

Using Conceptual Metaphors to Bridge the Gap Between the Receptive and Productive Competence of Idiomatic Expressions: The Case of Jordanian EFL Learners

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Abstract—The present study aims at narrowing the evident gap between the receptive and productive competence of idiomatic expressions of Jordanian EFL learners through the use of explicit CM-inspired instruction. 130 Jordanian EFL learners participated in the study and were separated into a control group that received no instruction in CMs and an experimental group that received a CM-based instruction. A multiple-choice test and a completion test were designed to measure the receptive and productive knowledge of students. A pre-test and post-test were conducted to measure the improvement of the idiomatic competence of students. The results of the pre-tests and the post-tests show that Jordanian EFL learners' productive competence can be developed to match that of receptive knowledge using CM-based instruction. The study is expected to provide EFL instructors and curriculum designers with insights on how to tackle the challenges posed by these figurative expressions.

Index Terms—idioms, EFL learners, CM-based instruction, conceptual metaphor theory, figurative language

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding what constitutes an idiom (Grant & Bauer, 2004; Künür & Çimen, 2009; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). However, despite these disputed notions of idiomaticity, all agree that an idiom is a multi-word unit whose total meaning cannot be derived from the literal meanings of its constituents. Therefore, it seems natural that idioms have always been attested to pose challenges to EFL learners globally. This has been attributed to their variable and opaque nature (Abu-Joudeh, 2021; Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018; Aladel, 2014; Cieśllicka, 2006; Kim, 2013; Sadeghi et al., 2010; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Taki & Soghady, 2013; Vasiljevic, 2011). The decomposability of idioms and their rich culture-specific nature have also attracted the attention of many scholars in the field (Al-Mohizea, 2000; Gibbs, 1986, Gibbs et al., 1989; Laufer, 2000). In Gibbs (1986), subjects were asked to read stories and make a sentence classification judgment for sentences that could be literal, idiomatic or unrelated paraphrase of the last sentence in each story. The results indicated that the figurative meaning of an idiom is processed before the literal meaning and that the literal meaning is activated only when the idiomatic meaning is not strengthened by context.

Other studies have focused on crosslinguistic influence as a significant factor in the acquisition of L2 idioms. Laufer (2000), for example, examined whether avoidance of English idioms is determined by the degree of similarity to L1. 4 types of idioms which represented 4 degrees of L1 (Hebrew)-L2 (English) similarity were used in this study. The results highlighted a significant association between avoidance of idioms and partial formal similarity. Abu-Joudeh (2021) examined whether L1 (Arabic) transfer has any significant effect on EFL Learners' comprehension of L2 (English)

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color idioms. The results confirmed reported findings that similarity to L1 may facilitate the processing of idioms. Moreover, it has been found that idioms that have different conceptual bases and different linguistic forms in the two languages were the most challenging. This suggests that lack of awareness of the sociocultural context that motivates the generation of such expressions can discourage learners during the learning process. The way learners perceive the target language culture profoundly affects their attitude towards learning the language itself and thus the progress they achieve. The motivation for conducting the present study was the difficulties experienced by Jordanian EFL learners when using idioms. The study specifically aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) To what extent does the use of conceptual metaphor-based instruction enhance the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to recognize the target idioms?

(2) To what extent does the application of conceptual metaphor-based instruction facilitate Jordanian EFL learners' production of the target idioms?

It is proposed that the explicit inclusion of CMs, shortly referred to as the CM-inspired instruction, in a language syllabus will significantly facilitate the recognition and production of these figurative expressions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Conceptual Metaphors

Metaphors are best defined as expressions used to comprehend a conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. A conceptual metaphor refers to a set of fixed correspondences between entities in a source domain and entities in a target domain. These correspondences are typically represented as TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN or TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN, with capitalized letters serving as mnemonics to label the mappings (Lakoff, 1993, p. 207). The source domain is a conceptual domain from which metaphors are drawn to understand another conceptual domain. The target domain, in contrast, refers to the conceptual area to which this metaphor applies. Accordingly, LOVE, ANGER, ARGUMENTS, LIFE, IDEAS and many others are target domain, whereas WAR, HEAT, JOURNEYS, BUILDINGS and many others are source domains. In the idiomatic expression *burn with a low blue flame*, the domain of fire is used to understand the domain of anger. The conceptual metaphor that underlies this idiom is ANGER IS FIRE. It is thus assumed that the conceptual metaphor provides the semantic motivation in which the idiomatic meaning of the expression is grounded. Kövecses (2001) states that the ANGER IS FIRE metaphor is presented in a way that brings together the source and target domains, making them explicit and foregrounded. Additionally, the idiomatic expressions associated with the metaphor are presented alongside the source and target, suggesting that they are interconnected and rooted in the conceptual metaphor (p. 91). The assumption is that the introduction of conceptual metaphors has provided a more systematic approach to the teaching of idiomatic expressions. This is the motivation behind conducting the present study. It aims at employing conceptual metaphors to bridge the gap between the receptive and productive competence of Jordanian EFL learners.

B. Using Conceptual Metaphors to Teach Idioms in an EFL Context

The claim that adopting a cognitivist framework to teaching idioms in an EFL context can have a facilitating effect has been widely held by many researchers. EFL learners are generally unaware of the conceptual motivations for English idiomatic expressions. They usually learn figurative expressions via rote memorization which has been proven to be ineffective. In effect, much research has been conducted which focus on the cognitivist approach to the study of idioms (Bailey, 2003; Boers, 2000; Boers et al., 2004; Charteris-Black, 2002; Giora, 2003; Kövecses & Szabó 1996; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that concepts govern the way we pattern our thoughts.

They argue that our thought processes are not solely intellectual; they also heavily influence our daily actions and behavior. Our concepts shape our perception, how we explore the world around us, and how we interact with others. Our conceptual system is thus crucial in shaping our everyday realities (p. 3).

Therefore, it is suggested that familiarity with the conceptual system of the target language can facilitate learning idioms by EFL learners. To this effect, Kövecses (2003) emphasizes that the theory of conceptual metaphors is becoming a valuable resource for both teachers and students in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (p. 311). Several studies have adopted a CM-based approach to the teaching of idioms (Doiz & Elizari, 2003; Kövecses, 2003, 2012; Kämür & Çimen, 2009; Vasiljevic, 2011). Other studies have claimed that a cross-cultural study of the conceptual systems of the target and the source languages to reveal overlapping conceptual metaphorical expressions can enhance EFL learners' acquisition of idioms (Chen, 2010; Chen & Lai, 2013; Danesi, 1994; Deignan et al., 1997; Jiang, 2017; Pham & To, 2019).

Danesi (1994) points out that integrating figurative language in the Italian language classroom may help learners achieve native-like competence. He explains that the unnaturalness of the student discourse can be overcome by developing their conceptual fluency. This can be achieved by designing a conceptually- based syllabus that enables students to find "conceptually appropriate target-language models for the representation of experience" (p. 453).

Kämür and Çimen (2009) reported similar results. They explored the effects of using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms to Turkish EFL learners. A 28- item achievement test was developed and administered to the target group. These items included tasks such as completing sentences, identifying key words in metaphors, and answering multiple-choice and matching questions. The results showed a significant progress both receptively and productively.

Participants demonstrated metaphor awareness and tended to use the target idioms when talking to their teacher and to each other.

In contrast, Pham and To (2019) reported evident development of receptive but not productive competence of idioms. They conducted a quasi-experiment to examine the acquisition of metaphor-related idioms by Vietnamese learners. The results have revealed that the CM-inspired method of instruction exhibits a long-term advantage over rote learning. They concluded that the application of the CM-instruction must be used in parallel to other methods of teaching to enhance learners' idiomatic knowledge. Vasiljevic (2011) examined whether understanding the semantic motivation underlying idioms can facilitate retention and recall by Japanese learners. The participants were divided into two groups: EG and CG. The EG received the CM-based instruction, while the CG was taught idioms using the traditional method. The results provide further support to the claim that developing metaphor awareness can enhance learners' figurative competence. Furthermore, it has also been found that presenting conceptual metaphors in L1 makes the mapping between the idiomatic expressions and the conceptual metaphors transparently clear.

C. Acquisition of Idioms in the Jordanian EFL Context

Within the Jordanian EFL context, the acquisition of idioms has gained the attraction of many scholars (Abu-Joudeh, 2021; Alfaqara, 2021; Alrishan & Smadi, 2015; Smadi & Alrishan, 2015). Alfaqara (2021), for example, used a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to investigate the attitudes of Jordanian EFL learners towards learning idioms, the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ when learning idioms. The participants of the study showed positive attitudes towards learning English idioms. Furthermore, many difficulties were considered as inevitable obstacles in learning these expressions. These include lack of L1 equivalence and semantic opacity.

It is observed, however, that most studies of idiomatic competence conducted in the Jordanian EFL context aimed at identifying errors made by students when using these expressions in their academic writing (Alrishan & Smadi, 2015; Alkarazoun, 2015; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016) or when translating them from English into Arabic (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2002; Smadi & Alrishan, 2015). Few studies have attempted to address how these difficulties can be overcome to facilitate the process of learning English. Therefore, the present study suggests that presenting Jordanian EFL learners with CM-inspired instruction would help develop their comprehension and production of idioms. Moreover, it is proposed that the apparent gap between their receptive and productive competence can be narrowed by raising their awareness of the semantic motivation underlying idioms.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Instrument

Two 20-item tests were designed by the researchers to evaluate the learners' receptive and productive competence of idiomatic expressions: a multiple-choice test and a completion test. The multiple-choice test aimed at assessing the receptive competence of the participants, while the completion test aimed at assessing their productive competence. The idioms along with their contextual meanings were taken from an authoritative idiom dictionary: *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*. The two tests were administered before and after the implementation of the teaching method to see whether they had any effect on enhancing students' receptive and productive competence of idiomatic expressions. Responses of the students in the pre-tests and post-tests were then analysed using the SPSS software.

B. Procedure

In four sessions, the two groups were separately exposed to two different teaching methods. The EG students were provided with a CM-based instruction where the instructors discussed the conceptual mappings and the semantic motivation underlying the target idioms. For example, the idiomatic expression *on fire* was explained by the conceptual metaphor *INTHUISAIM IS FIRE* and so on. The CG students, in contrast, were taught the target idioms using the traditional method where they were required to memorize contextualized idioms along with their meanings.

To teach idioms to the EG, the researchers designed four lessons that targeted 30 idioms relevant to the themes "ANGER IS FIRE, ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE, ENERGY IS FIRE, MONEY IS A LIQUID and ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER". They were first introduced to the notion of conceptual metaphors and then were presented with the target idioms along with the semantic motivation underlying them. In the first session, for example, students were given an introduction about conceptual metaphors and how idioms can be generated out of such conceptual metaphors. Then they were given examples that try to establish a mapping between a concept such as ANGER and the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS FIRE. The following fire-related idioms were used to exemplify this mapping:

ANGER IS FIRE METAPHOR

I'm really *burned up* at Bob's behavior

She was breathing *fire*.

He's *hot* under the collar.

She added *fuel* to the *fire*

The boss is *gunning for* you.

His eyes *flamed with* resentment when he heard Sally's good news.

Idioms from the five source domains were presented to the CG in four sessions but through rote learning and no reference to their underlying conceptual metaphors was made. The idioms along with their meanings were explained to the students using example sentences in English and sometime equivalent idioms in Arabic. For example, of the conceptual metaphor ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE, the students were introduced to the following examples:

Fred is *on fire* in his new job. He'll get promoted in no time.
 You had better *light a fire under* your staff. Either that or we will lay off some of them.
 The factory is *hitting on all cylinders* to finish the orders on time.

The idioms were highlighted in italics and students were encouraged to guess their meanings. After completing the four sessions, the students were given the post-tests to measure their retention and recall of the target idioms. Responses were then analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

C. Participants

130 first-year students participated in the study. All were native speakers of Arabic majoring in English language and literature, the Hashemite University. At this academic level, students were enrolled in introductory courses that aim at developing their language proficiency. The participants were divided into two homogeneous groups: control (CG) and experimental (EG). Both groups received 4 sessions of instruction in which they were introduced to the same target idioms. The EG was taught using the CM-inspired instruction, whereas the CG was exposed to rote learning. In all learning methods, the target idioms were presented over a two-week period with 6-8 idioms covered in each session.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at investigating whether the CM-based instruction has any significant effect on improving the receptive and productive idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL learners as opposed to the traditional method, rote memorization. A multiple-choice test and a completion test were administered to two groups of students (CG and EG) as pre-tests and post-tests to evaluate their receptive and productive competence before and after the application of the teaching method. To examine whether the CM-inspired instruction facilitated the students' receptive competence of the target idioms, the descriptive statistics of the multiple-choice pre- and post-tests for both groups were calculated as is shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE STUDENTS' SCORES ON THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE TEST IN THE PRE-AND POST-TEST ADMINISTRATIONS

Group	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Adjusted mean	Standard Error
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation		
CG	60	7.80	4.25	10.45	2.76	10.48	0.319
EG	70	7.96	4.03	15.34	2.77	15.32	0.295

As demonstrated in Table 1 above, the mean score for the experimental group in the pre-test was 7.96 and the SD was 4.03, and for the control group, the mean score was 7.80 and the SD was 4.25. This suggests that there were no significant differences between the EG and the CG on the multiple-choice pre-test. It also shows that the overall performance of the participants on the multiple-choice post-test was much higher than their performance on the multiple-choice pre-test. However, it is clear that the EG outperformed the CG with a 15.34 mean score. Additionally, Table 1 illustrates a disparity in the adjusted mean scores between the experimental group and the control group, indicating the superior performance of the experimental group. To gain a better understanding of the results, ANCOVA was conducted to determine if there was statistically significant difference between the scores of the EG and CG based on the teaching method, as demonstrated in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
ANCOVA OF THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE POSTTEST SCORES

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-test	206.988	1	206.988	33.979	0.00
Teaching Method	757.954	1	757.954	124.426	0.00*
Error	773.633	127	6.092		0.495
Corrected total	1754.069	129			

Table 2 above demonstrates that there is a statistical difference at the significant level of ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the adjusted mean scores of the overall performance on the post-test. The experimental group had a higher adjusted mean score (15.32) compared to the control group (10.38). The table also illustrates the effect size of the CM-based instruction on the multiple-choice post-test, as determined by the Eta-squared statistic applied to the test results. It reveals an Eta-squared value (0.495), indicating that the CM-based teaching method accounted for approximately (49.5%) of the variance observed in the multiple-choice post-test. This finding supports the main assumption of the present study that the inclusion of the metaphor-inspired method of instruction in an EFL context effectively enhances the receptive competence of learners. It also lends support to similar findings reported by Vasiljevic (2011), Kövecses

(2012) and Jiang (2017) that adopting a metaphor-based instruction to the teaching of idiomatic expressions improved participants' retention and recall.

The second question of the study examined whether there is any significant effect of the teaching method on the productive competence of the students. To answer this question, the means and standard deviations of the students' scores in the completion pre- and post-tests, along with their adjusted means and standard errors were calculated, as shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE STUDENTS' SCORES ON THE COMPLETION TEST IN THE PRE-AND POST-TEST ADMINISTRATIONS

Group	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Adjusted Mean	Standard Error
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation		
CG	60	6.75	2.55	7.53	1.94	7.34	0.382
EG	70	5.27	3.27	12.44	3.65	12.61	0.353

Table 3 above shows that the mean score for the experimental group in the pre-test was 5.27 and the SD was 3.27, and for the control group, the mean score was 6.75 and the SD was 2.55. Moreover, the table demonstrates a significant difference in the adjusted mean scores between the experimental group and the control group, with the experimental group having a higher advantage. For a better interpretation of the results, ANCOVA was used to analyze the students' scores based on the teaching method, as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
ANCOVA OF THE COMPLETION POSTTEST SCORES

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Pre-test	66.277	1	66.277	7.838	0.006	
Teaching Method	843.788	1	843.788	99.784	0.00*	0.440
Error	1073.927	127	8.456			
Corrected total	1918.931	129				

Table 4 above indicates that there is a statistical difference at the significant level of ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the adjusted mean scores of the overall performance in the post-test in favor of the experimental group. The experimental group, who learned idioms using the CM-based method, had higher scores compared to the control group, who learned idioms using the traditional method. The adjusted mean score for the experimental group was 12.61, while the control group had the adjusted mean score of 7.34. Furthermore, Table 4 displays the effect size of the CM-based method on the post test. This effect size was determined by applying the Eta-squared to the test results. The table shows an Eta-squared value of (0.44), indicating that (44.0%) of the variance in the completion post-test can be attributed to the implementation of the metaphor-based method of instruction.

The results of the data obtained provide support for a cognitive approach to the teaching of idiomatic expressions. It seems that raising students' awareness of the semantic motivation behind the linguistic choices in idiomatic expressions enhances their ability to retain and use them. This suggests that focusing on the intricacies of form does not always lead to effective learning. The overall performance of students exposed to the CM-grounded instruction on both the receptive and productive posttests has improved significantly. However, it was evident that students' scores on the productive knowledge posttest were not as high as their scores on the receptive knowledge posttest. Despite the relative progress in the productive competence of students exposed to the CM-based instruction, it is obvious that the gap between their ability to retain and use idioms was narrowed.

The findings of the study also support similar results reported by many studies that rote learning is not always efficacious in EFL teaching and learning (Deignan et al., 1997; Boers, 2000; Jiang, 2017; K m r &  imen, 2009; Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017). According to Khonbi and Sadeghi (2017), EFL instructors must be creative when presenting learners with figurative language. They proposed that the use of role-plays followed by movies or idiom sentence uses can significantly enhance learners' idiomatic competence.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to offer insights into how to narrow the evident gap between the receptive and productive idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL learners. It has been suggested that adopting a cognitivist view to teaching idioms can be significantly influential. The results revealed that the inclusion of CMs in a language syllabus in a foreign language context can significantly enhance the receptive and productive competence of learners, compared to the traditional method. Furthermore, it has been observed that students were noticeably eager to learn the target idioms using an unorthodox method of instruction in the Jordanian EFL context.

Therefore, the researchers suggest the following to facilitate the acquisition of idioms by EFL learners:

1. The integration of conceptually metaphor-based idioms in a foreign language context can be used to highlight the similarities between the two languages and thus facilitates the acquisition of these culture-specific expressions.

2. Dictionaries designed for EFL learners should introduce idioms grouped under conceptual metaphors to facilitate language learning and acquisition.
3. When teaching idioms to EFL learners, instructors are advised to begin with those that show similarities to L1 idioms. This is expected to facilitate the processing of these figurative expressions and motivates them to move to more difficult ones.
4. Raising Students' awareness of idiomatic competence as an inevitable part in the learning process can positively increase their motivation for learning idioms.
5. Students should be exposed to real-life and authentic contexts that motivate the use of these figurative expressions in real communication since the ability to use figurative language is considered an inevitable aspect of native-like proficiency (Boers et al., 2006).

To conclude, cognitive instruction does have a significant impact on idiom acquisition. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL instructors adopt this method when presenting learners with these figurative expressions. Moreover, providing learners with authentic contexts can boost their ability to acquire figurative language. Authentic materials can be an effective strategy for students to gain a realistic understanding of how figurative expressions are used in different contexts, ultimately helping them to achieve native-like proficiency.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The design of the present study was quantitative, future research can adopt qualitative designs such as interviews and observations to give a better account of how learners perceive and use idiomatic expressions when exposed to metaphor-inspired instruction as opposed to rote learning.

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