

TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PROMOTING THE TARGET LANGUAGE CULTURE THROUGH IDIOMS AND PROVERBS-A CASE STUDY

YEDIDI MERCY RANI

EFL Teacher, Muscat College

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between language and culture. The study investigates the use of idioms and proverbs through task based teaching approach to take cognizance of the culture of the native speakers of English among the learners and to reduce their apathy towards learning a foreign language. It aims to devise a strategy for learners who study the target language in non-English speaking countries and to understand the culture of the native speakers. The study attempts to explore the use of English idioms and proverbs for teaching grammar functions and their comparison with the local culture. The task-based approach, which imbibes communicative language teaching, is an alternative method through which learners perform a series of tasks as steps towards successful task realization. The setask-based approaches lay emphasis on learner centeredness, collaborative learning, and negotiation of meaningful real life interaction. In the current globalised world, English has become the universal language and everyone knows the benefits we acquire from being proficient in English. However, learners learning English as a foreign language form stereotypes and have apathy towards the language and are also alien to the target language. The study aims to expose the students to proverbs and idioms and the underlying principle of culture, which also exists in the local culture as well.

KEYWORDS: Target Language Culture, Idioms and Proverbs in Second Language Acquisition, Task Based Learning

INTRODUCTION

When English is learnt as a foreign language it inclines to focus on the role, the traditions, beliefs and the social environment of the native speakers play in acquiring a language. Emulating the behavior and language of a native speaker is essential when communicating in English. All foreign language teaching approaches considers learners' as outsiders and foreigners struggling to be accepted by the English society. In such a scenario the EFL learner tends to develop apathy towards the language as he/she finds it irrelevant in learning the language and feels that it has no value to them. This is with specific reference to the Arab learners whose culture is different and it misconceives the culture of the target language. In the EFL setting, the learners' are passive recipients of the language and are expected to participate in classroom activities with no focus on real language acquisition. With the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) there is a need for active learners for autonomy to learning and therefore, there has been a need for introducing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in EFL classrooms. Many EFL teachers are also unable to teach English as a foreign language and do not emphasize the culture of the language as they themselves are not aware of the target language culture. They fail to come out of their traditional methods of teaching, which is their comfort zone and resist innovative teaching practices.

Task Based Teaching Approach

The Communicative Language Teaching approach has become the order of the day in ELT. TBLT is a sub

category to Communicative Language Teaching and it was adopted by language instructors for a variety of reasons in an attempt to make language in the classroom truly communicative. It lays emphasis on real-life situations that learners might experience through relevant classroom activities. The objective of TBLT is learning through tasks, thereby promoting learning by doing which again is student centered. The learners' are provided with opportunities to use real language unconsciously through creative tasks and problem solving activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is observed that even after graduation, university students after having gained a wide knowledge of linguistics are unable to communicate well in English using idioms and proverbs. This is due to the factor that there is no focus on formulaic expressions included in the curriculum.

Idioms play a significant role in our day to day communication. They are one of the fundamental features of vocabulary or word knowledge (Nation, 1990). Idioms are used in language at an advanced level and the knowledge of idioms in learning a new language is essential for foreign language learners to perform well at higher levels of academics. It is posited that the academic skills of disadvantaged learners are weak because of lack of idiom knowledge. The present study is to develop this cognitive academic language proficiency by enhancing the knowledge of idioms among learners' in the process of teaching and learning.

Wray (2000) defines an idiom as a 'sequence, continuous or discontinuous of words or other meaning elements which is or appears to be pre-fabricated, that is stored and retrieved from memory at the time of use: rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar

According to Kovecses and Szabo (1996) idioms consist of two or more words and that the overall meaning of these is unpredictable from the meanings of the constituent words. Research has emphasized the importance of using idioms in L1 and L2 because of their frequent occurrence in spoken and written language (Sinclair, 1987) Gibbs, Nattinger and De Carrico, (1992). The knowledge of idioms would allow learners to speak English like native speakers,' with confidence and with less effort' (Sinclair, 1987). Erman and Warren (2000) state that 50 percent of a language may be explicable in idiomatic terms. Moreover, knowledge of idioms seems essential for second language proficiency, and a lack of it can interrupt comprehending language in social, academic, and vocational settings (Nippold and Martin, 1989).

A task in TBLT has been defined by Ellis (2003) as something which involves a primary focus on realistic meaning. Nunan (1989) defines task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.

Rationale of Task-Based Language Teaching in Promoting Awareness of the Target Language Culture

The direct method and sometimes the bilingual method is used in most of the EFL classrooms. Due to poorly motivated students and lack of professional knowledge of teachers in English in promoting the target language culture the students, attitude towards English is one of apathy and dislike. Though all EFL course books are written by native speakers, the cultural context is mostly of the target language culture to which the learners are not aware of. Teachers fail to experiment with different genres in language teaching. The study aims to explore if the TBLT method can bring awareness of the TL culture among the learners' usage of idioms and proverbs.

Research Objectives

- To investigate if the use of idioms and proverbs in language enhances native like fluency.
- To estimate the impact of the TBLT approach on the learners awareness of the target language culture using idioms and proverbs.
- To explore if current EFL course books include idioms and proverbs in language learning
- For the Arab EFL learners.

Proverbs and Idioms in Pedagogy and Language Teaching

Proverbs and other cultural expressions like the idioms are embedded in culture, hence unraveling their meanings both to learners and teachers alike in their historical and cultural contexts which would be of interest. Translation of phrases and proverbs from the learner's language to second language should be considered in the process of teaching and learning formulaic expressions for obvious reasons. Classroom activities to acquaint students with common proverbs and idioms in the target language as well as learner's language and focus on how they are different or similar to each other is suggested. The use of proverbs and idioms as a means to unravel culture would enable the teachers to assist students to perceive the culture of the target language. Ultimately, it would facilitate the students to explore the values and meanings that are often represented in the proverbs and idioms of their own native culture and the target language as well.

Proverbs

One of the oldest folk genres and one of the most widely distributed geographically, proverbs have been used at one time or another by people in every class and group formulating the values of society and way of doing things. (Peter Burke/Roy Porter 1995).Folklorists and anthropologists have shown that to study speech through its characteristics forms and genres-greetings, riddles, curses, jokes and so on are useful. The most instructive of these are proverbs as they are old, and have been widely accepted. They embody popular attitudes and they have been recorded.

Proverbs have been used as teaching tools for centuries to teach moral values and social skills. Proverbs contain much educational wisdom and have long been used as didactic tools in child rearing. (Dumitru Stanciu, 1986) .Proverbs have also been employed in native language instruction and to bring cultural traditions to foreign language classes. Proverbs play a major role in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Where they are included as part of metaphorical and cultural learning (Mieder, 2004), proverbs help new speakers of English in effective communication. Michael C. A badi has argued in his survey of "Proverbs as ESL (English as a Second Language) Curriculum" (2000) that proverbs we use today ought to be taught in EFL/ESL classrooms.

Idioms

Idiom learning has recently attracted a greater level of interest in English learning contexts, from online learning websites to language textbooks. (Huong Tran 2013).The latest course books widely utilized in teaching English programs in Asia put more emphasis on idioms in use. This reveals the vital importance of idioms in the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Much research has been done on the importance of idioms in the communicative competence of EFL learners. A detailed study was made by (Susanne Z. Riehemann 2001), who refers to idioms as an expression made up out of two or more words, at least one of which does not have any of the meanings it can have outside of the expression.

Idioms are fixed combinations of words whose meaning is often difficult to guess from the meaning of each individual word (Jung, SooJin 2016). Idiomatic phrases correlate with various grammatical parts of speech; they can be verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. The use of idioms benefits in enhancing contextual comprehension at higher levels of speech transactions.(Jung, SooJin2016).However, idioms and proverbs are not generally included in the course programme and have not received significant attention in EFL contexts.

Background of the Study

Oman is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country with where more than 10languages are spoken by the people of the country. Students who have had their education in English medium schools can manage to communicate well with the others, but students from ministry schools and from the interiors of the country studying in small towns cannot communicate well and do no thave proper interaction with their teachers and other students. They undergo psychological problems and are unable to communicate with the outside world as there is no exposure to the English language at home. Even at the college level we hear students speaking in their mother tongue inside and outside the classroom. The various reasons for students' apathy towards learning the language is that they are poorly motivated, were exposed to ineffective teaching methods by teachers and belonged to an improper English learning environment, which contribute to the mismatch between the two cultures and the misconceptions about the target Language culture.

Methodology

The research design is a case study used to explore and describe the perceptions, and viewpoints of teachers and students (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). In this study, the research objectives focus on the use of idioms and proverbs for a cultural awareness of the target language. The design helps to explore teaching idioms and proverbs through TBLT to enhance communicative language approaches to teaching. The research objectives in the present study are measured using questionnaires, focus groups, and observations. These data collection tools were treated as triangulations to assure data reliability.

Data was collected through teacher questionnaires and student questionnaires with classroom observations followed by semi - structured interviews. Five classroom observations were made and a questionnaire was administered to 15 teachers and 40 students.

A TBLT lesson plan was provided to five teachers to deliver in the classroom. The lesson plan had three stages.

Pre-Task Stage

The Role of the Teacher: The teacher introduces the proverbs and the corresponding idioms and attempts to elicit the meaning from the students. The teacher draws the attention of the learners to new vocabulary in the proverb or idiom and the language item to be acquired. The teacher instructs the learners' to list out such proverbs and idioms from the local language

The Role of the Learner: The learners' discuss among the group members and attempt to explain the underlying meaning of the proverb and the idiom. They list out similar proverbs and idioms from the local language. Students make attempts to use the expressions' in their own sentences.

Task Cycle Stage

The Role of Teacher: The teacher plays the roles of manager, facilitator, assessor, and chairperson to assist the

learners to carry out the task.

The Roles of LEARNERS: They are asked to work in small groups to choose proverbs and idioms from a list provided and discuss and explain the underlying meaning of them. They explore the meanings of new words and list out similar proverbs and idioms from their local language provided by the teacher. They work on the handout provided by the teacher with a gap filling task for and, but and so.

Language Focus Stage

The Role of Teacher: The teacher points out grammatical errors in their speech discussions and checks for language errors in the underlying meaning of the proverbs and idioms chosen by the learners.

The Role of Learners: They make corrections on the basis of feedback of the teacher. They rewrite the meanings of the proverbs and idioms without errors. The students are asked to choose idioms and proverbs related to their lessons in the course books.

Five teachers were interviewed before class on their general perceptions of what language culture constitutes in their typical classroom practices, to address students' intercultural awareness. The teachers exhibited high levels of motivation to adopt the TBLT approach to enhance the communicative skills among students. The teachers agreed that knowledge of idioms and proverbs enriches the cultural environment of the classroom and native like fluency in speaking.

After the lesson by each teacher, four students were identified at random for a semi structured interview. The students were required to inform if the classroom activities in developing the knowledge of idioms and proverbs had any impact on their communicative competence and enhancing their native like fluency. Time allotted for each student is for about five minutes.

Participants and Context

The research was conducted in the college where the researcher works in Muscat, Oman. The sample chosen is from the Language Centre where an English General Foundation Programme is delivered to high school graduates.

In a previous study made by the researcher on the socio-cultural factors on language acquisition suggestions were made that the teacher should provide a culture-rich learning environment in which proverbs and idioms play an important role as they reflect the target language culture. They also tend to bring a comparison between the two cultures as idioms and proverbs convey the traditions, cultural beliefs, social conventions and norms of the target language and enable the learners to emulate the native speakers of English. Therefore, teachers should include idioms and proverbs in the curriculum as a strategy to enhance native like fluency as they are short, funny and interesting to use.

The teachers admitted that they show less focus on the communicative competence of the students and no strategies are used to enhance native like fluency by using idiomatic expressions or proverbs. They agreed that opportunities to provide a natural language environment is limited although the course books include topics related to the target language. No attempt is made in correlating the local culture with the target language culture. However, two teachers agreed that contextualization of the content by using examples from the learners' real life experiences has been taking a place in the curriculum, but no focus is given on the culture of the target language thereby, to the native like fluency. Teachers exhibited high levels of motivation to adopt the TBLT approach to enhance the communicative skills among students. The teachers opined that knowledge of idioms and proverbs enriches the cultural environment of the classroom

and native like fluency in speaking.

Students agreed that there should be more focus on their communication skills and that they were interested to use idioms and proverbs in the same way as the native speakers. They agreed that the task based approach in acquiring knowledge on idioms and proverbs is interesting and provides opportunities to take up responsibility to their own learning.

Analysis of Student Survey

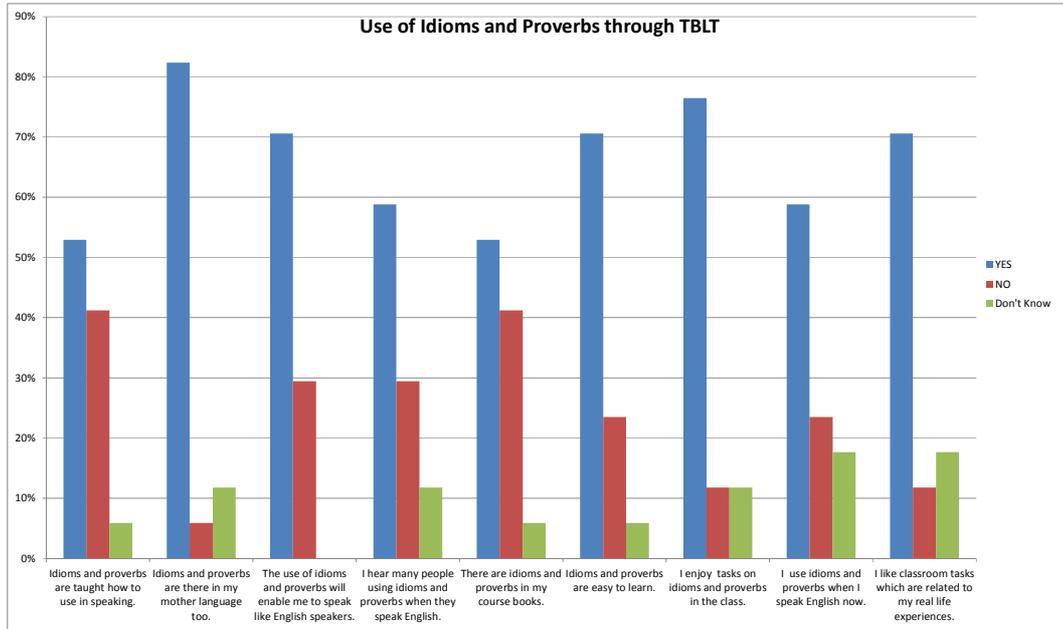


Figure 1.1

The response of students to a survey conducted with regards to the use of idioms and proverbs was mostly positive. More than three quarters of respondents stated that they enjoyed doing tasks on idioms and proverbs in class. In fact, the overall majority of students which is about 82 percent responded that they also used idioms and proverbs in their mother tongue.

Another constructive feedback was that a substantial number of students, 71 percent replied that they liked doing tasks that were related to their real life experiences. A significant number of students responded that idioms and proverbs were easy to learn and that using them would enhance native like fluency.

On the other hand, although not entirely negative, less than 50 percent of students responded that they could not identify whether idioms and proverbs were available in their course books or whether idioms and proverbs were taught in speaking classes. Furthermore, about one third of students responded that they either did not know the meaning of idioms and proverbs. A minority number of students were not sure if they knew the meaning of idioms and proverbs.

English is a language that is made up of a number of idioms and proverbs and hence teaching and learning idioms and proverbs is a difficult and challenging process. Though the findings show a positive student response to learning idioms and proverbs in class, they also were not able to identify them. The explanatory factors are likely to be because teachers are not ready to teach different genres of language and hence not ready to include idioms and proverbs in the curriculum. This can be because teachers either do not know the meaning and origins of idioms and proverbs or they are not aware of their importance in establishing the culture of the target language.

Nevertheless, idioms and proverbs are part of the vocabulary in students’ text books and teachers cannot refrain from teaching them. Teachers could design classroom activities to find similarities between the L2 idioms and proverbs and that of students’ L1.

Exercises of task-based learning in problem solving would help learners discover the descriptions in idioms and proverbs. Teachers can use a variety teaching strategies depending on the content and they should make attempts to develop critical thinking in students to facilitate the understanding and eventually acquisition of idioms and proverbs.

Analysis of Teachers ‘Questionnaire

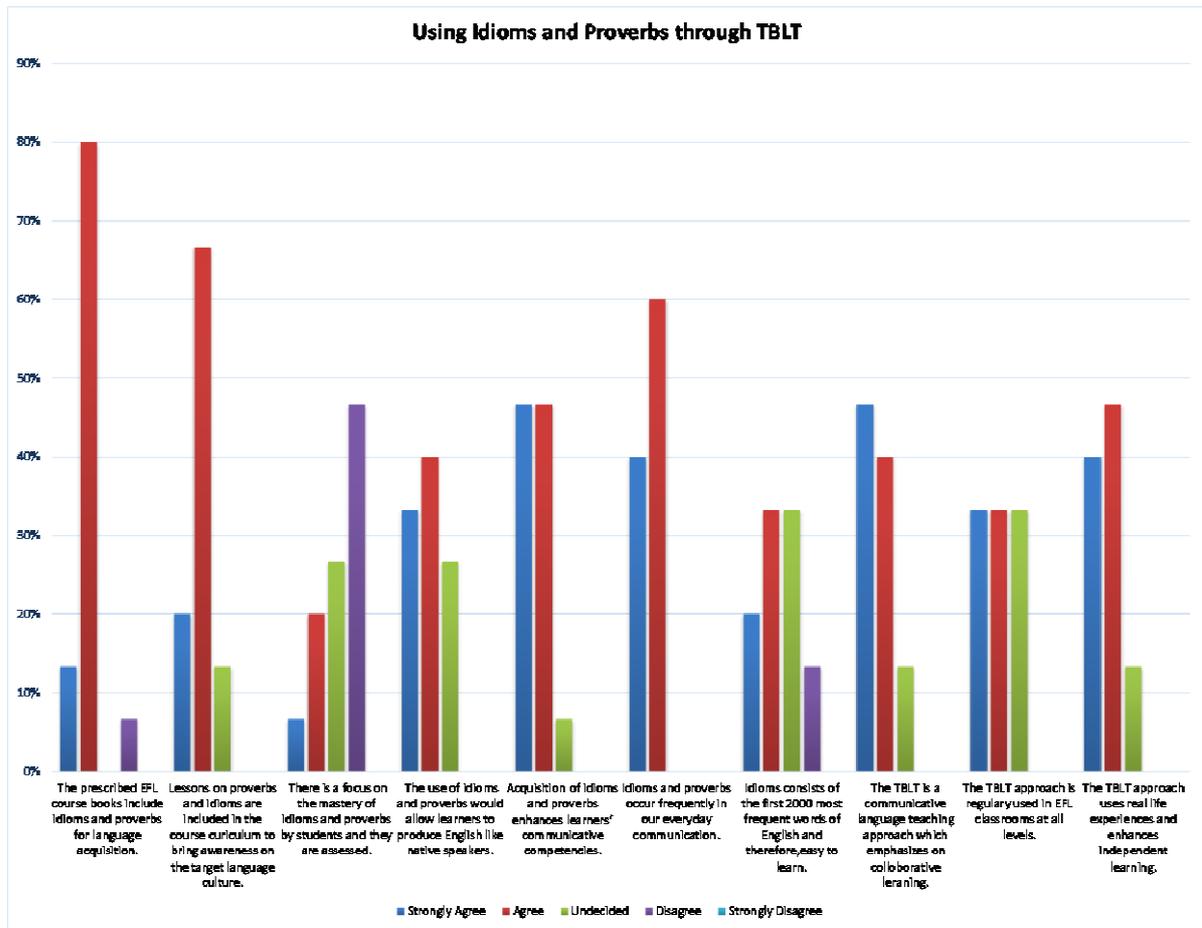


Figure 1.2

The findings show that the majority of the respondents, about 93 percent, strongly agreed that idioms occurred frequently in everyday communication and that the prescribed EFL course books included idioms for language acquisition. It is also observed that about 94 percent of the respondents believed that the acquisition of idioms enhanced learners’ communicative competencies and produced English with native like fluency. A significant majority responded that lessons on idioms were included in the course curriculum to bring awareness on the target language culture. Over half of teachers said that idioms consisted of the first 2000 most frequent words of English and therefore, easy to learn.

While there is a strong belief about the importance for students to learn idioms and how the teaching materials and lessons on teaching idioms were included in the curriculum, some teachers agreed that there was no focus on the mastery of idioms by students, nor that students were assessed on the acquisition of idioms.

About 87 percent of the teachers agreed that the TBLT approach used real life experiences and that it enhanced independent learning. They opined that the TBLT was a communicative language teaching approach and that it emphasized collaborative learning and was regularly used in EFL classrooms at all levels.

Based on the overall responses to statements, it can be concluded that teachers have confidence that idioms are included in textbooks as well as in the curriculum. Teachers also agree about the importance of acquisition of idioms for EFL learners and that the TBLT approach enhanced the acquisition of idioms through both independent and collaborative learning and that the TBLT drew on life experiences. With that in mind, more focus should also be placed on mastery of idioms and assessments.

Limitations of the Study

The current study was made only with a small sample and for only one semester of the course and one skill; the speaking skill. The study only could take the opinions of teachers and students but there was no statistical treatment to a control and experimental group for a comparative analysis. Despite these limitations, this study raises an alert about the interest exhibited by the language learners and teachers alike towards inclusion of idioms and proverbs in the Arab EFL contexts. Future studies should explore learners' ability to use idioms and proverbs in conversation.

DISCUSSIONS

Idioms and proverbial expressions should not be neglected in ESL/EFL acquisition. We hear idiomatic expressions in TV shows, magazines, books, newspapers, songs and when there is an interaction with native speakers. Students can be exposed to a variety of idiom dictionaries to enhance their knowledge and use. Teachers can include classroom activities like role play, writing and matching the parts of idioms and proverbs to the topics in the course books which enhances knowledge of idioms and the way they are used among learners'. Nation (2001) comments that it is preferable to teach the frequently occurring idioms to the students. The use of TBLT in teaching idioms and proverbs is considered appropriate as it is a communicative language teaching approach and this provides opportunities to students to use idioms independently in repeated conversations with the group members.

CONCLUSIONS

Idioms are used naturally by native speakers of English. Idioms and proverbs make a part of the vocabulary of any language. They reflect the history, heritage, and culture of a language. Learning idioms and proverbs helps L1 learners' attain native like fluency when speaking English and this knowledge brings an awareness of the target language culture. The results of the research findings will have implications for language teachers in general and policy makers in particular. Language teachers should familiarize students with cultural differences that facilitate the process of language learning. When planning and designing teaching materials teachers should consider the L1 and L2 cultures equally well to avoid apathy of students towards target language culture.

The findings show that majority of the students showed interest in learning idioms and proverbs. However, students are rarely provided with opportunities to learn and use idioms in classrooms to enhance their communicative competence. The study also observes that though the teachers are positive towards the use of idioms and proverbs no serious attempts have been made to teach them though included in the course books.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, J. D. & Rodgers, T. S. (2002). *Doing Second Language Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Dumitru Stanciu (1986) "Proverbs Speak Louder Than Words": Folk Wisdom in Art, Culture, Folklore. Peter Lang, Amazon .com
3. Dell & McCarthy (2010). *English Idioms in Use Advanced*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Ellis (2003) *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching* Volume 7, Number 3. Oxford University Press
5. Erman and Warrace (2000). *The idiom principle and the open choice principle*. Walter de Gruyter.
6. *Figurative Idiomatic Competence: An Analysis of EFL Learners in Vietnam*, Huong Quynh Tran *Language Education in Asia*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2013.
7. Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative look on the bright side (consistent idiom) thought, language, and understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
8. James R. Nattinger, Jeanette S. De Carrico (1992). *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching* Oxford University Press, 1992
9. Kövecses, Z. & Szabo, P. (1996). *Idioms: A view from cognitive linguistics*. *Applied Linguistics Applied Linguistics*, Vol 17, No 3, Oxford University Press.
10. Michael C. Abadi (2000). *Proverbs: A Handbook* Greenwood Publishing Group.
11. Nation (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* New York: Newbury House.
12. Nunan (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
13. Dell & McCarthy (2010). *English Idioms in Use Advanced*. Cambridge University Press.
14. Nippold & Martin (1989). *Idiom interpretation in isolation versus context: A developmental study with adolescents*. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*.
15. Peter Burke & Roy Porter (1995). *Languages and Jargons: Contributions to a Social History of Language*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
16. Rana Abid Thyab. *The Necessity of Idiomatic Expressions to English Language learners* *International Journal of English and Literature* Vol.7 (7), pp. 106-111, July 2016.
17. Sinclair, J. McH. (1987). *The nature of the evidence. An Account of the COBUILD Project in Lexical Computing*. London: Collins.
18. Wolfgang Mieder 2004: *A hand book: Proverbs* Greenwood Press.
19. Wray, A. (2000). *Formulaic sequences in second language teaching: principle and practice*. *Applied Linguistics*, Oxford University Press.

