TEACHING IDIOMATIC LANGUAGE THROUGH ECRIF

It would be non-controversial to state that idioms constitute one of the most challenging areas of foreign language learning. Being particularly difficult for those native adult learners who are less exposed to figurative language, they are especially confusing to learners of English as a foreign language. However, as M. Nippold and S. Martin pointed out, “Failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual’s understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings”[3, p. 59].

Practical and theoretical reasons for certain difficulties in mastering idioms are obvious. First of all, despite the fact that figurative meanings cannot be predicted through the conjoined meanings of the elements of these linguistic expressions, the language learners are very likely to try to assign the meaning word by word. What is more, with reference to Z. Kovecses and P. Szabó, understanding of idiomatic expressions arises “from our more general knowledge of the world (embodied in our conceptual system)” [2, p. 330]. Therefore, the language learners are to be able to make use of the context and their prior knowledge to comprehend the expression metaphorically. Consequently, language teaching must be allied with such a fundamental aspect of discourse programming as “conceptual fluency” development, so that the students were enabled “to access the metaphorical structures inherent in the target language and culture” [1, p. 4].

Besides a considerable difficulty in comprehending idioms, there is another challenge the learners are likely to encounter while studying the target language. The latter refers to the development of the learners’ ability to fluently use idiomatic expressions in conversations. The problem is that normally teaching idioms presupposes such stages as explanation of a number of isolated language units by a teacher and their subsequent conscious memorization by the students. However, it is obvious, but it needs to be said, that a direct instruction to commit vocabulary units to memory without a concomitant intensive practice will not necessarily give any kind of assurance that the students will acquire essential skills to use them productively in speech acts. Hence, the question, how to provide the students with more effective frameworks for internalising idiomatic expressions is by all means of vital importance.

In view of a pressing need for frameworks appropriate to teach idiomatic expressions, let us address a brief analysis of ECRIF lesson framework – the one, which was introduced by J. Kurzweil and M. Scholl [4] to facilitate productive language skills development. Basically, the framework comprises such stages as encounter, clarify, remember, internalise and fluently use, which can integrally be referred to the PPP (present, practice, produce) framework. To be more precise, at the stage of encounter new language structures are being introduced to the students, at the stage of clarify it is the meaning of new structures which is being explained, the stages of remember and internalise, in their turn, aim at moving the knowledge of newly-acquired structures from short-term to long-term memory, the stage of fluently use is intended for teaching the students to incorporate newly-acquired structures into clear and coherent utterances. It would be crucial to realize, that each of the stages of the framework suggested makes quality contributions to the students’ familiarisation with the target language structures.

There are ample reasons to believe that the ECRIF framework will undoubtedly be in tune with teaching idiomatic expressions. Nevertheless, compared with formal exposure to other language structures, there are several rules to bear in mind while teaching idioms. To begin with, at the stage of encounter the target structures must be introduced “in tandem with grammatical and formalized communicative structures…”[1, p. 4]. Furthermore, the stage of clarify will run more smoothly provided that the students are able to comprehend the meaning of the idiom constituent parts. Moreover, the stages of remember and internalize will be more effective if the idioms are meaningfully organized in a contextualized way. What remains to be said is that the success of the final stage of ECRIF is entirely dependent on the quality of the preceding stages, and, thus, any of them can neither go flop nor be ignored.
REFERENCES


