

## MASTERING IDIOMATIC ENGLISH: THE USE OF MOVIE CLIPS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The process of actively learning a foreign language means that students should be exposed to the real spoken language, i.e. the language in its natural form as it is used in everyday life. Since the main purpose of communication and the language is to convey information, the use of movie clips appears to be a perfect means of combining both verbal and non-verbal features which makes the learning process more enjoyable and more productive. Lexical items could be stored and preserved for a longer period of time if their mental representation resulted from the fruitful combination of spoken word, written text and images. Furthermore, grammar correctness should not be the only goal of paramount importance in foreign language acquisition, but appropriate language in naturally occurring context and cultural background. Thus, the creation of actual meaning is seen as a process where students actively participate rather than simply gather the facts about a foreign language and a particular culture.

Sometimes specific references belonging to different cultures are not substituted in an appropriate way in moving pictures with captions in the mother tongue, which may be the consequence of inadequate familiarity with idiomatic expressions, different humour styles and traditions or simply different mental patterns resulting from students' education and environment. Despite a certain degree of weirdness which is presumed to be tolerated by audiences, they are also supposed to evolve their knowledge of the foreign language and culture. This evolution assumes not only using a given language, but 'living a language' as well. If using a language is primarily related to reading skills, then 'living a language' is connected with listening and speaking.

Comparing the outcome by using traditional methods of learning a foreign language (audio tapes, language laboratory exercises, video tapes and pen and paper) with the ones achieved with the latest multimedia applications, students show a greater understanding when solving multimedia-delivered listening tasks (Brett 1997, 42). Nowadays computer software applications used to further language learning enable students to take advantage of state-of-the-art technology, but being expensive and time-consuming to develop, students should let go during the process of pure learning and enjoy themselves – instead. Artistic and emotional purposes may also be targeted while learning a language and getting to know a different culture, refining the general purpose of learning a foreign vocabulary and grammatical structures. And all these may be attained both in and out of the classroom – by watching movies – which at the same time promotes students' autonomy and free them from institutional ties. Through a foreign language movie, students find themselves checking and improving their previous knowledge of language on their own and gain self-esteem and self-confidence through personal development. They avoid getting embarrassed in the classroom for the mistakes they make. They learn at their own pace. They – above all – enjoy learning!

Students should be exposed to the language they learn and later be able to contextualise the vocabulary and grammar structures learnt and use them in real life situations. At times they come across words and structures in a movie they might not fully understand, but they might understand these situations with their heart and that in turn may help them understand words and phrases. They themselves become a part of the story, their listening comprehension is enhanced and their intercultural communicative competence, as the quintessence of human language skills, is increased.

There are two kinds of video material that can be used in the classroom – instructional video and authentic video – the former as a helpful teaching tool and the latter created for native speakers in the first place but growing more popular with language learning students. Authentic video materials, such as cartoons, commercials, TV series, video clips and

movies, provide additional input through a combination of spoken words, subtitles in the same language and image. Thus, bimodal – also known as intralingual subtitles (being unilingual renditions of the soundtrack) may provide a positive reinforcement and greater satisfaction to language students. That way they increase their vocabulary, they check and fix spelling and can even write down long fragments and idioms they do not understand to find the explanation later. Moreover, they can support the long-run retention of the same by using it in role-plays or in real life situations. As oral communication among ESL students is perceived as "a daunting and at times terrifying prospect" (Brooke 2003, 1), this leisure-learning activity may contribute to a more relaxing learning atmosphere and lower anxiety. Furthermore, some useful examples are available even on the Internet – varying from a job interview to a debate or a movie sequence from a huge amount of material can easily be googled.

Here it is important to emphasise that authentic video material should be chosen depending on the students' interests – historical documentaries, soaps, sitcoms, 'rags-to-riches' tales, talk-shows, interviews, thrillers, SF, dramas, etc. – otherwise, it can do more harm than good. In addition to authentic language, the body rhythm, speech rhythm and speed of speech in video clips used in the classroom enable students to get an idea of what they have seen and heard, and visual stimuli can sometimes "generate prediction, speculation and a chance to activate background schemata when viewing a visual scene reenacted" (Canning-Wilson 2000, 3). Besides the aforesaid, video clips used in the classroom must be situationally appropriate, bearing in mind the age of students and difficulty criteria concerning grammatical and lexical complexity.

In order to increase not only language memorisation ability but also students' competence in using the words and phrases learnt in the proper context, students should be provided with "meaningful practice tasks supported by contextualized linguistic (grammatical and phonological) cues" (Borras, Lafayette 1994, 62) after watching a particular video clip.



Then the gap between their competence in reading and listening could be bridged and their oral communicative performance could increase, affecting both their mental effort and achievement. The higher the task level, the greater the cognitive demands ought to be on the students. Lower-level students may be involved in providing descriptions related to spatial details or people's appearance and higher-level ones may be asked to solve more difficult idiom-related tasks. In addition, the opportunity to see subtitles is as important as it is to control them. It is logical to expect that higher-level students may benefit more from subtitles than beginners while taking advantage of authentic input and generating a suitable output on their own. At higher levels of knowledge this process of adopting new study strategies is less disheartening and upsetting and more effective.

Since students may pause, skip or restart the video clip any desired number of times, they can integrate listening for gist and listening for detail while at the same time becoming aware of particular language styles, emphasising, changing speed of speech and non-verbal messages such as: body language, music, sounds, etc. After watching a video clip different tasks may also be created – students may be required to fill in the missing words in subtitles, to complete the dialogue with missing questions, to work out the whole conversation using the clues they have picked up or their comprehension may be checked using for instance no subtitles, full subtitles and keyword subtitles. Having loaded the subtitles and made necessary corrections, students can then watch the clip again. When dealing with idioms, particular tasks may be assigned involving idiomatic expressions ranging from multiple-choice quizzes that consider idioms' meaning to inserting the missing words in order to obtain the correct answer or to matching various idioms or a jumbled up list of definitions. Different conceptual metaphors can be used for L1 and L2, some solutions bringing fun and thus will be remembered for good. Since multimedia language learning materials have become more widely accessible not only in foreign language classrooms but also in students' homes, there is a vast array of opportunities to deepen and broaden language knowledge, skills

and understanding. A variety of software for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) enables students to commit to their learning and to manage on their own, have a lot of fun and make progress. Of course, computer familiarity and their attitudes towards computers are of the greatest importance in self-learning; otherwise the 'press HELP' command is nothing but a waste of time.

The results obtained in recent research indicate that "participants interacted with subtitles more frequently and for longer periods of time than with the transcript" if both were offered (Grgurovic, Hegelheimer 2007, 45). This is why in further designing language learning software particular attention ought to be paid to making subtitles the help option. Higher proficiency students are expected to take advantage of different help options and to know which one may be more beneficial to them. On the other hand, lower-level students "found the captions distracting or confusing", having difficulty using the three channels of sound, image and captions simultaneously (Taylor 2005, 425) and hence using subtitles in the target language should be left to those with longer experience in language learning.

Appropriate use of idioms requires that their general features – conventionality, fixed structure and opaqueness – are recognised. While native speakers can more or less easily distinguish between idiomatic and literal language, ESL students find it more difficult. Furthermore, multi-word expressions, which idioms belong to, are rarely taught or at least they are rarely taught properly, but they are common in everyday speech. Although idioms cannot be analysed the same way as 'regular' sequences of words, offering insight into the system of grammar, it would be "a foolhardy gamble to believe that it is enough to expose L2 students to prefabs and the grammar will take care of itself" (Granger 1998, 157). A great number of research has been conducted on how the human brain functions in different situations and when it comes to language issues – as with an ordinary computer – language data is reorganised into smaller units



suitable for fast and flexible manipulation. Since the point of language is in communication, the reaction of the listener is the proper measure of success of what has been said by the speaker or by the person in a particular movie scene. The process of understanding may be supported by visual aids, sound and gestures, so the listener/watcher is helped in decoding. Sometimes some students do not engage with what prefabs contain and they succeed in mastering both the form and function of these utterances. But curiosity does not necessarily kill the cat, and further search following the memorisation of such prefabricated strings leads to their proper use at the right time and in the right situations. It is not unusual that incorrect translation in L1 subtitles enables better understanding with a movie audience, such as *It's raining cats and dogs* given as *Padaju psi i mačke* = *The cats and dogs are falling down*. Since it is raining in the movie scene, the audience will know that the meaning is idiomatic and where cats and dogs are together, there must be something silly and extremely messy. However, it may be very difficult to deduce anything from the idiom *It's all Greek to me*, especially when the translation is inappropriate: *Ne znam grčki* = *I can't speak Greek*. If, say, a character in the movie emphasises that he would not like the *red tape* in his business, the audience might be puzzled why in the translation line he expressed such dislike of an ordinary 'crimson ribbon'!

Cartoons and simple video presentations could be very suitable media for teaching idioms. Being inseparable from the conceptual system, idioms may be presented using visual aids. Just imagine a small, angry man with lots of *smoke coming out of his ears* or someone *spitting fire* or another one *burning with love*. First there was reality, then psychology interfered and then came idioms. The same pattern may be transferred into cartoons – even adults like them and may benefit from this kind of relaxed learning. Generally speaking, our ordinary conceptual system is of metaphorical nature and "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 5). Lots of events in everyday life may simply be related to UP or DOWN

positions and feelings. Colours also greatly contribute to painting and shading our world in a bright or a dim light. The human mind is considered to be a machine, while the heart has its own rhythm whatever it is made of, the palette can range from gold to stone. But mappings remain almost the same in all languages and general conceptual metaphors are shared.

Advanced stages in lexis acquisition require a greater teaching and learning load, and this should not be discouraging for the minority of students who are not seduced by the 'tricky' nature of idioms and stand opposite the majority of other students who are heavily involved with them. If what is said (L2) may also be read in the subtitles (L2), then students may be expected to manage larger fragments of text and sound which enhances their processing capacity (Vanderplank 1988, 276), for their cognitive effort is reduced, processing time is saved and language is available for immediate use (Shin, Nation 2008, 340). Having parallel access to text and sound means students can focus on the form and more easily notice idiomatic expressions, providing in turn positive reinforcement for further learning. The ability to draw language from different programmes on television also contributes to students' competence as anyone can choose between *BBC news*, *Discovery*, *Animal Planet*, *History Channel* etc. particularly when English subtitles are provided for the hearing impaired.

Carefully chosen video clips for classroom purposes could "make up the shortfall between what the classroom context can provide and the creative linguistic knowledge which the student needs to develop" (Wray 2000, 485). Repeated exposure to fixed and semi-fixed phrases assents with so-called 'immersion pedagogies', based on the fact that the best learning takes place when students are simply immersed in abundant, meaningful and, above all, natural communicative settings. But, the rules seem to be different for native students if compared with L2 students. Cultural background has made an impact. A great deal of any language, English not being the exception here, is not learned by explicit instructions but by the



'immersion' method – even collocations are good example of supporting evidence, let alone idioms. Supposing a person produces or comes into contact with 200 words a minute for 5 hours a day, there must be that "frequency of occurrence and mere raw size of long-term memory are more important than often admitted" (Stubbs 1995, 389).

Crosslinguistic influence is something to be taken as an important factor in the acquisition of L2 (Laufer 2000, 186). Cognitive mechanisms employed with idioms presuppose integration processes including metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge, all of which contribute to the 'motivation' of idiomatic expression (Kövescs 1996, 345) or, in other words, its 'semantic transparency' (Irujo 1993, 217). Regardless of personal measure of intelligence or level achieved in listening and reading skills, when it comes to recognition of an idiom, there is a specific part of it where enough information is accumulated and when the process of identification of a 'chunk' as an idiom takes place. Consequently, idioms cannot be simply retrieved from the mental lexicon – they are not merely long(er) words, but expressions of a figurative nature which is to be recognised.

Some idioms have exact translation equivalents (*lay the cards on the table / položiti karte na sto; crocodile tears / krokodilske suze; on the tip of the tongue / na vrh jezika*), between some others there is partial formal similarity (*miss the boat / prošlo voz; the last straw / poslednja kap; a storm in a teacup / bura u čaši vode*), or there is a lack of formal similarity (*beat somebody black and blue / propustiti koga kroz šake; beat about the bush / kao kiša oko Kragujevca; pink elephants / beli miševi*). There is, of course, a group of idioms in both English and Serbian without counterparts in the opposite language (*It's not my cup of tea!; Let's go Dutch.; put someone out to pasture // Dža ili ba; Koji mu je đavo!; Ako je za vajdu...*). If they want to do a great job, movie translators must bear different types of idioms in mind and find the most suitable way to convey the meaning. Since human thinking is largely metaphorical no matter where people live and what language they use, it is not unusual that basic conceptual

metaphors are common to most languages and that, consequently, meaning of many idioms is not arbitrary but derived from those metaphors. Thus, *optimism* is related to *light, love to magic, anger to heat, problem to burden* and so on. What is expected is that students, and here movie audiences, will more easily recognise and retain L2 idioms of formal similarity, although 'oddness' of the ones without counterparts in L1 may pull some strange trigger for storing them in memory because of that strangeness.

However, "verbal competences appear to be not sufficient to gather figurative meaning from nondecomposable expressions" in the way idioms are (Caillies, Sourn-Bissaoui 2008, 710). Theory of mind promotes idiom understanding and to some extent it determines figurative language comprehension, but only for nondecomposable expressions. What makes the difference between understanding decomposable and nondecomposable idioms is, besides verbal competences, related to age and second-order beliefs (I think that you think...). The age of language students, and related to L2 learning: the level of language knowledge determines figurative competence in decomposable idioms, but second-order beliefs understanding affects figurative competence in nondecomposable idioms.

A great deal of experimental work dealing with the comprehension of idioms and remembering them has been conducted recently (Laufer 2000, Riehemann 2001, Boers 2001, Grant, Bauer 2004, Cacciari, Corradini, Padovani 2005, Sprenger, Levelt, Kempen 2006, Libben, Titone 2008) and some other work has been conducted on natural language processing (Sag, Baldwin, Bond, Copestake, Flickinger 2002, Boers, Demecheleer, Eyckmans 2004). The traditional standpoint over idioms has been profoundly undermined by cognitive semantics suggesting that idioms can be taught and learned through more systematic and insightful learning. Existing lexical knowledge along with cognitive efforts in vocabulary tasks and exploiting the imaginability of lexical items may be fruitful in the long run. Imagery processing, i.e. the association of an idiom with a concrete image or a vivid scene, can be quite substantial (Boers 2001, 40).



However, the etymological origin of idioms is often blurred. The opaqueness of a great number of idioms prevents students from making a valid hypothesis on their meaning. Being grounded in culture-related knowledge, the discrepancy between L1 and L2 cultures may also lead to the misunderstanding of idioms. Thus, idioms should not be treated "as non-decomposable arbitrary units, which can only be learned through blind memorization" (Boers 2001, 41). The greater the 'distance' between the cultures, the greater the comprehension problems actually experienced are. Although general metaphors may be the same for both languages, their conventionality may vary. If the level of idiom imaginability is low, then students, or here movie audiences, should pay attention to the situational context while a higher level of imaginability enables them to deduce its meaning from its lexical constituents. Of course, the meaning of highly familiar idioms is directly retrieved from a mental lexicon of long-term memory which is much faster than full compositional analysis and is surely related to an economy in language. But, high frequency of different idiom constituents may also make idioms less predictive, since these constituents occur in lots of different contexts. Psycholinguists and linguists agree that "idioms cannot be thought of merely as arbitrary, noncompositional sequences" – "compositionality can facilitate idiom processing after a figurative meaning has been retrieved" (Libben, Titone 2008, 1117).

Individual techniques used in L2 learning may sometimes create certain issues difficult for students to deal with on their own. Having found the accurate explanation of an idiomatic expression, students have to pay attention to the context and find their own method of connecting and mapping. Sometimes it is not 'a piece of cake' and another piece of a jigsaw puzzle simply does not fall into place. Students may encounter such difficulties when they come across idioms with fossilised personal names. General education often provides answers for many questions – *Gordian knot*, *Freudian slip*, *Russian roulette*, *cross the Rubicon*, *Achilles' heel*, *Pandora's Box*, *Murphy's Law* are a few examples we have all been confronted with and they are the same in many languages. Nevertheless, is

every Tom, Dick and Harry able to recognise *the real McCoy*? Is learning idioms – like painting *the Forth Bridge* – a never-ending story? And what about English-speaking people learning Serbian when they come across odd expressions such as *Alajbegova slama*, *kajgana svetog Petra*, *kao Janko na Kosovu*, *pao s Marsa*, *pravi se Englez* etc.? Searching for an explanation may lead students to unusual stories based on mythology, religion, local history and etymology, which provides opportunities for students to enhance both their language knowledge and detailed understanding of history and culture including at times even local lore. Watching movies produced in the L2 country and using video clips in the classroom make useful techniques for mastering 'deeper' layers of L2 and gaining closer insight into the lives of others.

Some research findings show that quick access to conceptual metaphors during idiom comprehension is possible, but idiom comprehension does not necessarily depend on the activation of these conceptual metaphors (Gibbs, Bogdanovich 1997, 149). Metaphoric thought may have a certain role in the immediate understanding of some idioms in everyday language, to start with *a needle in a haystack* / *igla u plastu sena* point to the level of pessimism while trying to find the solution for a problem, to continue with *tie the knot* / *stati na ludi kamen* shows even greater pessimism and despair of generations who experienced the same and to conclude with the absolutely hopeless and least transparent *kick the bucket* / *otegnuti papke*. If not listed or classified in dictionaries, idioms are seldomly encountered outside of the context. In a movie such context often enables word-play and clever repartee (e.g., *You'd better drown the cat than let her out of the bag*!).

What should be mentioned in the end is the phenomenon of phraseological 'false friends' posing more subtle and complicated problems if compared to single-word 'false friends'. Actually, mental images and lexical constituents appear to be the same in such idioms in L1 and L2, but what makes the difference is their semantics. *The left hand doesn't know*



what the right hand is doing in Serbian literally means *when give, give discreetly*, but there is also idiomatic meaning of the same: *Ne zna se ko pije a ko plaća*, describing a messy and chaotic situation. The Serbian idiom *zagrejati stolicu* (=to spend long hours studying) is not to be mismatched with a literal meaning of a bench-warmer (Serbian: *lenja bubu*), describing an idle or ineffectual person. Somebody who jumped out of his skin actually made a quick, sudden movement because they were frightened, but the literal meaning in Serbian (= *iskočiti iz kože*) is equal to *be driven to distraction*. It is not easy after all to pick up the threads and continue with the activity that has been aborted, but the original meaning of the Serbian idiom *po hvatati konce* is a 'false friend' here for it means to figure out.

Since learning idioms has always been a very difficult task for easy-going students and a great challenge for devoted ones, the ESL teachers' aim may include finding a helpful way of making idioms more meaningful and more worth remembering. State-of-the-art multimedia, films and video clips can all be useful aids in this mission, particularly when supposing that students are at the same time exposed to a fair degree of L2 cultural background. What cannot be read in books may be heard and seen on the screen following the natural flow of speaking language and vivid images capturing a vast array of emotions, and since moving pictures do not provide the necessary interaction for learning language, silent audiences willing to learn further will find a way to later negotiate the meaning, clarify it and receive feedback on use. Situational appropriateness is then of utmost importance.

There is a wide-spread belief that the English language is easy to learn, since "it has no grammar, only words". Serbian, however, may seem like a dreadful nightmare with loads of personal suffixes, seven cases and a rather difficult system of regional accents and lengths. However, grammar rules are not all that matters and the general purpose of any language is to give information, to convey meaning and to communicate. Idioms can

therefore be seen as a mountain to be climbed in order to achieve the highest peak and conquer the complexities of the English language.

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