

Vivid Phrasal Idioms and the Green New Deal

Teaching Idioms to EAP Students Via Authentic Contexts

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Abstract. Vivid phrasal Idioms (VP Idioms), meaning non-compositional, figurative phrases such as “spill the beans,” occur frequently in English, particularly in conversation [23]. They occur also in the presentational mode, as exemplified by newscasts and political speeches. Yet research suggests that course books for ELLs inadequately address idioms [16, 19, 20]. The current study investigates the effects of exposing learners to VP Idioms in an authentic audiovisual context as recommended by previous research [9, 19, 20, 22]. The authentic context used in this study features U.S. Representative Ocasio-Cortez narrating a story that explains the *Green New Deal*, a plan which mandates an aggressive course of action to combat Global Climate Change. The instructional intervention and data collection took place within one in-tact classroom, wherein the participants passed through both the experimental (authentic context) and control conditions. Participants accessed an instructional website for images and definitions of the six key VP Idioms, three each for the control and experimental phases. Then they viewed “A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” [17] and read the associated script. Student-written dialogues, each of which contain one of the key VP Idioms, were the main data source. Results and pedagogical implications will be discussed.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, Idioms, Teaching and Assessment

1 Introduction

Figurative expressions, which are idiomatic in that their meaning is not transparent, are ubiquitous throughout the English language, in both oral and written form. For English Language Learners (ELLs) these idioms both open a door to fluent conversation and an opportunity miscommunication. For example, if a contradictory circumstance occurs, a speaker might respond, “every cloud has a silver lining” or say that the circumstance, “has a silver lining.” The listener cannot decode the meaning from the constituent words since the institutionalized meaning of the phrase does not equate with its literal meaning. Nevertheless, research has found that idiomatic expressions such as “take the bull by the horns,” etc. occur frequently in spoken English [19][20][21][22]. While such expressions occur more frequently in speech than in writing [3][23], there is evidence to suggest that some of these figurative phrases,

such as “cross the Rubicon,” are appropriate to more formal registers of usage, including oral presentations and even academic writing [32].

Regardless of the level of formality, a mastery of idioms requires an awareness of their cultural context. The non-native speaker (NNS) of English who lacks knowledge of these idioms is likely to be baffled by them when s/he meets these phrases in a conversation, oral presentation, or text. This can occur even among learners who have attained a high level of English proficiency. Idioms, many of which have word origins rooted in historical fact, deeply reflect culture [16] [19] [20] [27]. Learners who acquire awareness of the cultural context of a word or phrase are likely to avoid such confusion and acquire what Liantas [19] [21] calls Idiomatic Competence, the ability to use an idiom with relatively little effort and in an appropriate way. Sinclair also comments upon this ability to participate fluently in L2 conversation being contingent upon cultural awareness, including the following: “a subliminal mastery of phraseology, the ability to make linguistic and textual inferences, and a knowledge of aspects of culture which are not signaled anywhere in the text, but which are nonetheless known” [30]. Having to rely solely on L1 knowledge of idioms and (often futile) attempts to decompose an English idiom leads to misinterpretation unless this idiom is nearly identical to one found in the learner’s L1 [10] [20] [21] [22]. As instructors who endeavor to elicit the type of fluency that Sinclair describes, we ought to teach idioms in such a way that learners grasp the full connotation, which includes observing how native speakers use them.

1.1 Definition of Terms

The current study explores Vivid Phrasal Idioms, which should be defined. Moon (1997) states that numerous terms for idioms and other phrases exist, yet linguists have not agreed upon any standardized definitions of terms or categories. To address this ambiguity and as a focus of his research, Dr. John Liantas coined the name, Vivid Phrasal Idiom (VP Idiom) which includes many phrases such as “jump the gun,” “bite the bullet,” etc. The characteristics of VP Idioms are: (1) They are non-compositional, as explained above; these phrases cannot be decomposed so as to figure out their meaning based on the constituent words [11] [13] [28]. (2) VP Idioms are not limited to any particular verb tense. For instance, one can “spill the beans,” or say that “He has spilled the beans,” etc. (3) However, most of these phrases are what Fernando and Flavell (1981) call “transformationally deficient;” this means that they are usually inflexible insofar as substituting lexis. For example, the idiom “play second fiddle” cannot be transformed to “play second violin” without losing its figurative meaning. Hence, VP Idioms are conventionalized. These figurative expressions must be phrasal or sentential, so single-word figurative expressions are not included in this category. (4) The learner can easily visualize the idiom given that it has a concrete and literal counterpart, which led Liantas to call them “vivid.” (5) As mentioned, these idioms have dual meaning, in that a literal meaning exists. Nevertheless, analysis of the structure, syntax, semantics of the literal expression is insufficient to decipher the idiom’s figurative meaning [21].

2 Motive for the Study

Despite the importance of VP Idioms, evidence suggests that that teaching materials designed for L2 English learners do not adequately address these phrases [16] [19] [20]. Still, survey data reveals that the learners acknowledge the benefits of acquiring fluency in the use of idioms [16] [19] [20]. This gap in contemporary materials development and practice has motivated the researcher to investigate approaches for teaching idioms.

Various registers of usage employ VP Idioms, and while they occur most frequently in informal, spoken contexts [23], they also occur in other registers through which L2 learners will need to communicate. Myers (2006), analyzed communicative events (written or spoken) into three modes: conversational, presentational, and academic. Understanding these modes is integral to the rationale for teaching idioms. At the beginning of life, one hears and begins to speak L1, in the mode that will remain permanently (in most cases) the register through which one communicates with family and close friends. The interlocutor in a conversation aims primarily to immerse himself/herself into the community and maintain relationships. This mode includes non-specific language and vernacular forms. Conversely, academic communication (in speech or writing) has less emphasis on establishing and maintaining relationships. Rather, it requires precision, correctness, and distancing of the author's self and his/her opinion. A central goal of academic communicative events is to convey scientific objectivity, while elaborating upon the research that has been conducted by others.

Presentational speech events fall into a category neither fully academic nor informal in that the purpose and conventions of speech in this mode differs from either informal speech or academic writing. Examples of communication in the presentational modes include political speeches and news reports. This mode does not permit non-standard usage like conversation yet aims for a deeper connection with the audience than academic discourse. Applying Myers [25] research to learning English idioms, the immigrant or international student may be hampered not only in attempts at conversation but also in his/her understanding of political speeches and news reports if s/he fails to grasp an idiom's meaning.

Various approaches to idioms instruction have been taken, including the use of images associated with the literal meaning of each target idiom, etymologies, conceptual metaphors, etc. The plethora of English idioms makes it necessary for instructors or materials designers to thoughtfully select which idioms to teach due to time constraints. Teaching the most commonly occurring idioms has been recommended by some researchers and pedagogues [19]. Attention is more likely to be engaged if the selection of idioms is at least partly based on student interests [19]. Recent research recommends providing students with examples of idioms as they occur in authentic contexts, such as YouTube videos, etc. [16] [19] [20] [21]. This exploratory study investigates how the use of authentic contexts affects English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students' ability to produce them.

- (1) How does the use of authentic video clips (TV excerpts), printed definitions, and dialogues impact the learner's production of Vivid Phrasal Idioms? The learner's production has been measured by the authenticity and appropriateness of each idiom within the context of the participant's written dialogue.
- (2) What is the impact (if any) of using the authentic contexts on learner's receptive knowledge of idioms as compared to the effect of teaching them without it? The difference in effectiveness would be measured by comparing the posttest scores of the idioms taught through the control condition with the scores of the idioms taught through the experimental condition.

All instructional materials, links and supplementary information were provided for students via a researcher-designed website for learning idioms. <https://idioms.sitey.me/> This site was available to participants throughout the control and experimental phases of the instructional intervention.

3 Literature Review

This concise review of literature has two foci. First, it summarizes results of studies wherein researchers investigated methods for teaching idioms and relevant theory. Next, it explains the Green New Deal because this is the topic of the authentic context presented to the participants. Beginning with instructional interventions, numerous studies have explored the approach of providing students with an etymological elaboration of the idiom, which may come before presenting them with its meaning [1] [5] [6]. With rare exceptions, this approach has been found to be effective whether the study uses the Boers CALL tool, as in the studies above, or is implemented within a classroom without it [2] [27]. A more common approach is to present students with a picture of the literal meaning of the idiom [12] [15] [34]. Those textbooks that address idioms usually contain such associated images. While some researchers have found this to be effective, others have not. For example, results of a study by Boers and colleagues [8] suggest that providing students with associated pictures helps them to remember the meaning of the idiom but not its precise form. As noted above, idioms lack flexibility, so fluency in idiom usage, i.e. Idiomatic Competence, is contingent upon mastery of form as well as meaning. The accessibility of video via internet and YouTube has made it practical to use authentic contexts, in print as well as video, as a material to teach students about how native speakers and highly proficient NNS use idioms. Finally, there have been studies that investigate a multi-modal approach, which combines having students generate their own images with providing authentic contexts [13] [36]. This literature review touches upon the most common and replicated types of instructional interventions. As such, it is not exhaustive. The topic of the audio-visual context given to the participants is described next.

Possibly the most pressing issue worldwide for the 21st century is Global Climate Change. While the politics of the current U.S. administration denies its existence and has endeavored to strengthen the business of coal extraction and exploration for petro-

leum, many citizens in the U.S. grasp the reality and severity of this problem and support measures to fight the worst effects Global Climate Change, which has been caused by the burning of fossil fuels. The controversial Green New Deal exists as a plan rather than a bill ready to be discussed and voted upon by the U.S. Congress. The plan includes a provision mandating the implementation of a fossil-fuel free power in the U.S. ten years after becoming a law [26] [32], which is ambitious considering the extent to which the world's largest polluter consumes fossil fuels for home and industrial uses, not to mention transportation. The four major goals are: (1) It would mandate the transformation of the United States' energy sources to renewables, such as solar and wind. This plan includes creating a smart-grid, retrofitting power plants, and updating transportation, both mass transit and the options for individual use. "The draft proposal also mentions upgrading every residential and industrial building across the country for state-of-the-art energy efficiency and decarbonizing manufacturing, transportation, and agriculture" [32]. (2) It aims to restructure the economy so that even service sector workers can earn a living wage. (3) This plan would refute the argument of those who say that transforming America's energy would mean unemployment for numerous coal miners and petroleum workers. Rather the Green New Deal will provide re-training for those who currently work in toxic, pollution creating jobs (such as oil, gas, coal industries) and will pay them to be part of the restructuring process. (4) Finally, it will provide funding for communities affected by these changes. The video, "A Message from the Future," [17] provided audio-visual support for the EAP students in learning about the Green New Deal and a few idioms that occur within it.

4 Method

"A Message from the Future with AOC" was presented to students because of the importance of the topic, the prevalence of idioms, and the fact that the students could hear the script being read aloud accompanied by images illustrating the content of the narrative. This follows Paivio's [29] Dual Coding Theory, which posits that three channels of cognitive processing exist. Furthermore, having images associated with verbal input enables the learner to process the content through two channels, enhancing comprehension. The researcher collected posttest data in addition to collecting and analyzing the students use of idioms in students' dialogues.

This study builds upon the exemplary research by Freyn and Gross [13], yet with a smaller and less linguistically homogeneous group of students. Their study of Ecuadorian ELLs included four classrooms, two of which both observed idioms spoken in authentic contexts and created their own images. Given the smaller sample, the current study uses one group of learners who have passed sequentially through the control and the authentic context conditions. Three of the six target idioms have been taught through each of the conditions listed above. The target idioms include: "put the cart before the horse," "cross the Rubicon," "bite the bullet," "go to bat for someone," "the lion's share," and "kick off." The participants, who were in an advanced Level 5 writing course, are between the ages of 19 and 45. The native languages of partici-

pants are Spanish (12), Vietnamese (2), and Russian (1). The idioms were selected on the basis of likelihood to enhance TOEFL performance, such as “bite the bullet” and “cross the Rubicon,” frequency, such as “put the cart before the horse” and “bite the bullet,” and the appearance of the idioms in the audio-visual authentic context.

The instructional intervention proceeded as follows: On the first day, students became acquainted with the instructional website, including the purpose for learning idioms and the meaning of Idiomatic Competence. They then learned the first three idioms, based upon the definition, explicitly provided, along with examples. Finally, they wrote a dialogue based upon one of these idioms, “cross the Rubicon,” “bite the bullet,” and “put the cart before the horse.” On the next day of instruction, the students watched, “A Message from the Future.” Then they reviewed the script and watched it again after which the instructor/researcher clarified the definitions for any non-idiomatic words that they did not understand. Next, students accessed the page on the instructional website that contains the target idioms, wherein they could read the definition, followed by exemplification and class discussion. Finally, the students wrote their own dialogues using one of three idioms presented under the experimental condition, “the lion’s share,” “go to bat for _____,” and “kick-off.” By the end of data collection, each student had written two dialogues, one for each set of three idioms. The researcher evaluated each written dialogue based upon a rubric that measured writing skills in addition to the appropriateness of idiom use. Posttest data was collected one week later; there was no pretest.

5 Results and Discussion

Despite the small sample size, the researcher analyzed both the learner-generated dialogues and the posttest scores, endeavoring to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. Posttest results for idioms taught under the experimental (authentic context) condition were $N = 14$, $M = 93$ $SD = 1.20$; likewise, for the control idioms. Regarding research question #2, based upon posttest scores, there appears to be no difference in learning gains between the control and the experimental condition, i.e. authentic contexts. However, factors exist that may have compromised the validity of the assessment. Students were tested soon after instruction, there were only a total of six items, and all of these items were multiple choice matching of the definition with the idiom. The researcher refrains from drawing any conclusion *based on test scores* due to the small number of participants (14) and brevity of the test. The results for students’ dialogues show a different pattern. Despite some grammatical errors, the student writers were able to employ the VP Idioms appropriately within the dialogues, particularly those containing idioms that were taught under the experimental condition.

Analysis reveals that in some cases, students were able to use the idioms appropriately. Of the three control idioms, only dialogues containing “cross the Rubicon” were rated as having appropriate and naturalistic use of the idiom, whereas examples of appropriate usage appeared in all dialogues for the experimental items. Excerpts from two of these written dialogues are shown below. Given the limitations of space,

other dialogues do not appear. The current study served as an exploration and pilot study. The dissertation research, which includes four of the idioms from the pilot test, plus five more and additional web pages, has both a pretest and posttest, which should reveal changes in students' receptive knowledge of the key VP Idioms. Future research with a larger sample may reveal more about the effectiveness of using authentic contexts in teaching VP Idioms.

“The lion’s share” – Short summary: The characters are an office manager and her supervisor for the Chevrolet Company. The regional sales departments were competing to see which salesman could sell the most cars.

Boss: Hey Hellen, could you send me the report of all those sales?

Hellen: Of course, sir, here it is!

Boss: Perfect, let me see the papers. Hmm, ok Carl has sold 28 cars. Brenda has 25 cars sold [sic]. Steve has 31 cars sold [sic]. And wow! Chris has 40 cars sold [sic]. Incredible! He got **the lion’s share** of the business! He deserves the prize. Please Hellen, call all the groups to say who the winner is.

Hellen: Yes, sir, our dealership is excited. Could you tell me what the prize is?

Boss: Of course, Hellen, the prize is a new car for the winner.

“Cross the Rubicon” - Short summary: The main characters in the dialogue are two young adult immigrants to the U.S. One of them tells her friend about her desire to move out of the home of her father and American step-mother.

Beatriz: Since I finished the high school, I am the only one that “have time to clean the house” [sic] so I am the only one that does it. Also, they try to compare me with my siblings, but they have the advantage of language because they were born in the US.

Marla: Oh, I didn’t know that it was like that. . .

Beatriz: I try my best, but it is never enough. I work, I go to the school, I almost do everything in the house . . . I just want to leave my house. I don’t know where I’m going, but I don’t care!!

Marla: Bea, you must calm down and think carefully about your situation. You are only 20 and your work is not stable enough to be independent.

Beatriz: I know that Marla, but it’s hard.

Marla: If you leave your house you are going to **Cross the Rubicon**, and you will be living by yourself. That is difficult if you are not prepared. I think it is better if you talk to your family.

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