind that a consistent policy towards the use of the mother tongue is helpful for both teacher and students.

On the basis of the data analysis, it was found that the ability of the third year students of Language Department to comprehend English idiom is categorized into insufficient ability. It was also found that factors influencing their ability to comprehend English idioms covers internal factors, i.e. those coming from the students' inner, and external factors, i.e. that's coming from the students' outer.

The external factors influencing the students' ability to comprehend English idiom are teacher's bad performance in teaching and unavailability of books of English idioms. However, among the teacher factors, the inadequate explanation on English idioms tends to be the most influential factor on the insufficiency of students' ability to comprehend English idioms. It might



be caused that the technique used by the teacher in teaching English idioms doesn't follow the experts technique.

CONCLUSION

This research was carried out to find out the ability of the third year students of Language Department to comprehend English idioms and use in the sentence and its influential factors. After analyzing the data under descriptive statistics analysis that was used to describe the students' ability to comprehend English idiom and use in sentence, and percentage analysis that was used to describe factors which influence the students' ability, it was found the ability of the third year students of Language Department to comprehend English idiom and use in sentences is categorized into insufficient ability and average the mean of the students' marks is 4. In other result of the factors which tend to influence the ability of the third year students of Language Department are students' internal and external factors. The students' internal factor is students' perception on English in general and on English idiom in particular. The students' external factors are teacher and unavailability of books of English idioms. Therefore, there should be serious efforts in order to enhance the students' ability. First, Listing English idioms in the target vocabulary that should be mastered by the students in harmony with the themes attached in English curriculum for high school level. Second, Preparing time explicitly of teaching English idioms as part of vocabulary improvement. In which the students are given various activities inside or outside the class in order to overcome the students' feeling of boredom. Third, building positive attitude among students toward English in general and English idiom in particularly in which the material should be taught by "tense-free context". The last is, providing students with adequate reading materials about English.

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