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IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS AND SLANG IN ESP

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Abstract: The paper discusses an apparently less common aspect for an ESP course, viz. the teaching of idiomatic expressions and slang, covering tentative answers to the questions: What, Where, Why, How to teach idioms and slang and attempting to provide a principled framework meant to conduct towards a successful response to such a pedagogical challenge. The necessary background is given in order to provide reasons for this option, in spite of a certain amount of reluctance among the professionals of the field in this respect. The main arguments for this choice of the trainer would include, besides the fact that English is characterized by a high degree of idiomaticity – even at the level of academic texts, particularly in IT, therefore not only in ordinary daily communication, the frustration frequently expressed by English language learners unable to follow idioms or slang when they communicate with native speakers in (non)professional environments, as well as the necessity to get the learners to see slang and idiomatic expressions as an authentic component that they should internalize in order to develop a better and deeper understanding of the foreign language they study. A variety of models for the teaching of idiomatic expressions and slang within Enhlish language courses is reviewed and a coherent approach designed for the author's educational setting is proposed.

Keywords: idioms, slang, vocabulary teaching, English for Specific Purpose, communicative approach

I. Introduction – paper aim

In an analysis (Pollio et al., 1977) of a rich lexical corpus comprising political debates, taped psychotherapy sessions, as well as compositions by students and adults, one interesting result was that the frequency of idioms per minute identified in the texts yielded a surprising number of 4.08.

However, there has been a tendency among English language teachers, as pointed in the literature (Lennox, 2006; Burke, 1998) to resist introducing them in the language input of their classes, on grounds connected with their linguistic impurity. Everyday reality seems to contradict such views, advancing the idea that good grasp of such idioms and slang will actually 'open many doors' (Lennox, 2006).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to study and assess the importance of this rather neglected part of vocabulary input and to plead for a reconsideration of its tangible benefits for a language course trainees, with a focus mainly on an English for Specific Purposes one (ESP).

II. Idiomatic expressions and slang - theoretical background

The terms that are discussed in this paper have been the object of numerous attempts to defining them as appropriately as possible. However, the literature provides various approaches to their understanding, with some controversies still remaining to be solved.

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Thus, a brief review of the explanations given to the word *slang* will result in depicting the many facets of the term. It is 'language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech' (The Free Dictionary Farlex, 2000), consisting mainly of 'short-lived coinages and figures of speech ... deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect'.

One opinion (Lieb, 2009) underlines, in agreement with the 2000 edition of the American Webster Dictionary, the origin of slang as a form of 'secret language', emerging from 'subcultures mostly concerned with crime, sex, drugs and music'.

This comes in line with another view (Dalzell and Victor, 2008), for whom 'slangy jargon' is essentially a 'colloquialism', with the specific feature that its message goes 'beyond the text and the literal meaning'. The 'nonstandard' aspect of this form of vocabulary is also stressed by other authors who have analyzed it (Burke, 1998).

The main difference between *slang* and *idiom* would be, then, the fact that *slang* equals one (nonstandard) word, while *idioms* are generally phrases (Burke, 1998). In the same vein, it should be emphasized, as most sources mention (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012; Dictionary.com, 2005), that the meaning of idioms cannot be deduced from the individual words composing it or from the general grammar rules of the language.

A more nuanced source (Cooper, 1998) points out that idioms can have a literal meaning, but this will be different from the 'alternate, figurative' one, which should be interpreted metaphorically.

Finally, there are opinions (Andreou and Galantomos, 2008, quoting Mitsis, 2004) including idioms in a 'continuum', from '*usual collocations*', through '*stable* or *fixed collocations*' and '*metaphorical collocations*', and up to idiomatic expressions.

Another feature marking the difference between these easily confusable terms - *slang* and *idiom* - is that an idiom is 'established by use', while the words under the umbrella of slang are 'often restricted to special contexts or are peculiar in a specified profession' (Difference Between.com, 2010-2012).

Arguments in favour of the need to study and consider introducing these types of lexis in the English language course can be found in recent studies, particularly due to their increased frequency of use, leading to a commensurate high number of searches for their meaning, carried out by students of the language. Thus, the most popular searches on Cambridge Dictionaries Online (CDO) for 2010 were for idioms and slang (Phys.Org., 2011).

Here are some of the top terms whose meaning was searched, in a selection I made from a reliable source (Using English.com - English Language (ESL) Learning, 2012), with particular reference to terms of interest for my ESP engineering students, as the described educational setting for such courses, which should include slang and idioms, is a technical university. Thus, for the *Idiom Category: Technology & Science*, it gave:

- *Blow a fuse* = If you blow a fuse, you become uncontrollably angry.
- *Fire on all cylinders* = If something is firing on all cylinders, it is going as well as it could.
- *Rocket science* = If something is not rocket science, it is not very complicated or difficult to understand. This idiom is normally used in the negative.

Similarly, from another source (Using English.com - English Language (ESL) Learning, 2012), the following were obtained, based on the *Idiom Category: Numbers*:

- *Four-square behind* = If someone stands four-square behind someone, they give that person their full support.

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- *I've got your number* = You have made a mistake and I am going to call you on it. You are in trouble. I have a disagreement with you. I understand you true nature.
- *Sixes and sevens* = If something is all at sixes and sevens, then there is a lot of disagreement and confusion about what should be done.

The fact that idioms – as well as slang, in fact – are very much in the use of genuine English speakers and, consequently, they should be included in language courses, operating selections appropriate to the specific trainers' needs, can be seen from one of the works (McCarthy and O'Dell, 2002) dedicated to them. Over 1,000 idioms were collected from modern corpora and data bases, and they were grouped per topics; exercises to check the understanding of their meaning were included.

Given their increased use by contemporary native speakers, we believe, together with the book authors, that it would be 'inappropriate to ignore them', provided a meaningful selection be operated, taking into account the ones that are certainly very present in various working and/or study contexts. The recommended level of language proficiency of the learners that should take such activities should start from the intermediate one.

Moreover, it can be useful to let the students know about the fact that both idioms and slang keep appearing in English speaking countries lexis, so they should develop an awareness of this phenomenon and be able/ready to look for the meaning of such terms which they may encounter in their future activity.

One sound support resource for them in enlarging their knowledge could be one pointing out to the newly appeared forms of slang or idiomatic expressions that have been encountered in various source texts lately. An example is given here from one such resource (Urban Dictionary, 1999-2012); it defines the newly coined term: *smellucination*, actually meaning 'to imagine a smell that isn't actually there, as if to 'hallucinate''.

III. The need for idiomatic expressions and slang in ESP – standpoints and instructional models

It is a well-known fact that English is a language with a high level of idiomaticity, which makes it impossible for non-native speakers to avoid encountering and/or having to understand and even use them, not only in everyday conversations of the general kind, but also within professional settings. This recommends them for the language teacher's list of priorities, certainly in function of contextual factors such as: envisaged frequency of use by the learners in their own activity, students' proficiency, time available and so on. They should be, we maintain, taught based against a carefully designed framework of pedagogical principles, including teaching approach, source of input and sub-skills under focus - that should all facilitate a good learning process.

That slang and idioms should not be neglected is underlined by numerous authors who focused on the topic, each bringing forth strong arguments. These are summed up in what follows, as a starting point in creating a sound foundation for our own approach.

Currently, slang seems to be neglected in the EFL classroom (Lieb, 2009), both by the teachers and by course book authors. Arguments *pro* introducing them are provided: an increase of the students' motivation, since such input would be relevant due to its authentic character, an enhancement of the possibility of communicating informally (slang fosters communication 'by lowering the affective filter'), while also demonstrating to the learners that English is a living language which keeps evolving.

With specific reference to ESP courses, it is shown that, as most textbooks do not actually cover aspects such as communicating informally at the working place, introducing

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slang and idiomatic expressions in the ESP class could compensate for this lack, answering the specific expectations of the trainees, who will thus come into contact with slang and idioms widely used by native speakers.

This idea is reinforced by a powerful concrete example (Kim, 2007) pertaining to the business talk sphere: 'If an executive gives the order to "Get the ball rolling" or "Get on top of things" how else would a non-native English speaker know what to do in this situation if not taught what these sayings mean.'

In support of the same position, one more argument is brought (Working with idioms, 2009) in favour of introducing slang and idioms teaching in the ESP course, viz. that such knowledge can help non-native speakers to become 'better speakers and negotiators' and to exploit business and other professional opportunities more to their advantage.

The next question is *how* should slang and idioms be introduced and taught in an ESP course. Analyzing advice from various authors dealing with the approach to the teaching of slang and/or idioms, some basic principles have emerged, which are presented below as guidelines for the English teacher who wishes to address the issue in a coherent efficient manner.

The students' level should be upper-intermediate or advanced (Pesce, 2007-2012), as it is *fluency* that comes under focus with such activities. Task types should include idioms grouped per topics and taught in context, by means of conversations and games based on authentic input material, such as TV shows.

The linguistic and pedagogical perspectives are taken into consideration in generating other significant principles that are recommended in the literature (Cooper, 1998):

a) the chosen idioms should be frequently encountered in English,
b) they should not pose special problems of lexis and grammar,
c) it is advisable that they should be taught starting from those having more or less the same meaning in L1 as in L2, then gradually pass to those that are totally dissimilar,
d) students' awareness of figurative language and of its role in oral and/or written communication should be raised by discussions,
e) the activities should be designed so as to be easy to learn and remember, by getting the students, for instance, to act the strictly literal vs the figurative meaning of the phrase, which will appeal to their sense of humour.

There are teachers who are reluctant to the idea of including idioms and slang in their courses (London School of English, 2012), and whose hesitations stem from the 'fear that learners would find the idioms obscure', having to 'struggle to use them correctly'.

There is definitely a challenge in deciding to teach idioms and slang, particularly if the teacher is a non-native speaker of English. Therefore, the approach should be carried out with the observance of certain guidelines (Bearman, 2012), namely: the use should not be turned into abuse; it should be tailored to the audience, answering their specific reasons for using such lexis.

As regards the use of slang, given the fact that by its nature it has a rather short life, the learners should be sensitized to this aspect, so that they should permanently refresh their repertory of idiomatic expressions and/or slang. Moreover, once defined and understood in context, these lexical units/groups should be used in the input, at a frequency allowing them to be naturally internalized by the trainees.

IV. Approach to the teaching of slang and idioms – proposal synopsis

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In my educational context, viz. higher education engineering students - most of them specializing in Computer Science, providing the trainees with the appropriate tools that would be useful in their study and further on in their work activity has been a permanent concern.
The main elements to be taken into account include the learners' profile (level of language proficiency, cultural background - especially for multicultural groups), envisaged register and/or style, L1 influence, identified needs, main course/lesson objectives, time and prioritization constraints.

Another aspect taken into consideration is to facilitate the students a correct understanding of these words/expressions as they are used in the real life, thus increasing their motivation to embark upon using them, i.e. to pass from the receptive phase, of simply understanding them, to the productive one.

As far as the resources available are concerned in this respect, the Internet proves a major rich source, providing not only explanations, but also lesson plans to choose from.
Within the communicative approach to the teaching of English, with certain additions of the eclectic type, that underlies the ESP courses taught in the described educational context, the types of tasks that I have developed in order to teach idioms and slang to engineering students at bachelor level, with a language proficiency level of minimum B2/CEFR, range from warm-up activities, through speaking and writing development, and up to possible follow-ups.

Because of space reasons, they are only briefly presented here in very broad lines, together with their rationale, as mere suggestions for fellow trainers embarking upon designing and teaching similar lexical units in their educational settings.

As slang and idioms are apparently outside the scope of the ESP course, warm-up tasks are quite important, as they aim to sensitize the students to the usefulness of such input. Of particular effect are the use of critical incidents, such as presenting a situation to the students – orally by the teacher or as a reading text, in which the boss utters the idiomatic phrase addressed to one (non-native speaker of English) employee: 'Get the ball rolling!'. Alternatively, reading input including a quiz about the value and/or frequency of idioms in Business English can be a stimulating beginning of the lesson.

The logical progression of the tasks should certainly begin by analyzing idioms/slang items and the best way of approaching them, with a concatenation of skills under focus, from reading and listening to speaking and, finally, writing.
Task types that are particularly effective are sketchily described in what follows:

- for identification/recognition, the students can be asked to: (i) solve multiple-choice tasks, with the beginning of the phrase given and several possibilities for the ending, (ii) match halves of expressions from lists with/without distractors, (iii) reorder words in idiomatic phrases;
- for developing an awareness of the manner in which these terms are used, the teacher can provide a context of use and get the learners to choose an appropriate item from a given list in order to continue the input text, or, alternatively, images can be used instead of texts;
- for enhancing the speed of memorizing such phrases by resorting to their sense of humour, the students are asked to mime the meaning of such idioms/ slang words, and their peers have to guess from a list of possibilities;
- for higher level students, a very cryptic idiom can be given, dissimilar from the meaning/wording in L1, and a multiple-choice range of possible explanations to choose from – or, reversely, given the meaning, the task can ask the trainees to try to identify the correct item from a given list of options.

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All the proposed tasks above can be designed and taught in various formats, and appropriate follow-up homework or mini projects can be derived from most of them. Thus, the students can be asked to:

- provide a concrete context of use for a certain phrase in written form or as a dialogue to be played in front of the class;
- use such slang/idioms in sentences or mini contexts of their own, applicable in their future work activity;
- identify more examples of idioms and slang from the Internet – operating selections and prioritizations in function of various criteria, such as frequency or topic, and include them in their Learner's Portfolio;
- with high level learners, use such lexis in tasks created by the students for their peers;
- work on a comparison between L1 and English, ranging items from similar to dissimilar ones for certain meanings or topics.

The proposed tasks can also be used in designing ESP course forms of *evaluation*. As possibilities as multiple, here is just one example that can be designed in order to test both lexis and reading comprehension: the students get a text with gaps and they are asked to insert the appropriate items from a given list, with/without distractors.

V. Conclusions

The main aim of this study is to provide arguments in favour of including in ESP courses the teaching of slang and idioms, which we maintain can be successfully carried out by the language teacher, if a certain framework of principles is observed in designing the approach and in tailoring it in response to the students' needs and the course objectives.

Therefore, teachers of English should be open to introducing elements that are really necessary to the students. They should develop an awareness of the manner in which such an approach should be implemented in practice.

There are not final answers to that, and the trainees should be guided towards developing an attitude of awareness of the changes going on in the contemporary English lexis, which may have good chances of increasing their success in their current and future activity.

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