Improving English Language Learners' Idiomatic Competence: Does Mode of Teaching Play a Role?

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A B S T R A C T

Idioms feature prominently in daily communication. Accordingly, teaching and learning idioms should be a primary concern in language education, including English education. However, there is relatively little research on the role of formal instruction of idioms in developing idiomatic competence. This study investigated the instructional effects teaching idioms in four modes (short movie clip, sentence-use, definition, and role-play) had on learners' idiomatic competence. An idioms test was distributed among 47 English language learners at two language institutes to establish their idiomatic knowledge prior to the experiment. One hundred idioms were taught to all participants in the course of one month. The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the posttest results revealed significant differences among the four idiom-teaching modes. Discussions and pedagogical implications are provided in the paper.

Keywords: English language learners; idiomatic competence; mode of learning; teaching idioms

A R T I C L E   H I S T O R Y

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Introduction

The importance of vocabulary knowledge in enabling individuals to hold authentic and native-like conversations is self-evident. Yet vocabulary is not limited to a set of words whose meanings are always identifiable from a cursory surface glance. The English language is rich in idioms and native speakers use daily a diverse set of vocabulary items which do not have a literal meaning (Brenner, 2013). By all accounts, idioms appear to have meanings that are largely rooted in a nation's deep culture. Non-native speakers of English have difficulties understanding such idioms, especially if they do not possess the necessary vocabulary knowledge commonly associated with such lexical items. Lack of knowledge of idioms may even harm relationships if communications break down (e.g., Alhaysony, 2017) and prevent successful intercultural competence. One of the defining characteristics of native proficiency in a given language, according to Cowie and Mackin (1975), is idiomatic competence. Cooper (1998) maintains that "[s]ince idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum" (p. 259). Similarly, Moreno (2011) claims that since idioms are an integral aspect of verbal communication, and since they pave the way for effective communication, they should receive due attention in teaching.

O'Dell and McCarthy (2010) claim that learners who want to read English fiction, newspaper, or magazines, or understand TV shows, films, and songs need to understand a large number of idioms. As far as production is concerned, using idioms contributes to more efficient and effective communication, since there are times when a very short, perhaps three-word idiomatic expression may replace a 15-word complete phrase (for example, *a hot potato* stands for 'an issue, mostly current, which many people are talking about and which is usually disputed'.). Indeed, native speakers often use the abbreviated form of an idiom like *'the grass is always greener'* rather than *'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence'* to refer to the full meaning in a more economical manner (Boerger, 2005). Moreover, idioms are arguably more interesting and memorable than many other aspects of language since they have variety and humor in themselves. This can easily be observed among learners who are eager to express their delight in uncovering the meaning of an idiom in both the foreign language and their mother tongue. Understandably, this feeling of joy could even heighten their motivation and love-of-learning for the target language.

There are claims that teaching and learning idioms has proved to be problematic (e.g., Chen & Lai, 2013) and counterclaims against this (such as Liontas 2002a, 2006, 2015b) is that despite research findings that using idioms in spoken and written discourse is a significant indicator of high English language proficiency (e.g., Ellis, 1997; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Wray, 2002) English as a foreign language (EFL) learners may show low motivation for idiom learning if idioms are not taught in their classrooms. To be sure, teachers may have difficulty in motivating students to pick up (or use) idioms beyond the classroom context (Al-Kadi, 2015) because the chance for such extension may seem almost non-existent. As a result, students may not even try to understand what an idiom might convey if they are not afforded opportunities to see idioms enacted in real life. Despite Liontas's (2017) argument that we need to focus on idioms

in language programmes, teaching idioms is often neglected in a great many school and university English courses in Iran.

These assertions aside, certain pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features of idioms have been found to be a challenge for EFL learners (Chen & Lai, 2013). They find it challenging to recognize idiom structures and comprehend and translate their meanings into the L1 (Al-Kadi, 2015). Many such challenges can be solved with the help of a formal, independent idioms course, which is lacking in many English education programs, including our own English education programs in Iran. Though many studies have already been conducted on various aspects of vocabulary acquisition, learning, and use (e.g., MacArthur, 2010; Randolph, 2017; Wahyuni & Rozani Syafei, 2016; Zou, 2017), the field of idiomaticity, which is open to many fruitful investigations from multiple perspectives, has been left largely untouched. Idioms have only been the subject of a handful of such types of research whose practical implications and applications are hard to realize (e.g., Beloussova, 2015; Danesi, 2008; Doiz & Elizari, 2013; Liontas, 2015a; Littlemore & Low, 2006). In parallel to the Iranian context and despite the importance of pragmatic knowledge accorded to idioms assessing how well Asian language learners acquire and use idioms in communication has only recently attracted the attention of researchers (Tran, 2013). To add to the small database of relevant research and to assist learners with methods that can best facilitate the development of their idiomatic repertoire, the present research aimed at assessing the effect that different methods of teaching idioms might have on students' idiomatic competence.

Review of Literature

In any language, phrasal verbs, proverbs, metaphors, and idioms are both conventionalized and standardized in use. Idioms appear to be the most difficult to learn since their application ranges from the formal to clichéd and from informal to folksy/slang, including proverbs (Spears, 1996). Idioms are a combination of words that always come together in a certain order and to which minimal linguistic alterations are possible. The meanings of the overall expression are most often quite different from the meanings of the words composing them, a lexemic/semantic feature which makes learning them very complex and challenging for second language learners.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines idiom as *a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit*. Fernando (2000) defines idiomatic expressions as "conventionalized multiword expressions which are often but not always non-literal" (p. 1). Fernando further states that opaqueness of idioms can be divided into three types: (a) pure non-literal idioms, (e.g., *hot under the collar*, *a carrot and stick*), (b) semi-literal idioms, (e.g., *build castles in the air*, *cut the ground out from under someone*), and (c) literal idioms (e.g., *looking forwards, taken for granted*). In order for discourse to be considered authentic, it must demonstrate among other features frequent and pragmatically appropriate use of idiomatic expressions (Ädel & Erman, 2012; Liontas, 2015a). What is more, *idiomatic competence* is interpreted as the ability to correctly and properly comprehend and use idioms in their different sociocultural contexts without any mental effort and in the way native speakers use them (Liontas, 1999). Idiomatic competence can be linked to Canale and Swain's (1980) *sociolinguistic competence* and Bachman's

(1990) *language competence*. Students should not only be able to understand idioms, but they also should be able to use them accurately and appropriately (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2010).

In a pragmatic account of developing idiomatic competence in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom, on the basis of earlier research on idioms' theoretical constructs and empirical findings, Liontas (2015a) offers an integrated theoretical and methodological framework for promoting the development of idiomatic competence. His pragmatic account encourages the teaching of idioms in an explicit and systematic way that is rendered appropriate for authentic idiom use. He asserts that the comprehension and production of idioms must be contextualized in sensible, realistic ways that are based on practical considerations, that is, in natural context-sensitive social situations that do not violate established conventions of social appropriacy.

Investigating the comprehension of idiomatic expressions between skilled and less-skilled comprehenders in context and between two age groups, Oakhill, Cain, and Nesi (2016) found that older children and good comprehenders were better able to correctly interpret idiomatic phrases. They claimed there is an interaction between the age and meaning condition: younger and less-skilled students did not appreciate that understanding idioms needs particular effort. Wang and Plotka (2016) carried out a study on the effect of adult verbal scaffolding and the use of deliberately iconic gestures on facilitating young bilingual English-Chinese children's comprehension and retention of idiomatic expressions in their different languages. The researchers found speech-gesture modality to be more effective than speech-only modality in enabling students to comprehend and retain more idioms in both languages.

Xie (2017) also found that Chinese EFL learners' understanding of English idioms is highly associated with their judgments of idiom-familiarity but not of transparency. The study also found that context exerts a facilitating role in interpreting the meaning of idioms and that there are significant interactions between familiarity and context. Chen and Lai (2013), who conducted a study on second language learners' idiomatic competence in a writing course, found that teaching idioms through cognitive-oriented methods such as metaphoric mapping not only increases students' frequency of using common idioms but also their making of creative analogies comprising vivid images based on conceptual metaphors taught. Boers (2000) concluded that raising students' metaphor awareness (i.e., familiarizing them with the conceptual metaphors behind idioms) facilitates students' comprehension, retention, and production of idioms.

Involving students in two groups, one making conversations and the other writing short paragraphs with new idioms as they learned them, Khabiri and Masoumpanah (2012) found practicing idioms in conversations to be more efficient for idioms learning by intermediate EFL learners. In a study on the effect of explicit teaching of idioms on EFL learners' strategy choice in a reading comprehension test, Khoshhal and Hassaskhah (2017) found that the group who received explicit teaching of idioms referred to a dictionary while the control group sought help from teacher for understanding idioms. Investigating the role of context in learning idiomatic expressions among Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, Mohamadi Asl (2013) found extended context like brief stories positively affects both posttest and delayed posttest scores in contrast to the limited context provided by individual sentences and simple definitions. Noroozi

and Salehi (2013), who studied the effect of etymological elaboration and rote memorization on idiom learning, found that etymological elaboration is a more effective method of teaching idioms to Iranian EFL learners than mere rote memorization. Haghshenas and Hashemian (2016) also studied the effect of etymological versus pictorial in comparison with etymological and pictorial elucidation as methods for idiom learning by EFL learners. They found that the combined etymological and pictorial method was the more effective idiom learning strategy. Cieślicka and Heredia (2017) carried out a study on the effect of idiom transparency and cross-cultural similarity on Spanish-English bilinguals' idiom processing abilities. The idioms they used varied along the dimensions of transparency including literal, figurative, and opaque ones and were different with regard to whether or not they had any identical equivalent in both languages. They measured participants' readings through eye-tracking and found cross-cultural similarity together with idiom transparency affect Spanish-dominant vs. English-dominant bilinguals' ability to interpret various types of idioms.

A short informal test of idiomatic knowledge of some Iranian language learners by the present researchers revealed that students resorted to word-by-word translation of the expression to guess the meaning of an idiom. However, students guessed the meaning of an idiom much more quickly when a picture illustrating it was shown than when the idiom was presented alone. Such an informal observation underscores the role context plays in understanding idiomatic meaning, and that role is further examined in this study employing different contextual modes: Does the mode of teaching idioms (short movie clip, sentence-use, definition, and role-play) play a significant role in developing idiomatic competence?

Method

The study employed a quasi-experimental research design. The main independent variable was the four different modes of presenting idioms to students, with idiomatic gain as the dependent variable. Forty-seven volunteer language learners from two language institutes were randomly assigned into each of the four experimental groups as explained next.

Participants

Forty-seven male (N = 18) and female (N = 29) language learners ranging in age from 15 to 22 participated in this research. All participants came from the same ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with Azeri being their mother tongue and Persian their second language. Based on language institute proficiency tests, participants were more or less homogeneously at the upper-intermediate/advanced proficiency levels. The first experimental group (teaching idioms through short clips of movies) included 10 participants, the next experimental group (teaching idioms in sentences) included 15 participants, the third experimental group (teaching idioms through their definitions via PowerPoint slides) had 12 participants, and finally, the last experimental group (teaching idioms through role-play conversations) consisted of 10 participants.

Instruments

The two instruments used were a pretest and a posttest of idiomatic competence, which were the same and had 45 items. Since there was no feedback as to students' performances on the pretest, repeated measures item ordering effect did not apply to reduce validity. The tests were multiple choice with each item displaying 4 choices. The items also asked for the Persian equivalent of the idioms in question. The items were randomly selected from the pool to be taught. The test was piloted with a group of language learners similar to those in the main study and its validity and reliability were established by experts in the field who were professors with more than ten years of experience teaching English language related courses with scholarly publications in these areas. With no major modifications, the final test enjoyed a Cronbach reliability index of .84.

The tools used for teaching idioms in each group were, respectively, short movies, sentence-use, PowerPoint (for definitions), and role-play. The movies were collected from Everyday English Idioms available on YouTube. Then the idioms in the movies were used as a reference for designing short stories for the role-play group and as a guide for those to be taught in the sentence-use and PowerPoint groups. Accordingly, the same idioms were taught through each one of these tools.

Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment, students mentioned that they had never been offered any formal idioms course. They were then given an idioms knowledge test to assess their idiomatic competence at the outset of the experiment. The pretest session ended with a short informal introduction to the course. In an effort to keep the teaching/learning time the same for all groups, eight one-hour treatment sessions were held wherein 10 to 12 idioms were taught in each session to each group as follows:

o   *Movie Group* (MG1): Intended idioms were first presented to students with an illustration in the form of a movie clip. They watched the clip and were required to guess its meaning. A sentence was then read and shown containing the idiom and having animations illustrating it. Upon seeing this second illustration, students were asked anew for the idiom meaning to find out if they guessed it incorrectly. Thereafter, the correct meaning was revealed along with a Persian equivalent idiom.

o   *Sentence-use Group* (SG2): An idiom was written on the board and students were asked to think about the possible idiom meaning. In groups of two, they were then asked to write two sentences encompassing this idiom. Next, the teacher checked their sentences and provided corrective feedback on their interpretations. Thereafter, the L1 meaning of the idiom was given to students with the request to revise their sentences accordingly.

o   *Definitions Group* (DG3): One hundred PowerPoint slides, each slide showing an idiom, were shown to students, who, in turn, were asked to work in pairs and think about the possible meaning of each idiom. They were then asked to offer their final idiom interpretation and any corresponding idiom in their mother tongue, in Persian or in English if they already had

one. Thereafter, the English idiom definition was shown on the PowerPoint slide and students wrote it down in their notebooks.

o   *Role-play Group* (RG4): Students were presented with a list of idioms but now in the context of short stories in conversational form, with each conversation containing one or two idiomatic expressions. Students were requested to form groups of two or three. Each group was given a conversation. They were instructed to practice the dialogue with their partner(s). As they were reading the dialogues, they were also required to look for any idiomatic phrase(s) in the conversation. They then wrote their guesses on a piece of paper along with any possible other idioms they already knew having the same meaning in both English and their mother tongue. Upon completion, each group stood in front of the class and role-played their conversations. The other students attentively followed each play performance in an effort to uncover the idiomatic expression in question prior to each group revealing it themselves. Students were also requested to write down the idiom with its meaning and any other synonyms they already knew in both English and Persian. The members of each role-playing group would then reveal the idiom. If the idiom provided was accurate, the group would offer another synonym for the idiom or its Persian-English counterpart. If it was inaccurate, the other classmates would offer their guesses along with any synonyms or Persian-English counterparts. Finally, the idiom with its correct interpretation and its corresponding counterpart in students' mother tongue and English would be presented.

Following the completion of treatments, students were asked to take the posttest (i.e., the same test as the pretest described above) with the aim to measure their idiomatic competence at this stage.

Data Analysis

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the pretest and posttest results among the four groups, with the latter intended to identify any main effect for teaching mode.

Results

To investigate whether the groups differed at the pretest stage, a one-way between groups analysis of variance was run on the pretest scores. Table 1 represents the related descriptive data.

Table 1
Pretest Scores

Pretest Scores					95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Movie	10	2.1000	1.19722	.37859	1.2436	2.9564
Sentence-use	15	2.6667	1.67616	.43278	1.7384	3.5949
Definition	12	1.8333	1.26730	.36584	1.0281	2.6385
Role-play	10	1.8000	1.22927	.38873	.9206	2.6794
Total	47	2.1489	1.39843	.20398	1.7383	2.5595

As Table 2 shows, there was no significant difference among the groups at the commencement of the experiment.

Table 2
ANOVA Pretest Results

ANOVA

Pretest Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.457	3	2.152	1.108	.356
Within Groups	83.500	43	1.942		
Total	89.957	46			

A one-way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out on post-test scores of the four groups to explore the impact of teaching mode on their idiomatic competence. Table 3 shows the related descriptive statistics.

Table 3
ANOVA Posttest Results

Descriptives

posttest scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Movie	10	14.4000	2.79682	.88443	12.3993	16.4007
Sentence-use	15	11.4667	3.54293	.91478	9.5047	13.4287
Definition	12	8.6667	2.96444	.85576	6.7832	10.5502
Role-play	10	17.6000	1.95505	.61824	16.2014	18.9986
Total	47	12.6809	4.33442	.63224	11.4082	13.9535
Model Fixed Effects			2.96177	.43202	11.8096	13.5521
Random Effects				1.89406	6.6531	18.7086

The value of significance according to Levene's test of equality of variances in Table 4 shows that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated.

Table 4
Levene's Test of Homogeneity Variances

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Posttest Scores

Levene's Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1.830	3	43	.156

As Table 5 shows, there was a statistically significant effect for teaching mode, F (3, 43) = 18.50, P = .00.

Table 5
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

ANOVA					
Posttest Scores	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	487.013	3	162.338	**18.506**	**.000**
Within Groups	377.200	43	8.772		
Total	864.213	46			

The results of the post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test (provided in Table 6) indicated that the mean score for the MG1-Movie Group (M = 14.40, SD = 2.79) was significantly different from the DG3- Definition Group (M = 8.66, SD = 2.96). The SG2-Sentence-use Group (M = 11.46, SD = 3.54) displayed a mean significantly different from the RG4-Role-play Group (M = 17.60, SD = 1.95). The DG3-Definition Group also proved to be significantly different from the RG4-Role-play Group. There were no differences between the SG2-Sentence-use and the MG1-Movie groups, between the RG4-Role-play and the MG1-Movie groups, and between the DG3-Definition and the SG2-Sentence-use groups. The groups outperformed each other in a descending order with the RG4-Role-play Group outperforming the MG1-Movie Group, and both outperforming the SG2-Sentence-use Group, and, finally, all three groups outperforming the DG3-Definition Group.

Table 6
Multiple Comparisons

Multiple Comparisons						
Posttest Scores Tukey HSD						
					95% Confidence Interval	
(I) Teaching Mode	(J) Teaching Mode	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Movie	Sentence-use	2.93333	1.20914	.087	-.2980	6.1647
	Definition	5.73333*	1.26815	**.000**	2.3443	9.1224
	Role-play	-3.20000	1.32454	.089	-6.7397	.3397
Sentence-use	Movie	-2.93333	1.20914	.087	-6.1647	.2980
	Definition	2.80000	1.14709	.084	-.2655	5.8655
	Role-play	-6.13333*	1.20914	**.000**	-9.3647	-2.9020
Definition	Movie	-5.73333*	1.26815	**.000**	-9.1224	-2.3443
	Sentence-use	-2.80000	1.14709	.084	-5.8655	.2655
	Role-play	-8.93333*	1.26815	**.000**	-12.3224	-5.5443
Role-play	Movie	3.20000	1.32454	.089	-.3397	6.7397
	Sentence-use	6.13333*	1.20914	**.000**	2.9020	9.3647
	Definition	8.93333*	1.26815	**.000**	5.5443	12.3224

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Based on these observations, there is strong evidence to conclude that there is a significant difference among the movie, sentence-use, definition, and role-play modes of presenting idioms in terms of their effects on language learners' idiomatic competence, thereby implying that teaching mode does indeed play an important role in learning idioms. The order of effectiveness for the teaching modes was role-play first, then the movie, sentence, and definition groups.

Discussion

The present research investigated the effect of different teaching modes on the idiomatic competence of forty-seven male and female Iranian English language learners at two language institutes. It found a significant effect for teaching mode on developing learners' idiomatic competence. Among the different teaching modes, the most beneficial was role-play. However, there were significant differences between the movie and the definition modes in favor of the movie group. There were also significant differences between the Role-play Group (RG4) and the Sentence-use (SG2) and Definition (DG3) groups, such that the RG4-Role-play Group outperformed the other two. Thus, in a descending order from the most to the least effective, the positions were role-play, movies, sentence-use, and definitions.

In the RG4-Role-play Group, since the students were trying to visualize the conversation in order to play the roles of their interlocutors, it seemed to them that they were telling/playing a short story as well. As Gere (2001) points out, "[s]torytelling can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner" (p. 5). Moreover, as in the MG1-Movie Group, where students were presented with visual illustration of the idioms, according to Paivio's (1986) *dual coding theory*, a mental image of a concrete scene would have been shaped in both the role-play and the movie groups, which could have been stored in learners' memories alongside the verbal form, thus providing a better tool for learning idioms (Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007). Paivio (1986) contends that his theory highlights the role of image formation along with verbal associations. Furthermore, a picture highlights a particular word through associating it with a memorable image and can, therefore, create very strong memories and facilitate students' learning (Shapiro & Waters, 2005). It is therefore reasonable to infer that this mental image, which arguably provides a better condition for both comprehension and retention of new words in general and idioms in particular, is called up in role-plays and then in movies.

The outperformance of the RG4-Role-play Group in comparison to all other groups could also have been due to the fact that in designing and performing the conversations, the learners needed to interact with one another cooperatively, whereas there was no such interaction in the Movie (MG1) and Definition (DG3) groups or in the SG2-Sentence-use Group wherein the learners were mostly engaged in writing individually. Interaction and cooperative learning have proved to result in more effective learning (e.g., Khabiri & Masoumpanah, 2012). Interaction is said to provide input, affect negotiation or interactional modification, and lead to greater focusing on input form (Gass, 1997; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Pica, 1983). Moreover, during interaction, cognitive conflicts arise that by nature lead to increased learning (Slavin, 1995). Similarly, Swain

(1995) asserts, "[w]hen a collaborative effort is being made by participants in an activity, their speaking (or writing) mediates this effort. As each participant speaks, their 'saying' becomes 'what they said', providing an object for reflection" (p. 113). Thus, as Swain puts it, when "our students' performance outstripped their competence" (p. 113), there is good reason to believe that when involving students in problem-solving, new knowledge is built. Following Swain's *output hypothesis*, by enabling students to reflect upon what they are learning, the output produced performs a metalinguistic function and controls and internalizes the language or language items being learnt. Furthermore, students notice when what they want to say is in contrast with what they are able to say and, thus, they notice what they do not know or know only partially. Such "output-based" notions are in line with this study's findings in which both the Role-play (RG4) and Sentence-use (SG2) groups outperformed the DG3-Definition Group. Conversely, given the collaborative nature of the idioms tasks, the RG4-Role-play Group performed better than the Movie (MG1), Sentence-use (SG2), and Definition (DG3) groups.

Similarly, Hinkel (2017) offers some insights and techniques for incorporating idioms into the language classes, and Ward and Lepeintre (1996) suggest that movies are motivating for foreign/second language teaching. Since movies present colloquial uses of English in realistically plausible situations rather than in artificial pedagogical contexts, they are also seen as valuable and rich resources for teaching. In this way, movies provide a viable opportunity to expose learners to a variety of native speaker voices, reduced speeches, slang, accents, stress patterns, and dialects (Stempleski, 2000). As Secules, Herron and Tomasello (1992) explain, viewing the video and movie clips enhances students' learning of vocabulary and idiomatic structures because of the contextualized presentation of the video; In addition, the video clips and dialogues practiced by the RG4-Role-play Group provided the necessary experience and exposure to idioms. As concerns the power of movies as a medium, Massi and Merrio (1996) believe that one possible use of films in the language program is to promote new ideas and expand learners' horizons. For example, in a content-based syllabus, a particular movie or an authentic conversation can be used to vividly illustrate situations which are inaccessible or unfamiliar to learners. Such instructional interventions provide students with a much-needed stimulus for further learning which, in turn, serves as a springboard for further discussion.

Seen from another perspective, the outperformance of the Role-play (RG4), Movie (MG1), and Sentence-use (SG2) groups may well be attributed to the "proportionality theory" which predicts that idiom comprehension will decrease proportionally as the amount of context decreases (Qualls, O'Brien, Blood, & Hammer, 2003). Similarly, one other model for idiom processing that can justify these findings is the *lexical representation* model (Swinney & Cutler, 1979), which represents idioms as long words recovered from the mental lexicon together with any other words. It clarifies that in a concurrent processing of both literal and figurative meanings, the amount of context provided determines whether the correct meaning will be retrieved. Confirming the better performance of the role-play and movie groups in comparison with the sentence-use and definition groups, Boers et al. (2007) also found that teaching idioms could be more effective when done in context than in isolation because in authentic situations, idioms are presented in context and this context can aid comprehension without any need, for instance, for etymological awareness (see also Liontas, 2001, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2003, 2007).

Finally, the better performance of all other groups over the DG3-Definition Group can also be attributed to the fact that idioms' mental pictures act as a motivation for language learners by increasing the appeal of the materials presented (Male, 2007) and activating their aesthetic visual appreciation (Chiaverina, Scott, & Steele, 1997). In a comparative study of using idioms in conversations and short paragraphs, Khabiri and Masoumpanah (2012) found these two methods more useful than rote learning and conversations were more effective than short paragraphs. As is conveyed in the present study, the Role-play (RG4), Movie (MG1), and Sentence-use (SG2) groups had access to more of the context in which the idiom was used than the DG3-Definition Group. In this regard, Sadeghi, Vahid Dastjerdi, and Ketabi's (2010) study underlined the role of context in conveying the appropriate and pertinent meaning of idiomatic expressions. On the same grounds, Mehrpour and Mansourzadeh (2017) strongly recommend using short stories and pictures for teaching idioms to beginner EFL learners. Mohamadi Asl's (2013) research also found that idiom teaching in extended-context is more effective than limited-context or decontextualized ways of teaching. Yeh and Wang (2003), conducting a study on the effectiveness of vocabulary learning in academic contexts, found that text accompanied by a picture was very influential on lexicon retention, even for adult learners. Similarly, Yoshii (2006) investigated the role of pictorial cues in vocabulary learning and also found that pictures were effective in the recognition and production of vocabulary items.

Although the parallels are not exact, it should be conceded that Mehrpour and Mansourzadeh's (2017) study might contradict the present findings in that they found that using pictures (as more or less representing movies) is more effective in learning idiomatic expressions than are short stories (which has a relationship with conversations in role-plays); the contextualized situation of the participants and the teaching conditions were offered as plausible explanations. Moreover, our findings might challenge Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) and Nation (1994), who have argued against the appropriateness of contextualized methods of vocabulary learning for all learners. They assert that learning words 'out of context' by studying word lists, doing vocabulary exercises, or even by reading through a learners' dictionary, are more useful pursuits. However, it should be noted that their participants were beginning and intermediate level learners and, arguably, the process of learning idioms may not be identical to the learning of separate words.

The promising finding of this research is that language teachers should pay attention to idiomatic competence as an inevitable and inseparable part of the learner's overall competence in the language, and resolve to deal with idioms in their classes. The researchers suggest that teachers try new technologies for teaching idioms. New technologies, compared to more traditional strategies like literal translation and finding idiom equivalents, offer learners an authentic context in which to comprehend the meaning and grasp the gist of the expressions. Concerning the widespread varieties of English such as English as a lingua franca, to improve language learners' idiomatic knowledge, it is extremely important to follow English Medium Instruction with specific reference to idiomaticity (Briggs & Smith, 2017) and to increase learners' opportunities for exposure to foreign language idioms. When compiling textbooks or exercise books, language teachers and researchers should consider the incorporation of more idiomatic expressions. They may also resolve to create innovative idiom-based listening-speaking activities and to teach and explain more idioms in authentic contexts, thereby increasing learners' exposure to this kind of figurative language within meaningful constructs. During instruction, language teachers may

purposefully explain in detail the formation of idioms along with their figurative meanings, and suggest projects that offer language learners ample opportunities to comprehend and use idioms in real-life situations.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be posited that the use of role-plays, followed by movies or idiom sentence uses and definitions, positively impacts learner's idiomatic knowledge. By all accounts, role-plays appear to heighten learners' attention and interest, and, in direct ways, further stimulate their ability to comprehend and interpret idioms accurately. As shown, aesthetically appealing visual materials accompanied by words make learners refer to verbal and non-verbal methods of noticing the new information in the process of learning which, in turn, may result in more effective idiom learning.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there are not nearly enough exercises or orderly explanations of idioms in teaching materials/textbooks in Iran's language education system and few English courses, if any, come with an idioms' component. Teachers seldom use idioms in their oral presentation of lessons potentially owing to their own limited idiomatic knowledge. Brown (2000) proposes that for language acquisition to take place, there must be comprehensible input received by the acquirer through hearing or reading language structures that are slightly beyond their current ability (zone of proximal development). Since the end goal of language learning is communication, dealing with idioms should not be relegated to the sidelines and students should be encouraged to use such expressions in authentic and productive ways. Given that one of the key characteristics of language fluency is the simultaneous use of many literal and figurative expressions and words, a defining feature of all proficient speakers, such vocabulary knowledge needs to be promoted in the language classroom and beyond so that learners may begin to employ them profitably in natural settings.

Language teachers and learners alike have no option but to rely on systematic courses for acquiring idioms, based on planning decisions that are informed by research findings such as the ones presented herein. In more ways than one, we hope to have succeeded in illuminating the path to a better idiom learning, a learning that has yet to find its way into the curricula of many Iranian language programs.

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