

The Impact of Context on the learning and Retention of Idioms

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of context on learning idioms among 60 Iranian female advanced English learners. To this end, the researcher assigned the participants to two experimental groups and one control group: Group 1 (first experimental group, the extended-context group), Group 2 (second experimental group, the limited-context group) and Group 3 (control group or the decontextualized group). First a 50-item idiom test was constructed using Vocabulary Knowledge scale (adopted from Wesche and Paribakht, 1993) and answered by the participants. The results of this test revealed that thirty idioms were not at all familiar to the participants. So these 30 idioms were selected as the target idioms. Then, the researchers applied two types of treatment to the participants in groups 1 and 2. Group 1 was taught idioms in extended-context through listening to short stories including the target idioms, Group 2 in the limited-context through listening to single sentences including the target idioms, and Control group (Group 3) was taught idioms through their decontextualized definitions of the target idioms. The analysis of the results of immediate and delayed post-test showed that extended contexts had significant influence on the participants' idiom learning and retention. Pedagogical implications are provided.

Keywords: Idioms, Extended context, Limited context, Learning, Retention

Introduction

Schmitt (2000) and Read (2000) believe that vocabulary which consists of grammaticalised lexis not lexicalized grammar should be placed at the centre of language teaching and learning curricula. The reason lies in introduction of a vocabulary-based approach to language teaching and learning by Lewis (1993) named, the lexical approach. According to He (1993), lexical approach is a paradigm shift in language teaching and learning programs from grammar teaching to vocabulary teaching. Similarly Lewis (1997) believes that “language does not consist of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often it consists of multi-word prefabricated chunks. In fact, by introducing the lexical approach to language teaching and learning curricula, Lewis (1993) brought to attention the important role that vocabulary teaching and learning in general and idiom learning and teaching in particular plays in learning and teaching a second or foreign language. He argues that those chunks are idioms, collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions.

‘Formulaic language’ is another term which, occupies a crucial role in facilitating language; it is the key to fluency and motivates the learner. Review of the previous literature on idioms shows that idioms are defined as multi-word units which tend to be mentally stored and retrieved as single units like collocations, phrasal verbs. According to Carter (2002) idioms are those groups of fixed expressions which can most obviously cause difficulties for non-native learners of a language. He points out that idioms cause difficulties since “they are restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up” (p. 65). According to Carter (2002) idioms can most obviously cause difficulties for non-native learners of a language, since “they are restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up” (p. 65). Idioms are expressions whose meanings do not come from the sum of their individual words, so finding a proper way for teaching and learning of the idioms seems of the urgent need in language teaching courses.

There are three main reasons why idioms have not received due attention over the past years (Boers, Demecheleer and Eyckmans, 2004).

The first reason is related to the approach in which language was viewed. At that time, “language was generally conceived as a grammar-lexis dichotomy with grammar ‘rules’ on the one hand and ‘lists’ of individual words on the other” (p. 54). In this approach, as Boers et. al (2004) believe, idioms (along with other multi-word expressions) had no place in the dichotomy. The second reason is related to the assumption that figurative expressions were employed to serve only stylistic purposes restricted to rhetoric and poetry. As a result, idioms were conceived to be used for ornamental purposes. Finally, the third reason was related to the assumption that the meaning of the idioms could not be guessed and because of the belief towards the nature of idioms, the common view was that they could not be taught in any systematic or insightful way. Therefore, the learners had only one choice and that was for them to memorize a list of idioms. These misconceptions about the nature of idioms have made them uninteresting to both English as a foreign and second language learners and teachers.

There is a plethora of research (e.g., Cooper, 1999 and Buchwald, 2000) which shows that learning English idioms is difficult for English native speakers and it is much more problematic when it comes to be discussed for ESL/EFL learners. This can be accounted for by the assumption that the non-literal or figurative meanings of English idioms cannot be predicted through summing up the meanings of their individual words. Nippold and Martin (1989) argued that “failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual’s understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings” (p. 59). So one of the important problems with which language educators have to deal is to find effective ways to help learners learn idiomatic expressions or vocabulary acquisition and their long-term retention.

Most contexts provide some information that can take knowledge of the words forward; however, as Brown (2001) argues since context-reduced language cannot provide the language learner with rich source of information, it will be difficult for language learners to tolerate this lack of knowledge. The implication is that one effective way to help the EFL learner learn idioms is to put the idioms into extended and meaningful contexts so that they employ contextual clues to infer the meanings of the

idioms. It is far more effective than asking the learners to learn them in isolated chunks through memorization and drilling.

As Stahl (1999) argues there are clues in the context called context clues which help the reader or listener guess the meaning of a word. Such clues may be in the sentence that contains the word or somewhere else in the text within close proximity. As a result, a wide variety of reading and listening activities can be viewed as a cure and they should be considered as necessary conditions for the development of a large vocabulary size. What is considered important here is the effective use of context to guess the meaning of unknown words and idioms. For example the ability to guess the meaning of unknown words and idioms depends on a variety of types of knowledge such as world knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and strategic knowledge. To some extent, world knowledge and strategic knowledge can help compensate for limitations in second-language learners' linguistic knowledge and these types of knowledge can be acquired by training. Such training can focus on linguistic clues in the immediate context of the unknown words, or clues from the wider context, including background knowledge (Nation, & Meara, 2012). Cooper (1999) also states that inferring the meaning of idioms from context in 28% of the time helps the readers identify the meaning of idioms.

Knowles (2004) believes that the learning process takes place in five steps ranging from familiarization, recognition, and comprehension to mastery and automaticity. When learners reach the level of automaticity, they are capable of communicating in the language they are learning. He argues that automaticity can be achieved through the practice of phrases and thought groups and the exposure to the target language. This implies that language learners should be exposed to idiomatic expressions and should have intensive practice to be able to use idioms for communication. Knowles argues that one effective way to teach idioms on the part of the teachers is to put them into contexts. She hypothesizes that if learners are provided with idioms occurring in context, it will, to some extent, aid their comprehension.

According to Yule (1996), there are two types of contexts which help the readers or listeners understand the writers or speakers' intentions:

linguistic and physical contexts. With reference to linguistic context or co-text, Yule (1996) argues that “the co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence” (p. 129). He points out that this surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word means. He further points out that our understanding of much we hear and read is tied to the physical context, particularly the time and place, in which we encounter linguistic expressions.

Mondria and Wit-De Boer (1991) also highlight the importance of the context in assisting learners learn idioms effectively. Sheer memorization of idiom lists does not guarantee to be an effective idiom learning and retention strategy. This implies that the chance of success in idiom learning and retention for the learners is quite low when they have to memorize idioms which are presented in isolated lists. According to Widdowson (1983), schemata can help the learner establish connections between the idiomatic expressions in a context and their personal background knowledge. As a result, the chances of the idioms learning and retention in the long-term memory increase. Being interested in interactional functions related to individual examples of common formulaic sequences, Nottinger and DeCarrico (1992) highlighted the significance of teaching idioms through conversation by suggesting the following stages:

- Pattern practice drills using fixed routines to develop confidence and fluency;
- Controlled variation using substitution drills to demonstrate that ‘the chunks learnt previously were not invariable routines, but were instead pattern with open slots’;
- Increased variation ‘allowing them to analyse patterns further’ (p. 117)

In the same line, Boers, Demecheleer and Eyckmans (2004) argue, “many figurative expressions can be traced back to a relatively small set of concrete ‘source domains’ whose structure is mapped onto our conception of abstract ‘target domains’ via ‘conceptual metaphors’” (p. 55).

To the best knowledge of the researchers, no or little research has ever reported to investigate the effect of context on learning idioms and their retention in an Iranian EFL classroom context. Therefore this created enough motivation for the researchers to investigate the effect of context on learning and retention of idioms by Iranian EFL learners. Few studies that

have dealt with the role of the context on learning language elements are reviewed in the following lines.

Following the research projects Schouten-van Parreren (1985), Haastrup (1991) and Mondria (1996) have done, they have concluded that context aids the learner to infer the meaning of the unfamiliar words correctly and leads to better retention than those in which the meaning of a word is presented in a list. One reasonable explanation for the retention effect of inferencing by using contextual clues is related to deep processing where, according to Anderson (1990), Ellis (1995) and Hulstijn (2001), elaborations are established among the unknown words and idioms, their meanings, the context, and the background knowledge of the learner.

Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) introduced the construct of task-induced involvement as attempts to operationalize the construct of elaboration. They believe that elaboration and motivation are key factors in promoting vocabulary and idiom learning. According Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), the cognitive activities namely, *search* and *evaluation* are conducive to retention. They define *search* as the deliberate attempt on the part of the learner to find the meaning of an unknown word and idiom. Then, in *evaluation*, the learner compares a given word with other words and also the contextual meaning of the word with its other meanings to arrive at its context-specific meaning.

According to Mondria and Wit-de Boer (1991) and van Parreren (1967), for the context to help the learner infer the meaning of the words and idioms correctly, it should be pregnant. That is to say, it should provide the learner with sufficient clues so that he or she can use them to correctly infer the meaning of the word or idiom.

So inspired by the reviewed literature on the role of context in second language learning, in the present study the researchers addressed the following research questions:

1. Does context (extended, reduced and no context) have any significant effect on the learning of idioms by EFL learners?
2. Does context (extended, reduced and no context) have any significant effect on the retention of idioms by EFL learners?

Method

Participants

60 Iranian female EFL students, who scored one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean in the TOEFL proficiency test, were selected as the participants of the study. They were in the advanced level and had passed the previous levels of the institute. They ranged in age from 17 to 28 years, the average age being 21.3 years. The participants have been studying English for ten to fifteen terms in language institutes in Tabriz.

Instruments and Materials

First, to assess the participants' initial knowledge of the idioms we developed a 40-item idiom test constructed out of "English Idioms in Use by McCarthy and O'Dell (2002) idiom test and scored according to Idiom Knowledge scale (adopted from Wesche and Paribakht, 1993). The second test was a 30-item immediate post-test constructed out of those idioms in the first test which the participants did not know. Finally, the same 30-item post-test was given to the participants one month after the immediate post-test to assess the long effect of the context on the participants' idiom retention. The content validity of the tests was checked by two experts based on the content of their idiom book. The reliability of the Wesche and Paribakht's scale has already been checked and showed a proper amount of index.

Procedures

60 Iranian advanced English learners were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group: Group 1 (experimental group, the extended-context group), Group 2 (experimental group, the limited-context group) and Group 3 (control group or the decontextualized group). Group 1 was taught idioms through the extended context, ie. brief stories. Every session they were listening to one story which included some of the target idioms. After listening to the story, they were writing down the idioms included in the story and practiced them.

Group 2 was exposed to individual sentences including the same target idioms. After listening to isolated sentences they had to write down the

idioms and practiced them. Finally, Group 3 (control group or the decontextualized group) received the same idioms in only a decontextualized form through definitions. They were listening to the person who was reading the idioms and giving their definitions. Like the participants of the other groups, they had to write down the idioms they heard and practice by themselves.

All the idioms were presented to the participants through listening activities. The rationale behind the use of listening activities was that, as Brown (1980) believes, “listening ability lies at the heart of all growth, from birth through the years of formal education. The better those learning skills are developed, the more productive our learning efforts” (p. 10).

After the treatment sessions were over, the participants administered an immediate post-test (30 items) developed from those idioms which were presented in the treatment. Then, a one-way ANOVA test was employed to examine whether the three groups differ in the performances on the idiom learning and retention both immediately and some time (one month) after the treatment sessions.

Results

The concern of the first research question was to find out the effect of presenting the idioms to the participants in different contexts through listening materials on the learning of those idioms by learners. To answer this research question we compared three groups' scores in the immediate post-test by running a one way ANOVA analysis. It should be mentioned that before running the main analysis a set of other analyses were run to meet the assumptions of ANOVA analysis. The obtained results confirmed the normality of the data and other assumptions. So the main analysis of descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA was run on the immediate post-test scores. The results of descriptive analysis are presented in the following table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Descriptive statistics for the comparison of three groups in the immediate post-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
1.00	20	23.05	1.60	.35891
2.00	20	15.10	1.33	.29824
3.00	20	14.65	1.49	.33462
Total	60	17.60	4.15	.53636

As it is clear from the table, the mean score of the first group (extended context group) with a mean score of 23.05 and standard deviation of 1.6 was higher than the other two groups, but in order to see whether this difference has reached a significant level or not, the researchers ran a one way ANOVA, the results of which are given in table 4.2.

Table 4.2

One way ANOVA for the comparison of three groups' immediate post-test

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	893.100	2	446.550	203.139	.000
Within Groups	125.300	57	2.198		
Total	1018.400	59			

As the results of ANOVA analysis indicate ($f(2,57) = 203.13$, $p = .000$) there is a significant difference among the immediate post-test mean scores of three groups. In order to identify the location of this difference we ran a post hoc analysis of Tukey, the results of which are represented in the following table.

Table 4.3
Tukey HSD analysis on the immediate post-test

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	7.95000*	.46885	.000	6.8217	9.0783
	3.00	8.40000*	.46885	.000	7.2717	9.5283
2.00	1.00	-7.95000*	.46885	.000	-9.0783	-6.8217
	3.00	.45000	.46885	.605	-.6783	1.5783
3.00	1.00	-8.40000*	.46885	.000	-9.5283	-7.2717
	2.00	-.45000	.46885	.605	-1.5783	.6783

The results of Tukey test in table 4.3 shows that the difference between the first group and second group as well as the difference between the first and third groups is significant, and the first group with the highest mean score has outperformed the other two groups. Therefore we conclude that the extended context in which the idioms were presented to the participants helped the participants in Group 1 learn the idioms far more better than the participants in Group 2 and 3. However, we found that Groups 2 and 3 performed almost the same on the immediate post-test.

In the second research question we wanted to know whether the participants remember the idioms they have learned two months ago and can retain them easily or not. To answer this question the researchers gave a delayed post-test of idioms to the participants and compared their performance in this test. For the comparison of the three groups' mean scores in the delayed post-test, we ran some descriptive statistics and a one way ANOVA. Of course before the main analysis the needed assumptions were considered. In the following table the results of descriptive statistics are given.

Table 4.4

Descriptive statistics for the comparison of three groups in the delayed post-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
1.00	20	23.20	1.67	.37417
2.00	20	14.00	1.29	.29019
3.00	20	13.55	1.27	.28539
Total	60	16.91	4.69	.60660

As it is clear from the table, the mean score (23) of the first group was higher than the mean score of the other two groups in the delayed post-test. In order to see whether this difference is meaningful statistically or not, we ran a one way ANOVA. The results of this analysis are represented in the table 4.5.

Table 4.5

One way ANOVA for the comparison of three groups' mean scores in the delayed post-test

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1186.433	2	593.217	291.118	.000
Within Groups	116.150	57	2.038		
Total	1302.583	59			

The results of the one way ANOVA shows that in the delayed post-test like the immediate post-test, the difference among the groups' mean scores is significant ($f(2,57)= 291.11$, $p=.000$). In order to locate the source of difference, the researchers ran a post hoc Tukey test, the results of which are shown in the table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6
Post hoc analysis of delayed post-test results

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	9.20000*	.45141	.000	8.1137	10.2863
	3.00	9.65000*	.45141	.000	8.5637	10.7363
2.00	1.00	-9.20000*	.45141	.000	-10.2863	-8.1137
	3.00	.45000	.45141	.582	-.6363	1.5363
3.00	1.00	-9.65000*	.45141	.000	-10.7363	-8.5637
	2.00	-.45000	.45141	.582	-1.5363	.6363

The results of Tukey test indicated that like the immediate post-test, in the delayed post-test also the difference between the group one and group two as well as the difference between the group one and group three is significant. However, the difference between the group two and group three mean scores is not significant. Group one which has received the idioms in the extended context through the short stories has outperformed the other two groups in the learning and retention of the intended idioms.

Discussion

The results of the analysis for the first research question showed that the extended context group outperformed the other two groups in the immediate post-test. The extended context provided the participants in Group 1 with enough clues to infer the meanings of the idioms and helped learn them effectively. The utterances (including words, phrases, and sentences) helped them to guess the meanings of the unfamiliar idioms and allowed them to learn them easier. Therefore, the role of the context cannot be neglected in assisting the learners to learn the idioms effectively. This is in line with Yule (1996) who points out that the surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word means. However, the present study did not find significant effect of the limited context on the performance of the participants of Group 2 indicating that providing the learners with a limited context is not enough and effective in helping the learners to learn the idioms. This lent support to Brown (2001) who argued that context-reduced

language cannot provide the language learner with rich source of contexts. Instead, the idioms should be presented in as rich and extended contexts as possible to allow the learners to both guess and learn the unfamiliar idioms. The results of the current study supported those of Mondria and Wit-de Boer (1991), van Parreren (1967), Pei-Yu (2002) and Cieslicka (2006).

The results of the delayed post-test which again confirmed the superiority of the first group, supported Schouten-van Parreren (1985), Haastrop (1991) and Mondria (1996) who believe that the context aids the learner to infer the meaning of the unfamiliar words correctly and leads to better retention than those in which the meaning of a word is presented in a list. One reasonable explanation for the retention effect of inferencing by using contextual clues is related to deep processing where, according to Anderson (1990), Ellis (1995) and Hulstijn (2001), elaborations are established among the unknown word and idiom, their meanings, the context, and the background knowledge of the learner. However, we argue that memorizing idioms in the form of definitions can only occupy the memory of the participants and cannot help them learn the idioms as effectively as the extended contexts helped them to learn. When the participants are to memorize the idioms in the form of definitions, since no or little meaningful interaction between the learner and the idioms is established, the learners cannot learn them effectively and they forget them after some time later.

According to Nation (2001), idiom learning can be considered as an integral part of vocabulary learning. However, compared to the learning of vocabulary or grammatical structures, learning idioms is a hard task for the EFL learners. The contextual clues in extended contexts provide the learner with enough information to allow the learner to make associations between the unfamiliar idioms and the contexts within which they are used. This association helps the learner to learn and remember the meanings of the idioms and put them into their long-term memory. As a result, we argue that the present paper provide EFL English teachers with sound pedagogical implications so that they can help their students learn the unfamiliar idioms effectively. One way for EFL teachers is to design various teaching materials in which the unfamiliar idioms are put into extended contexts so that students learn them efficiently by means of contextual clues.

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