

An Explorative Study of Idiom Teaching for Pre-service Teachers of English

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Abstract

This study investigated the situation of teaching and learning idioms at a university level in Vietnam, a foreign language context. It also examined the evaluation of the idiom teaching process in three language classes over a 15-week period for pre-service teachers of English. The data were collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews and email guided reflective writing. The analysis revealed that teachers and students at the university achieved moderate effectiveness in idiom learning. Both teachers and students believed that students are motivated, felt relaxed and confident and actively participated in idioms learning activities in this foreign language context. The findings also revealed that students demonstrated the process in idiom comprehension as well as in idiom production though the evidences in the comprehension of idiomatic phrases are more evitable. The results indicated significant effects of the context in idiom learning when idioms were creatively used in integrated skill tasks. The findings also implied that idiom learning should receive more attention in EFL learning context.

Keywords: teaching idioms, pre-service teachers, idioms learning

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning English in Vietnam as a foreign language has been encountering controversial social reactions when students are said not to be able to competently communicate in English after their six or seven years of studying English. It is claimed that students even cannot purposively speak one or two correct sentences in English for their communicative intention. Some students with good English grammar and vocabulary think that they can communicate in English. However, they still fail to communicate when they discover that the language English speakers actually talk to them is different from what they have been taught.

On the one hand, this may come from the teaching methodology. In the past foreign language teachers just focused on grammar and writing. Speaking and listening received inadequate attention; therefore, students did not have chance to speak and to express their ideas in English. Later, in the 2000s English started to be taught in light of the skill-based teaching approach. Students have, consequently, learnt four skills separately, that is, speaking, listening, reading and writing. In spite of the advantages of this approach, the biggest drawback is the undervaluation of word power such as fixed phrases, formulaic expressions because of the heavy emphasis on skills.

On the other hand, this crucial problem may come from the lack of idiomatic phrases in teaching and learning English whereas idiomatic expressions are of great popularity in English in use. Copper (1998) indicates that an English native speaker uses about 20 million idioms in his or her lifetime of 60 years. This means that each person exchanges 356,720 idioms a year, 980 idioms a day and 4.08 idioms a minute in average with one another in daily conversations. These impressive statistics illustrate the undeniable significant role of idiomatic phrases in daily language use.

However, students and teachers tend to traditionally avoid idiomatic expressions in English. This prevents students from the exposure to multi-word units in English. Thus, students cannot profoundly understand the communicative meanings of multi-word units in the right context. Researchers in language acquisition such as Wray (2000), Joyce & Burns (1998) emphasize that mastery of idiomatic language is one significant indicator of successful language acquisition. In fact, idiomatic competence is one of the criteria for IELTS speaking

assessment. In the IELTS speaking band descriptors, uses of idiomatic vocabulary and collocation are mentioned as indicators for the use of lexical resource in bands 7, 8 and 9.

The majority of research studies in idiom learning have focused on the idioms themselves, on either literal meaning, idiomatic meaning or idiom syntax, the frequency of idioms (Lennon, 1998, Grant, 2007, Wray, 2000, Liu, 2003). Simpson and Mendis (2003) review four research disciplines in the literature by 2003. They are the definitions of idioms, the argument of teaching or not teaching idioms, the selection of idioms in teaching and the methods of teaching idioms. Some scholars focus on teaching idioms by English native speakers (Lennon, 1998, Cooper, 1998, Abel, 2003). Few studies focus on foreign language users conducted by foreign language researchers and teachers, who are in the expanding circle of English users categorized by Kachru (1985). Moreover, in Vietnam, teaching idioms has just received initial attention, so that language educators and researchers have done few studies of this controversial issue. This is a gap in the literature especially when English is regarded “the world’s international language” (Richard, 2008, p. 1). Apparently, the majority of language users nowadays are from this expanding circle. This study focused on idiom learning in Vietnam, a foreign language context, therefore, could fill in the gap in the literature on idiom teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Idioms: Definitions and Types

The definition of idioms varies in the literature. As Lennon (1998) states, language is more or less idiomatic in the scale of idiomaticity. Scholars such as Cooper (1999), however, address that idioms are a type of multi-word units that have non-literal meaning. Grant (2007) emphasizes the frozenness or fixedness in syntax of idioms, that is, there is no grammatical flexibility in idioms.

Significant attempts have been made to categorize idioms. Fernando (1996) puts idioms into three categories: pure idioms (kick the bucket = die, bread and butter = main income, earning activity), semiliteral idioms (use something as a step stone) and literal idioms (according to). While Makkai’s work in 1972 classifies idioms into lexemic idioms and sememic idioms. Grant (2007) also categorizes idioms as core idioms, figuratives or ONCEs - one non-compositional element.

In this study, an idiom is defined 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, as Simpson and Mendis (2003) and Zyzik (2011) define it. In other words, it can be called figurative idioms or figurative idiomatic expressions, for example, catch fire, under the microscope. As it is stressed in this definition, a figurative idiom can be identified by asking the question: Is it possible to understand the meaning of this multi-word unit by adding up the meaning of each word in the unit? This definition also distinguishes idioms from collocations. In contrast to idioms, the meaning of collocations is predictable from the meaning of the individual words in the unit.

2.2 The Roles of Figurative Competence in Language Acquisition

The literature remarks a persistent confirmation that figurative competence plays an important part in assessing spoken language competence (Boers et al. 2006). Figurative competence, getting along with other language competence, refers to the ability to appropriately use and comprehend idioms in communication. It enables non-native speakers to achieve full comprehension in daily life conversation (Burke, 1998, Buckingham, 2006). Boers et al. (2006) emphasize the benefit of idiomatic expressions to language learners. For the first place, students can recall figurative idioms in chunks of multi-word units, which helps learners avoid momentary hesitation in their connected speech. Second, idioms facilitate the fluency. Third, idioms assist learners in achieving native-like performance (Boers et al, 2006). Wray (2000) analyses the role of multi-word units such as figurative idioms in speakers’ production and hearer’s comprehension. Figurative idioms tend not only to help speakers create a shorter processing route and organize discourse but also to assist hearers in profoundly understanding the speaker’s world and indicating the speaker’s individual identity. Lennon (1988) also stresses that the knowledge of figurative idioms both facilitates processing loads in language production and provides speculating information of the incoming utterances. However, both teachers and learners seem to be reluctant to teach and learn idioms. Students in Vietnam, as a result, have considerable difficulty in understanding speakers in the inner circle because of a number of idiomatic expressions.

2.3 Teaching Figurative Idioms

Learning idioms is one of the most difficult areas in a foreign language, as claimed by many teachers and students in Vietnam. In fact, idioms are “notoriously difficult” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999, p. 39), which has been quoted by later scholars (Liu, 2003, Zyzik, 2011). Teaching idioms so far has been considered a part of teaching vocabulary. Earlier, idioms were treated individually out of context. However, more and more

strategies and tactics have been employed in teaching idioms. Copper (1999) investigates the use of strategies for idiom comprehension. Out of seven strategies, guessing from context and using literal meaning are the most popular. Therefore, it should be emphasized that idioms must be taught in the context in which they are embedded. However, many scholars, for example Liu (2003) argues that it has been a challenge to teachers in a foreign language context to help students acquire idioms.

Another controversial issue in teaching idioms is idioms selection. Among numerous idioms in the dictionary, which idioms should be taught? The issue of teaching methodology is also a growing concern. Should we teach idioms in separated lesson or in an integrated approach? or which activities can be used to teach idioms?

It has been argued that idioms seem to be too complex for foreign language users (Liu, 2003, McLellan, 2010). The learning target is just expressing ideas and thoughts in plain English. Not only students but also teachers tend to avoid idioms. However, this paper would like to challenge this stereotype of idiom learning. Through a teacher's conscious effort, students in a foreign language context such as Vietnam can receive effective outcome in comprehending and producing idioms in their connected speech. Moreover, the students' attitudes toward the appearance of idioms in natural language will change.

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions

This study explores cases of teaching idioms in light of an integrated skill approach for senior pre-service teachers at a university of education in Vietnam. The study addresses the answers to the following research questions.

- How have figurative idiomatic expressions been taught for senior pre-service teachers?
- What are the teachers' and students' evaluations on their teaching and learning of figurative idiomatic expressions?

3.2 Method and Procedure

The study adopted a mixed-method case study approach. To explore the in-depth situation of teaching and learning idioms for senior pre-service teachers, an interpretive case study was conducted. The researcher purposefully collected as much information about the problem as the possible for the phenomenal analysis, interpretation (Cresswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998). Purposive sampling techniques helped the researcher to select the informants who appeared to be rich of information.

Nine English teachers (n=9) and 56 pre-service teachers (n=56) were selected as the informants of the study. All of the teachers are tertiary teachers at a faculty of English education in a recognized university of education in Vietnam. They immediately taught English language skills for the pre-service teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 17 years. Three out of them had formal training and practical experiences in English native speaking countries. Four of them held a Master's degree in language teaching and teacher education. They were selected because they were representatives of the two generations of teachers, either in their early- or mid-career with their background education in Vietnam or English speaking countries. They are representatives of the majority of EFL teachers in Vietnam. The pre-service teachers were senior students at the faculty who were training to become English teachers at secondary schools in Vietnam after their graduation. They were supposed to be at upper –intermediate or advanced levels of English when they participated in the unit of study. In analysis, the term “students” is used to describe the pre-service teachers.

Data were collected through questionnaires for teachers and pre-service teachers, in-depth interviews and email-guided reflective writing. The questionnaires were designed with both opened and closed ended questions, which, as Mackey and Gass (2005) argue, can provide not only reliable but also insightful data for the study. Close-ended questions are in form of a 5-point Likert scale. These data collection techniques acted as triangulation to assure the validity of the study. These may overcome the weaknesses and biases that may rise from each method of data collection. Transcriptions of the interviews were sent back to the informants and compare with the guided reflective writing. Pseudonyms are used. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaires, interviews and the informants' writing, themes were identified according to the aims of the research.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Situation of Teaching and Learning Idioms

Regarding the situation of teaching and learning idioms, the study focuses on the criteria that the teachers bear in mind for idiom selections, teaching methods and idiom – related activities that were employed.

Table 1. Criteria for selecting idioms for teaching

Criteria	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Relevance to the contents of the lessons	30	54%	7	78%
Frequency in use	50	89%	6	67%
Cultural suitability	24	42%	2	22%
Being up to date	22	39%	5	56%
Fitting students' language level	36	64%	9	100%
Others	0	0%	0	0%

Although there was a slight difference in priority among the criteria, teachers and students both take into consideration such criteria as fitting students' language level (64% for students and 100% for teachers), relevance to the contents of the lessons (54% and 78%, respectively) and frequency in use (89% and 67%). Teachers showed great concern about their students' English level (100%) whereas students were more interested in the frequently used idioms (89%). Lan and Hoa, teachers, emphasized that "the idioms should not be too difficult or too easy, the level of difficulty may possibly discourage students". This is also illustrated in the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky (1978). Understanding students' English level, or locating their exact ZPD, will suggest proper assistance to students' learning. The attention to the most frequent idioms is also recommended by Zyzik (2009). Zyzik proposes that idioms should be selected by the frequency of occurrence or the familiarity (2009). These criteria assist the teachers in including many frequently used idioms and leaving out some seldom used ones. Teachers and students may consult the study of idiom frequency of occurrence by Liu (2003) and Grant (2007) when selecting idioms for their students.

In term of an idioms-related teaching approach, "How did you teach idioms?", idioms were taught and introduced in either listening activities or reading activities. Idioms were also taught in integrated-skill activities that also involved in listening and reading skills.

Table 2. Teaching approaches

Approach	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Idioms were taught separately in idiom-focus activities	8	14%	2	22%
Idioms were taught integrated with listening activities	26	46%	6	67%
Idioms were taught integrated with reading activities	30	53%	6	67%
Idioms were taught in integrated -skill activities	28	50%	7	78%

It can be seen in table 2 that idioms were taught and learnt much from reading and listening activities (about 67% for teachers), which are the receptive skills (Harmer, 2001). These activities provided the input of the language for the students. It is likely that they enabled students to lead to productive skills, which are speaking and writing. Although these activities valuably helped students expose to the idiomatic language, they were not enough. Harmer (2001) argues that students should participate in the activity "at the communicative end of the communication continuum" (p. 249). This means that language production should have a communicative purpose. Also, there is a significant distinction between "knowledge about a language and skill in using it" (Bygate, 1987, p. 3). Therefore, if idioms just are presented in the listening and reading activities, students will not have many opportunities to put newly learnt idioms in practice.

Some students in the interview suggested, "it's necessary to focus more on speaking and writing using idioms rather than explaining the meaning of idioms". Also, as it was indicated by another informant,

"We need more role plays to put idioms in our communication. Just knowing idioms is not enough. It is much better if we have chance to speak and use the idioms communicatively after understanding of the meaning of

idioms in the reading or listening tasks.” (Minh, a student informant)

The data showed that 78% of the teachers and 50% of the students thought they learnt idioms from integrated skill activities. The integrated skill approach, in which all the language skills are presented in the theme-based models or task-based instruction focusing on communicative purposes to help students to speak English communicatively (Oxford, 2001), has recently attracted a great level of interest. This approach not only helps students focus on language in use in its right contexts but also includes knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar to support student learning. In this way, students can get “the benefit of practicing all the language skills in an integrated, natural, communicative way, even if one skill is the main focus of a given volume” (Oxford, 2001, p. 18).

As it can be seen from tables 3 and 4, a variety of teaching activities were creatively designed and performed to help students learn idioms better. 56% teachers disagrees that idioms activities were almost determined by the textbook. Trinh (a teacher) states, “I usually adapt the activities in the textbook, so that they fit students’ learning styles and my teaching objectives.” Many scholars have supported the teacher- produced learning materials or teacher-adapted ones. Block (1991) emphasizes the contextualization feature of the teacher-produced materials. These materials also meet individual needs of learners. They may also fill in the gap between teaching context and course books.

Table 3. Teachers’ opinion on teaching methods

Statements	Teachers				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Idioms were presented in a variety of ways	11%	66%	11%	11%	0%
Idioms activities were almost determined by the textbook	11%	33%	0%	56%	0%
Different teaching aids were used to help ease the idioms learning process	44%	11%	33%	11%	0%

Table 4. Students’ opinions on teaching methods

Statements	Students				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Idioms were presented in a variety of ways	28%	46%	7%	10%	7%
Idioms activities were almost determined by the textbook	3%	21%	14%	60%	0%
Different teaching aids were used to help ease the idioms learning process	10%	64%	7%	14%	4%

The creativity in designing idiom-related activities is also illustrated in table 5. The teachers used a great number of activities, ranging from matching, idiom sharing to flash card activities and theatre playing. Matching, idioms sharing and theater playing with idioms tend to be most frequently used. Hoa (a teacher) explains that

“At the beginning of the lesson, I usually ask students to work in groups and share the idioms they have learnt in the week with one another. Among all the exchanged idioms, each group selects two idioms, which are useful to learn in their opinion and write on the board to share with other groups. I then use some revision techniques to help them remember these idioms.”

Another teacher, Mai, also emphasized that students were very excited in this sharing. Her students found it easier to remember and used these idioms than other idioms in the book.

Theatre playing was also of interest. In this activity, the students usually made a mini play with idioms they have learnt in the last lessons. “We at first found it very difficult but then when we can express our ideas and thoughts with idioms, we were strongly motivated in this activities”, said by Tram (a student). The teachers also commented that their plays at the second half of the semester were meaningful and interesting. “Students can use idioms more naturally. Students are motivated in making conversations with roles in specific contexts”,

commented by Mai (a teacher).

The teachers in the study attempted to apply numerous techniques and skills in teaching vocabulary to deal with idioms. With their creativeness, these vocabulary teaching techniques were realized in integrated skills tasks, ranging from listening and reading activities to provide the input to speaking and listening to practice. As Zyzik (2009) guidelines it, idioms can be taught in either separate lessons or an integrated approach. Teaching idioms, as many scholars such as Cooper, 1998, Lennon, 1998, Zyzik, 2009 argue, should be contextualized and divided into two steps; that is students' awareness of idioms and student's use and practice of idioms. The former step may happen in either reading or listening activities, and the latter one tend to incorporate in speaking and writing activities.

In a foreign language-teaching context, the influence of contextual support on idiom comprehension is even more important. Context of situation provided in listening or reading material facilitate students' comprehension of idioms. Lan (a student) stated that her friends and she usually predicted the meaning of the fixed phrases in the reading. Based on the context, the sentences before or after it and her common knowledge, she could guess the meaning of the phrases. Hoa (a teacher) also shared a contextual technique, "I sometimes tell the students a story with idioms. The plot of the story is familiar to my students but I use the idioms in the story. My students find it very excited and remember these fixed phrases better. Then, they can use the idioms in the similar context."

Using idioms in the right context is also teachers' concern. "If students do not understand the appropriate context in which the idioms are embedded, they will use it in an inappropriate way. Some of my students attempt to use idioms but their language are still not natural because of their misuse of idioms in the right context", said by Mai (a teacher). As Thornbury (2005) argues, contextual factors determine the selection of language we use to communicate. Without context, language is not fully understood. Idioms, similarly, contains themselves certain values of contextual dimensions. This or that idiom should be appropriate in a specific field, tenor and mode, the register of the utterance. In fact, in spoken language, contextual features are indispensable. Douglas (2004) and Nunan (1993) describe that contextual features of spoken language consists of such elements as setting, participants, purposes, topical content, tone, language, norms of interaction. It may be argued that these elements are difficult to specifically describe in words in foreign language environment. Yet, it is easier to visualize these elements with a photo or a short video clip. Multimedia in this case will help students easily imagine the context. Therefore, teachers and students can employ such teaching aids as authentic clips to contextualize the meaning and the use of idioms.

However, the findings also reveal that board games, quizzes, word clouds and video watching are not frequently used. In the interview, many students suggest that it would be more effective if teachers used more authentic videos to teach idioms. Also they want to participate in games like board games, quizzes, and word clouds in their process of learning idioms. They think that they "will be more motivated in learning idioms with games", states by Ha (a student).

Table 5. Idiom- related activities

Activities	>10 times	7-9 times	4-6 times	1-3 times	Not used
Story telling				6	3
Quizzes			2	1	6
Board games	1	1	2	1	4
Matching (idioms and meaning)	1	4	3	1	
Word clouds		1	2	1	5
Dominos	1		2	3	3
Idiom sharing	1	4	2	2	
Role play		1	6	2	
Video watching			1	3	5
Flash card activities	1		3	2	3
Theatre playing with idioms	1	1	5	1	1
Dialogue writing		4	1	1	3
Discussion		5	3	1	
Idiom glossary	1	4	2	1	1
Others					

The data also uncovered the lack of metaphorical uses in teaching idioms. None of the teachers and students showed any evidence in using conceptual metaphors. Komur and Cimen (2009) investigate into the effects of conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms in Turkey, a similar foreign language teaching context. Kevecses & Szabco (1995) also implement an informal experimental study of the effect of cognitive semantic in learning idioms. The studies show the success of students in learning idioms with conceptual metaphors. Therefore, metaphor-related activities should be employed for idiom teaching. Lennon (1998) also supports this metaphorical approach. He guides some pedagogical implications for idioms teaching with metaphorical encoding and decoding.

Most of the teaching material was from the textbook, the Internet and referent books on idioms. While teachers just focused on these three referential sources, students found idioms from other sources such as TV shows, movies and songs. These are also useful sources of idioms that the teachers should actively consider for their teaching. Another significant figure is that none of the students learn idioms from newspapers and magazines while these types of documents are authentic discourse. This may come from the fact that students in Vietnam do not have much exposure to newspapers and magazines in English. Instead, they are more familiar with news, video clips and broadcasts on the Internet. As a result, 75% of the students and 78% of the teachers informed that they found teaching and learning material on idioms on the Internet. These figures tend to reflect the tendency of teaching and learning English in the Internet dominated age.

Table 6. Sources and teaching material for idioms

Sources and teaching material	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
In the textbook	34	61%	8	89%
On the Internet	21	75%	7	78%
Newspapers, magazines	0	0%	3	33%
Books on idioms	40	72%	5	56%
Others	10	36%	0	0%

4.2 Teachers' and Student's Self-evaluation on the Effectiveness of Their Idiom Teaching and Learning

There were different opinions on the effectiveness of their teaching and learning in the students' and teachers' viewpoint. Apparently, students seemed to be more positive when 21% of the informants believed that idiom teaching and learning was effective, 64% were moderate effective and 17% were somewhat effective. In contrast, teachers just selected moderate effective (78%) and somewhat effective (22%) for their teaching. As Mai gave her estimations:

“The most successful feature of the course in my opinion is that it helps my students recognize the presence of figurative idioms and fixed phrases in authentic materials. When they understand and experience the importance of these phrases they can have the focus of idiomatic phrases in their further learning. In the past, we ignore this significant feature of language”

Table 7. Teachers' and students' general evaluation of idiom learning

How do you evaluate your teaching and learning idioms in the semester?	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Very effective	0	0	0	0
Effective	12	21%	0	0
Moderate effective	36	64%	7	78%
Somewhat effective	10	17%	2	22%
Ineffective	0	0	0	0

Table 8. Teachers' and students' evaluation of idioms learning in detail

Statements	Teachers					Students				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1 The idiom- related activities match your students' level	0%	33%	33%	22%	11%	4%	53%	25%	17%	0%
2 The idiom-related activities were successful	0%	44%	44%	11%	0%	7%	36%	43%	14%	0%
3 You felt confident and relaxed when teaching/learning idioms	0%	11%	78%	11%	0%	4%	37%	42%	17%	0%
4 Your students/You have demonstrated the progress in idiom comprehension	22%	33%	44%	0%	0%	0%	61%	35%	4%	0%
5 Your students/You have demonstrated the progress in using idiomatic expressions	0%	22%	66%	11%	0%	0%	30%	63%	7%	0%
6 Your students/You enjoyed the idioms learning activities	11%	78%	11%	0%	4%	4%	30%	52%	14%	0%
7 Your students /You were motivated to learn idioms	0%	67%	22%	11%	0%	10%	32%	42%	7%	7%
8 Your students/You actively participated in the learning process	0%	56%	44%	0%	0%	4%	50%	46%	0%	0%

The opinions on the appropriateness of idioms and the students' English level are controversial. 33% of the teachers agreed that the learning activities match their students' level whereas the just under percentage of teachers (22% disagree) did not. In contrast, more than half of the students believed that their English level matches the idiom-related activities (4% strongly agree, 53% agree). Both teachers and students had similar opinions on the success of the idiom activities when 44% and 43 % of the teachers and students agreed and totally agreed with the statement 2. Teachers seemed not to be confident and relax to teach idioms. Most of them had neutral opinions on the statement 3 (78% neutral). This can be explained that teachers themselves do not confidently use idioms in their communication. They admit that using idioms in their conversations is a real challenge not only for students but also for teachers. In the past, they did not study much about idioms. They now have to self-improve their language skills and knowledge to meet the idiomatic demand for the course.

Teachers apparently see the progress of students in understanding idioms in listening, reading activities. 22% of the teachers absolutely agree, and 33% of them agree with the statement 4. The similar findings are shown in the students' self-evaluation. The evidence of the progress in using idioms in student language development outcomes can be seen in table 8, but the percentage is not so persuasive. Only 22% of the teachers and 33 % of the students agree that there is a progress in the idiomatic competence. Most of them keep their neutral opinion on this statement. It reveals that students are not so confident in using idioms in their productive skills as in their receptive skills. This can be explained from the analysis in teaching approach. The figures show that more receptive skills are used than productive skills in the learning process. Also, as Harmer (2001, p. 251) points out, "teachers should not expect instant fluency and creativity; instead they should build up students' confidence bit by bit".

The majority of the teachers believe that students enjoy the idiom-learning activities and are motivated to learn idioms (89% and 67% for both absolutely agree and agree options, respectively). As the teachers in detail describe it in their responses, students actively involve in the idiom activities. Not only in class but also outside class, they attempt to use idioms to communicate with their friends. The percentage of the students' opinions on these two items is not as high as that of the teachers but the figure is still quite positive. Students in fact feel like learning idioms. They feel excited when they can express their thoughts with idiomatic phrases. This finding

reveals the positive attitudes of students toward idiom learning because motivations “determine the extent of active, personal involvement in L2 learning.” (Oxford & Shearin, 1994, p. 12). Other researchers also stress that motivation directly influences the outcome of the language learners (Gardner & Macintyre, 1991).

Teachers and students also mention several challenges for teaching and learning idioms. Loan (a teacher) claims that too many idioms are taught in the textbook. Therefore after 4 or 5 weeks, both teachers and students somewhat overload by the long list of idioms they have to learn. Consequently, teachers and students spend too much time on explaining new idioms, and do not have enough time for production stage.

Teachers also understand this constraint so they suggest that they

“develop further activities that integrate idioms into all language skills tasks. Also, they should set clear and achievable goals for the use of idioms at the start of the semester as well as for separate blocks of lessons, modules so that tests can be more relevantly designed to meet the goals set”, proposed by Lien (a teacher).

Moreover, they also recommend that idioms should be taught to students of lower level of English as supplementary tasks so that students are more familiar with idiomatic expressions and collocations. They then can study on their own and gradually build up their idiomatic expression list.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This paper explores the cases of learning idioms in light of an integrated skill approach at a university in Vietnam. It demonstrates that teachers and students at the university achieved moderate effectiveness in idiom learning. Both teachers and students believe that students are motivated, feel relaxed and confident and actively participated in idioms learning activities in this foreign language context. The findings also reveal that students have demonstrated the process in idiom comprehension as well as in idiom production though the evidence in the comprehension of idiomatic phrases are more evitable.

These positive learning achievements in idiom learning are the result of the creative use of idiom-related teaching activities that are designed in integrated skill tasks. Idioms are contextualized in listening or reading activities and then practice with speaking and writing focus. The learning tasks are varied from idiom sharing, matching, role-play to theater playing with idioms.

The results also show that idioms teaching should focus more on idioms practice in activities “at the communicative end of the communication continuum” (Harmer, 2001, p. 249). Moreover, the study indicates the missing of conceptual metaphors in idiom learning activities. This acts as a barrier to the prevention of creative associations in the learning process. Furthermore, idioms teaching would be more effective if the students have more chance to participate in numerous authentic video clips and games in their process of idiom learning.

The study implies that idioms learning, “a notoriously difficult” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen – Freeman, 1999, p. 39), can be creatively and actively integrated in a foreign language teaching context. Therefore, instead of being avoided in EFL learning, idioms should receive more attention in language teaching to assist students in acquiring English in a foreign language context. This filling may help EFL learners profoundly explore the target language and then purposefully communicate in English.

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