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Idioms in EFL at a Spanish University

ANA M. PÉREZ TORREGROSA

Abstract

Idioms, a salient ingredient in languages, create significant problems for second language (L2) teachers and learners. This paper presents our research on the approach to idioms in EFL at a Spanish university. This study also investigates the undergraduate students' and tertiary teachers' perceptions on English idioms teaching and learning in a university context. Thus, the participant pool was formed by tertiary teachers and students in the Degree of English Studies at the University of Alicante (UA). The data collected through questionnaires suggest to some extent that idioms are not efficiently approached in this EFL university context. Thus, there seems to be a greater need for attention to idioms in this setting. Implications for teaching idioms are discussed.

Keywords:

English idioms, idioms teaching/learning, perceptions, approach.

Los modismos, un ingrediente destacado de las lenguas, crean problemas significativos a profesores y estudiantes de segundas lenguas (SL). Este artículo presenta una investigación sobre el enfoque de los modismos en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en una universidad española. Además, este estudio investiga las percepciones sobre la enseñanza y aprendizaje de modismos ingleses de los estudiantes y profesores universitarios en este escenario. Así, el grupo de participantes está formado por profesores y estudiantes del Grado de Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad de Alicante (UA). Los datos obtenidos a través de cuestionarios sugieren que, en cierta medida, los modismos no son tratados eficazmente en este contexto universitario de EFL. Por lo tanto, parece haber una mayor necesidad de atención a los modismos en este marco. Se comentan implicaciones para la enseñanza de estas expresiones idiomáticas.

Palabras clave:

Modismos ingleses, enseñanza/aprendizaje de modismos, percepciones, enfoque.

1. Introduction

Idioms, a subset of formulaic language, are widely recognized as being an important and distinctive phenomenon found in languages. Indeed, the presence or absence of idioms in discourse is considered an indicator of the mastery of the target language by many scholars (Fernando, 1996; Wray, 1999). Non-native speakers face many problems in recognizing and producing idioms. Therefore, L2 idioms often pose a challenge for language teachers and students. L2 learners rarely reach a native command of the use of formulaic language, and hence, of idioms (Wray, 2002). For that reason, the study of idioms has become an important aspect in second language (SL) studies.

Language, our system of communication, has literal and figurative meanings. Idioms are figurative expressions which are considered a subcategory of the more general lexical phenomenon of formulaic language. Nevertheless, literature fails to provide a unique definition, classification and categorization not only of formulaic sequences, but also of idioms. Due to the lack of homogeneity of idioms, L2 researchers seldom agree when attempting to explain idioms. According to the definition most commonly posited, idioms are linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts. Thereby, the meaning of the idiom a *piece of cake*, i.e. "easy", cannot be inferred by adding up the literal meaning of piece plus *cake*.

Since statistics show that people exchange 4.08 idioms a minute in average (Cooper, 1998), it may be claimed that idiomatic expressions play an undeniable significant role in languages. In addition, not all idioms have an equivalent in all languages. Thus, there is a clear need to analyse in depth the reasons why L2 learners stumble and struggle with idioms.

Many recent pedagogically-oriented studies have focused on the effectiveness of clustering idioms (Cooper, 1998; Zyzik, 2010, 2011), the etymological elaboration (Boers, 2007), and the awareness of conceptual metaphors (Samani, 2012; Li, 2010) when it comes to approaching English idioms. Furthermore, Tran (2012) researches on the situation of teaching and learning English idioms at a university level in a foreign language context, and the teachers' self-evaluation on the effectiveness of their idiom teaching.

Given the importance of idioms in languages, it is surprising that little, if anything, is however known about tertiary teachers and students' perceptions and the approach to English idioms in a Spanish university context. More precisely, previous research in this field has failed to consider the teaching and learning of English idioms in the BA and Degree in English Studies at Spanish universities. It would thus be of interest to find out about the specific treatment of idioms in this learning scenario. By highlighting some insights on this issue, I hope to raise awareness amongst L2 curricula writers and teachers on the relevance of idioms.

The structure of the current study is as follows. Following this introduction, the literature review regarding vocabulary teaching and learning, formulaic language, and idioms teaching and learning is presented. Then, the methodology used is described in detail. Next, results are reported and the discussions on the main findings are synthesised. Finally, conclusions are drawn and the most relevant insights which emerged from the study are presented.

2. Theoretical background and previous studies

After decades of neglect, vocabulary is "no longer a victim of discrimination in second language learning research, nor in language teaching" (Laufer, 1997: 140). Since the last decade of the 20th century, acquisition of vocabulary has acquired a more important role in second language studies. Due to this shift in emphasis, "the language teacher is faced with the challenge of how best to help students store and retrieve words in the target language" (Sökmen, 1997: 237).

L2 students, teachers, materials writers and researchers have reached a general consensus on the importance of learning vocabulary for mastering a SL (Schmitt, 2008). Nevertheless, SL teachers and learners have often been unsure of the best means of achieving a good vocabulary competence efficiently. A major concern in the literature is how L2 idioms can be better approached in class. Thus, researchers in this field concentrate on how L2 learners process, understand, and learn idiomatic expressions.

A considerable proportion of our everyday language is formulaic (Wray, 2002). It is predictable in form, idiomatic, and seems to be stored in fixed, or semi-fixed, chunks. A number of studies consider idioms as "a subset of formulaic language" (Simpson and Mendis, 2003: 421) or one subcategory of the more general lexical phenomenon of formulaic language (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 2004; Wray, 1999, 2000, 2002; Wray & Perkins, 2000).

The importance of formulaic language (e.g. phrasal verbs, idioms, proverbs, etc.) is highlighted by many L2 researcher and it is a common comment that "a recurring theme throughout this literature is that an ability to understand and use formulaic language (including idioms) appropriately is a key to nativelike fluency" (Simpson and Mendis, 2003: 420). In fact, a very important component of successful L2 learning is the mastery of formulaic sequences such as idioms, collocations and sentence frames (Wray, 2002). According to Fernando (1996), "no translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity if a natural use of the target language is an aim" (p. 234). Nevertheless, the formulaic language of L2 learners tends to lag behind other linguistic aspects (Irujo, 1993). This view is also advocated by Wray (2012) who states that "there is an increasing body of evidence that instructed L2 learners have an impoverished stock of formulaic expressions" (p. 236).

Idioms and idiomaticity are pervasive features of language (Fernando, 1996). In vocabulary studies idioms have been approached from different perspectives, the focus of attention varying from form and frozenness (idiom structure) to metaphoricity and the degree of literalness (idiom meaning). Depending on the emphasis, the definition of idioms varies in the literature. As almost all researchers of idioms have noted, defining this phenomenon is indeed problematic. According to the most common definition, idioms are linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts. Scholars such as Cooper (1999) describe idioms as a type of multi-word units that have non-literal meaning. Conversely, Fernando (1996) notes that "idioms, or conventionalized multiword expressions, are often but not always non-literal" (p. 1) In his study, Tran (2012) agrees with Simpson and Mendis' (2003) and Zyzik's (2011) definition and considers an idiom as a "group of words that co-occur in more or less fixed phrase whose figurative meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its components" (p. 77). This definition implies that it is not possible to know the meaning of these multi-word units by adding up the meaning of each lexical item in the unit. Moreover,

this definition facilitates the distinction between idioms and collocations since, in contrast to idioms, "the meaning of collocations is predictable from the meaning of the individual words in the unit" (Tran, 2012: 77).

Lately, many pedagogically orientated studies of idioms have been developed, e.g. F. Boers, (2000), F. Boers & Demecheleer, (2001), F. Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, (2004b), F. Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, (2007a), F. Boers, Piquer Piriz, Stengers, & Eyckmans, (2009b), Zyzik, (2010), Zyzik, (2011); Samani & Hashemian, 2012), Tran (2012). The meaning of many idioms is motivated by their original, literal usage. Many idioms have been shown to exemplify general conceptual metaphors or conceptual metonymies. On this view, Boers and colleagues (Boers, 2000; Boers et al., 2004, 2007) maintain that teaching idioms need not to be reduced to memorization but that it can be approached by raising students' awareness of the conceptual metaphors that lie behind many idioms. In this same vein, Samani (2012) investigates the effect of conceptual metaphors on learning L2 idioms and reports that conceptual metaphorical awareness facilitates learning L2 idioms.

Investigations on the situation of teaching and learning of L2 idioms at university level in EFL contexts are not very common. Indeed, Tran (2012) is one of the few studies that deal with this issue focusing on Vietnam. For that purpose, Tran (2012) focuses on (1) the situation of teaching and learning idioms, and (2) tertiary teachers' and senior pre-service teachers' self-evaluation on the effectiveness of their idiom teaching and learning (p. 78). Tran's study concludes that L2 idioms should be approached more efficiently and received more attention in EFL learning contexts since L2 university learners show a positive attitude towards the leaning of L2 idioms.

3. Methodology

The main objective of the current research is to get to know the students' and teachers' perceptions on idioms teaching and learning in the English Language subjects in the Degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante, Spain.

Therefore, this qualitative study aims to shed light on the following questions and to contribute to fill the research gap in English idioms teaching and learning at Spanish universities, with the following research questions:

1. What are tertiary teachers' and students' perceptions on their teaching and learning of English idioms?

2. How are English idioms approached in EFL at a Spanish university?

To answer these questions, a paper questionnaire was handed out to undergraduate students and tertiary teachers, and the syllabus of all English language subjects in the Degree in English Studies were analysed. The participant pool involved in this study were six groups of university students (n= 243) of English Language II, IV and VI subjects (taught in first, second and third year, respectively, and tertiary teachers of English Language subjects (n= 6).

The items included in the students' questionnaire were based upon relevant literature review, mainly Wray's (2002) classification of formulaic sequences, Cooper's (1998) and Irujo's (1986a) activities for teaching idioms, Cooper's (1998; 1999) strategies for comprehending and learning idioms, as well as Sökmen's (1997) and others researchers' (e.g. Oxford & Scarcella (1994), Read (2004), Schmitt (2000)) arguments for explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction. Concerning the teachers' questionnaire, whereas the same literature review formed the basis for this one, more questions were included aiming to gather a wide range of information such as their beliefs and practices.

For the statistical analyses, two different documents using data processing software were designed and created: one for the tertiary teachers and one for the students. By means of these, all the data from the questionnaires were computed in order to analyse, develop and interpret the results. The graphics used to clarify the results were also made by manually transferring the responses from the questionnaires into a spreadsheet application.

Table 1: Example of results shown in graphics

2. Can you distinguish between idioms (A), collocations (B), social formulas (C), multiword phrases (D)?
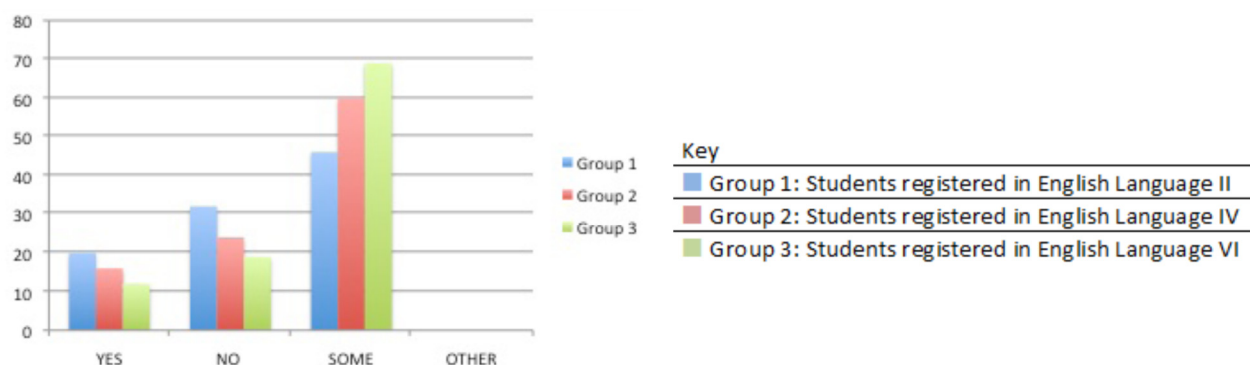
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Some ☐ Other:

Figure 3. Results of item 2. Students' questionnaire

4. Results

4.1. Results & Analysis of the students' questionnaire

In total, 243 students' questionnaires were collected and analysed. A comparison between the three participant groups is considered when reporting the findings of the current study. However, general comments are mentioned when significant differences are not found among the three informant groups.

In Part 1 item 1 was addressed to find out if students know what an idiom is. 90% of Group 1, 83% of Group 2 and 77% of Group 3 answered *yes*. Surprisingly, only 10% of all participants provided the two correct examples required if they replied affirmatively. The most reported idiom was *it's raining cats and dogs* (by 5%) followed by *to pull one's leg* (by 3%). It must be noted that this last one was one of the idioms employed in item 3. In most cases they left the example section blank. Furthermore, when dealing with different types of formulaic sequences, 46% of Group 1, and 69% of Group 2 and 3 reported that they could distinguish among *some* of them.

Nevertheless, the following item required the students to match 10 statements according to the classification provided before, and nobody completed this activity successfully. 70% of Group 1, 52% of Group 2 and 33% of Group 3 did not match any statement correctly. Indeed, 13% of Group 1, 40% of Group 2, and 58% of Group 3 matched less than 5 right alternatives. Overall, Group 3 performed better on item 3. However, it is worth mentioning that among the four types of formulaic sequences included, idioms were the most successful since 15 % of respondents got 2 out of 3 idioms correctly (*to pull ones' leg* and *to look for a needle in a haystack*).

The respondents were presented with 11 types of idioms activities and asked to choose the ones that were introduced in class. 17 % of Group 1, 33% of Group 2, and 53 % of Group 3 reported that none of these activities were used in class. A minimum number of participants (1% of Group 1, 4% of Group 2 and nobody in Group 3) selected more than 5 different idiom activities.

Among the strategies for understanding and learning idioms, two were selected most frequently by 70% of students: (1) *guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context, and* (2) *using the literal meaning of the idiom as a key.*

The informants were posed the question of whether the syllabus included the teaching of idioms and how the teaching of idioms was approached, i.e. explicitly, implicitly or both ways in class. Here it must be noted that all the subjects but English Language VI include explicit idioms instruction in the syllabus. About 30% of the total participant pool reported that they were not aware if English Language syllabuses cover the teaching of idioms. With respect to the explicit or implicit idiom instruction, 19% in Group 1, 30% in Group 2, and 58% in Group 3 answered that idioms were not taught in class.

Part 2 was intended to show up the student's satisfaction with their mastery of idioms, their opinions about the role that idioms play when learning a language and the extra time the informants devote to the learning of idioms outside the EFL class. When responding to their satisfaction with their own command of English idioms before taking that specific subject, 40% in Group 1, 66% in Group 2, and 69% in Group 3 reported that they were *dissatisfied.* The results were almost the same when informing about this issue after taking that subject, that is, 20%, 53%, and 64% in Groups 1, 2 and 3 respectively, confirmed their *dissatisfaction.*

Items 11, 12 and 13 did not cause any statistical differences among the three groups. The data indicate that not only the majority of informants (about 94%) are interested in learning idioms, but also believe that idioms are important when learning a language. However, item 11 was addressed to discover how much the participants were involved with the learning of English idioms outside the class. 63%, 78% and 86% in Group 1, 2 and 3 respectively claimed that they do not devote any extra time beyond that subject to learn idioms. Finally, two open-ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire, but no relevant questions or remarks for the present study were provided by the informant pool.

4.2. Results & Analysis of the tertiary teachers' questionnaire

Six tertiary teachers form the participant pool in this section. Informants teach English Language I, II, III, IV, V, and VI in the Degree of English Studies at the University of Alicante (which covers the first three years of the four-year programme).

Part 1 was focused on the informants' practices in an EFL university context. Items 1 and 2 were aimed at investigating the most important skills as well as the informants' preference for skipping any of them in case they do not have enough time to finish a didactic unit in class. Data collected from the tertiary teachers' questionnaire reveals that *grammar* is the only choice of two out of six respondents. All the alternatives were given the same importance by two other informants, and finally two other participants only left aside *pronunciation*. As for the items skipped for time reasons, one tertiary teacher selected *vocabulary*, two participants chose *pronunciation* and four informants opted for *reading*.

Items 3, 4 and 5 were intended to research on the professors' training for teaching the English language, vocabulary, and more specifically idioms. The whole informant pool reported having received instruction on how to teach language and vocabulary. Nevertheless, two respondents stated that they have not been instructed on how to teach idioms.

Concerning explicit or implicit idioms instruction, three tertiary teachers involved in the survey indicated that explicit instruction was not included in the syllabus but they asserted that they teach English idioms implicitly in class. Among the six participants, three of them affirmed that the syllabus included the explicit teaching of idioms and they opted for an explicit and implicit approach.

The rest of items in Part 1 were included in this questionnaire to research on the participants' general practices and not focusing on specific subjects. Thus, items 10 and 11 dealt with their assessment of idioms and the type of idioms activities used when teaching English. Five out of six tertiary teachers claimed that they *sometimes* include the assessment of idioms in the exams. Among the five types of idioms activities selected, two were mentioned by all the respondents: *filling the gaps* and *matching statements*. The next most popular idioms activities were *dictionary activities, matching quizzes* and *puzzles*, which were chosen by three, two and one informant respectively.

Eleven strategies for learning idioms were presented in order to know which ones were used in the participants' teaching practices. These are the same ones included in the students' questionnaire. *Guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context* was the most selected option since five respondents asserted to use it in class. Some other strategies, such as *discussing and analyzing the idiom or its context without guessing, requesting information about the idiom or context, and referring to an idiom in an L1 to understand the L2 idiom* were also referred to by three tertiary teachers.

When responding to the question on the problems involved in the teaching of idioms, the following ones were selected by two tertiary teachers: *there are many students in the class, the syllabus does not include the teaching of idioms, the text book/class material does not include idioms activities,* and *I don't have time to teach idioms*. Moreover, one respondent added a different alternative in the Other section, i.e. students often do not participate actively. Two other options were not chosen by any participant: *I don't know how to teach idioms,* and *my students are not interested in idioms*.

With regards to the type of dictionary that informants recommend, four out of six tertiary teachers selected a *monolingual* dictionary. A *bilingual* dictionary was the choice of one participant. *Both* types of dictionaries, i.e. monolingual and bilingual, were proposed by one teacher. When informing about specialized idioms dictionaries, four out of six respondents asserted that they do not advice the use of these in class. This same proportion of participants confirmed that they have designed exercises or activities to train their students to use the dictionary properly.

Part 2 aimed at finding out the perceptions and considerations of the respondent pool concerning the syllabus, their students' command of idioms, and their own confidence and training in the teaching of idioms. According to four out of six respondents, the English Language subjects' syllabuses need to be modified for including or improving the teaching of idioms. As for their student's command of idioms before taking that subject, three respondents asserted they ignore their students' command of idioms. Two tertiary teachers indicated that they were *satisfied*, and one participant claimed his or her *dissatisfaction*. When alluding to their student's command of idioms after that subject, half of the participant pool again reported they ignore this information. With respect to the appropriateness of their students' command of idioms to their level, four out of six respondents offered a negative reply. One tertiary teacher answered affirmatively, and one of them recognized not being aware of this data.

While the majority of teachers (five) in the survey claimed they feel confident in teaching idioms, four of them noted they should receive training for teaching idioms. All the tertiary teachers involved in the present study reported that teaching idioms is important when learning a language. Moreover, one informant's contribution was that teaching idioms is "one important aspect of many".

At the end of the tertiary teachers' questionnaire the same two open questions provided in the students' one were included. Just two respondents added a remark stating that (1) "idioms must be included in the syllabus of English Language V", and (2) "this year the syllabus of Language IV does not focus on idioms but more on what we call formulaic language".

4.3. Analysis of English Language subjects' syllabuses

In order to conduct this study the syllabuses of all English language subjects in the Degree in English Studies at the UA were analysed for examining how English idioms are approached in this context.

The syllabus of English Language I (1st semester, 1st year) is formed by two thematic blocks: (1) English grammar, and (2) use of English. The teaching of idiomatic expressions is included in the thematic block 2. This syllabus does not allude more specifically to idioms.

Similarly, the syllabus of English Language II, III, IV and V offers the teaching of idiomatic expressions in the *Language in Use* section. This information is retrieved from the *Brief description of the content* Part. No more specific details regarding the instruction of idiomatic expressions or, more precisely, idioms are provided in the *Theoretical and Practical Contents* Part.

Conversely, in spite of focusing on the instruction of Academic English, the syllabus of English Language VI does not refer to the teaching of idioms, idiomatic expressions or formulaic language in any section. It is important to highlight that Academic English is generally characterised by a wide inventory of idioms.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was not only to investigate tertiary teachers' and students' perceptions on their teaching and learning of English idioms, but also to determine the way idioms are approached in EFL at a Spanish university. By means of the analysis of the data collected from questionnaires and the syllabuses of the English language subjects, both research questions were addressed.

Accepting this study's limitations, the students' perceptions on this issue are measured, and not their real knowledge about idioms. In order to check the veracity of their response, two examples requirement in case they answered affirmatively are included. Albeit the majority of the informant pool provided an affirmative response, only 10% of them offered the two examples required. In addition, it is intriguing to notice that one of the most facilitated idioms (to pull one's leg) was included in the recognition task designed as item 3. As a consequence, this might question the validity of the students' reply when confirming they knew what an idiom is. It should be borne in mind that the vast majority of informants started to learn English between 10 and 15 years ago. Thus, the results seem to confirm that idioms are 'often a stumbling block to second and foreign language learners' (Liontas, 2003: 1).

In order to avoid confusions the term *formulaic sequence* was not employed and Wray's (2002) classification of some formulaic sequences is used, i.e. idioms, collocations, social formulas and multiword phrases. Researchers in this field claim the importance of the command of formulaic language, and thus idioms, as an indicator of nativelike fluency and competence (Simpson and Mendis, 2003; Ellis, 1996). Results indicate that Group 3, the most advanced English learners, performed better when identifying several expressions as

different types of formulaic language. Nevertheless, due to the high proportion of students who did not match any response and the low proportion who matched more than five right expressions, it may be suggested that most respondents fail to distinguish among them. Thus, the results appear to echo Irujo's (1993) and Wray's (2002) claims on the lack of competence and awareness of formulaic language among L2 learners. Notwithstanding its limitations, the results reported here would also seem to indicate that there is a need to promote the learning of formulaic language, and hence idioms, among undergraduate students in the Degree of English Studies at the UA. In this sense, Cooper's (1998) and Boers et al's. (2007) suggestions, among others, could be considered in order to foster the learning of idioms in the L2 class.

One of the perceptions sized in this research tackles the students' satisfaction with their own command of idioms. In this respect, a very high percentage of students asserted their dissatisfaction, and confirmed almost unanimously their interest in learning idioms. The findings seem to support Tran's (2012) conclusions that L2 university learners are highly motivated, participate actively in idioms activities, and show a positive attitude towards the leaning of idioms. Nevertheless, although almost all the participants confirmed the importance of learning idioms undisputedly, the majority of them also admitted that they do not devote any extra time beyond the class to the learning of idioms. As Cooper (1998) indicates idioms are difficult for SL learners to comprehend and produce. Therefore, it may be suggested that raising the students' awareness of this difficulty as well as presenting idioms in a logical order in class (Irujo, 1986b) are likely to have a positive effect on their learning.

Furthermore, tertiary teachers were also surveyed about their students' mastery of idioms and their satisfaction with this matter. Half of the tertiary teachers involved in this study estimated that they were not aware of their students' command of English idioms. Regarding the appropriateness of their students' command of idioms to their language level, the majority of respondents considered that these data do not correspond. Again, these negative insights on the students' command of idioms might suggest the need to shed light on idioms, and more generally on figurative language, and the purpose these fulfil in languages (Cooper, 1998) in the EFL university class.

As for the tertiary teachers' perceptions on their teaching, the results are quite optimistic since all the respondents confirmed they had been trained to teach the English language, and more precisely, vocabulary. The findings, however, have indicated that although the majority of teachers feel confident when teaching idioms, they admitted that they should receive training for teaching idioms. Consequently, it seems advisable to encourage tertiary teachers to be instructed about the different strategies (Cooper, 1999), activities (Cooper, 1998; Tran, 2012) and challenges (Liu, 2003) involved in the appropriate teaching and acquisition of L2 idioms. Another controversial issue is the idioms teaching methodology. Practitioners have been concerned about whether L2 idioms are to be taught in specially-designed mini lessons or in an integrated approach (Zyzik, 2012). In this sense, the informants' will to receive specific instruction on the teaching of idioms may lead to a more effective instruction. Added to all this, Oxford and Scarcella's (1994) personalised approach to the teaching of vocabulary might well be proposed in this EFL university context.

the role of vocabulary in L2 studies is generally recognized (Macaro, 2003), and students report vocabulary as one of their top priorities (Knight, 1994). On that note, the importance of teaching vocabulary is supported by all the tertiary teachers participating in this study, since almost none of them would skip it in class. Therefore, results are in accordance with previous research that highlight the salient role assumed by vocabulary in SL studies (Lewis, 1993), and the challenges that L2 teachers face for scaffolding students in this respect (Sökmen, 1997). Whereas students asserted the significance of idioms unanimously, the present study, however, does not uncover the students' perception on the importance and the role of vocabulary in their L2 learning process.

In terms of the crucial problems faced when teaching idioms, tertiary teachers reported that these mainly come from time constraints and the excess of students in the EFL class. It should be taking into account that 65 students approximately are registered in each group. Overall, class size is a very relevant factor in education. In particular, when teaching an L2 comes to play, class size really matters as it may affect negatively students' achievement. Thus, this high figure may not contribute to the effective learning of idioms. Then, it might be argued that reducing pupil-to-teacher ratios in this context can lead to an increase in student performance.

In sum, on the basis of the data analyzed, the findings of the current study might suggest that undergraduate students perceive their competence on English idioms negatively, and their awareness of formulaic sequences is to be raised. In addition, tertiary teachers and students surveyed are completely aware of the importance of English idioms, conscious of the difficulties involved in this linguistic phenomenon, and most importantly, interested and motivated to improve their idioms competence and instruction.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the data reveal the lack of awareness of idioms, and more generally of formulaic sequences, of undergraduate students. Indeed, L2 learners participating in this study perceived their own command of English idioms negatively. Besides, most tertiary teachers surveyed were not aware of their students' mastery of English idioms, and denied the appropriateness of idioms and the students' language level. As far as the tertiary teachers' insights on their teaching training, albeit being trained on teaching the English language and more precisely vocabulary, they recognized the need for receiving training in teaching idioms. This might be in discrepancy with the indicated confidence when teaching idioms. The findings have provided some insights about the problems teachers may encounter in this EFL university class. Time constraints and overcrowded classes are the main obstacles tertiary teachers claim to face. Furthermore, the results have uncovered that tertiary students' and teachers' agree when it comes to asserting the importance of idioms in a L2, and their interest in improving their idioms competence and teaching.

On the other hand, this study has sought to shed some light on the approach to idioms in EFL at a Spanish university. As for the analysis of the syllabuses conducted, results indicate that, although all but one subject include the explicit instruction of idiomatic expressions, there appears to be a need to specify in further detail the inclusion of idioms in the syllabuses. Despite the lack of knowledge of a significant number of students on how idioms are addressed in this context, tertiary teachers advocated an implicit and explicit balanced approach to idioms. In addition, the findings show that a wide range of strategies and activities regarding idioms appeared to be neglected in this specific context since idioms are infrequently found in the class materials, and rarely assessed in the exams. Therefore, the data have to some extent suggested that idioms are not efficiently approached in this EFL university context. As a result, the students' lack of awareness of idioms may stem from this lack of attention to idioms.

There seems to be no study focused on English idioms in a Spanish learning context. Thus, further research is needed to investigate how idioms can be efficiently approached, and the effectiveness of thematic or metaphoric organization in EFL at Spanish universities, among others. Additionally, it would be interesting to carry out future research on how idioms are approached, and how best to implement the teaching of English idioms in Compulsory Secondary Education in Spain. Thereby, Irujo's (1986) proposal of the learning of idioms as an integral part of vocabulary learning at beginning levels could be looked into.

The pedagogical implications that may be derived from this study are primarily those having to do with teaching practices. Although the data revealed a balanced approach to idioms, tertiary teachers are recommended to be fully aware of the English idioms to be taught in class not only explicitly, but also implicitly. Tertiary teachers could explain this linguistic phenomenon, provide at least a simplified definition, and a characterization of idioms as a first step to address L2 idioms. Furthermore, equipping the students with a wide array of idioms learning strategies and activities will enhance their idioms competence. Many teaching suggestions can be found in Cooper (1998), Irujo (1986b) and Liu (2008), among others. Tertiary teachers and students are advised to take the bull by the horns and face the challenge that L2 idioms pose.

Additionally, implications for curricula writers are that they should review their inclusion of formulaic sequences so as to make them more explicit and easily understandable in this university career. Given the importance of idioms in languages, it might be claimed that a more efficient approach is necessary.

Finally, the current research supports Zyzik's (2009) assertion that idioms are "an essential part of knowing a language and, thus, they should be systematically incorporated into the L2 curricula" (p. 4). Likewise, confirming Tran (2012), a greater need of attention to idioms is seen in this EFL university context. In essence, this study represents a contribution to fill the research gap by considering English idioms in a university learning scenario in Spain as the core of the study.

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