

## Competencia comunicativa intercultural en el aula: el caso de las expresiones idiomáticas

### *Intercultural communicative competence in the classroom: the case of idioms*

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Recibido: febrero de 2023

Aprobado: abril de 2023

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#### Resumen

La Competencia Comunicativa Intercultural (CCI) es un componente crucial en el proceso de formación de estudiantes de Lengua Inglesa como futuros profesionales. En el interés de satisfacer esta necesidad, los autores del presente trabajo proponen un conjunto de acciones para potenciar la CCI en el aula mediante la enseñanza de expresiones idiomáticas. En la investigación se adoptó un enfoque mixto y la muestra comprendió a treinta y cinco estudiantes de la carrera Lengua Inglesa con Segunda Lengua Extranjera en la Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de las Villas. Los resultados obtenidos a través de diferentes métodos e instrumentos de investigación mostraron que la mayoría de los estudiantes coinciden en que el tratamiento de las expresiones idiomáticas en las clases, su conocimiento de esta estructura y el uso que les dan es insuficiente. Por consiguiente, los autores esperan que el conjunto de acciones propuesto pueda ayudar a mejorar el dominio de los estudiantes de estas expresiones y potenciar su competencia comunicativa intercultural.

**Palabras clave:** competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI); expresiones idiomáticas; enseñanza y aprendizaje de expresiones idiomáticas.

#### Abstract

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a critical component in the process of training English Language students as future professionals. In the interest of meeting this need, the authors of the present study propose a set of actions to enhance Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in the classroom through the teaching of idioms. The study herein presented adopted a mixed approach and the sample comprised thirty-five students from the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas. The results obtained through different research methods and instruments indicated that most students agreed that the treatment idioms receive in English lessons, their knowledge regarding this structure and the usage they do of them is insufficient. Therefore, the authors hope that the set of actions proposed can help to improve the students' mastery of idioms and to enhance their intercultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); idioms; teaching and learning idioms.



## Introduction

Nowadays, higher education faces the quandary of how to educate adaptable, innovative, and knowledgeable specialists able to work in the ever-changing economic, cultural, and political work scenario that the modern world encompasses. Training language students to enhance their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become an imperative in language classrooms in the last few years, as they need to acquire certain abilities, which go beyond the borders of simple linguistics in order to understand culture as well as the tangible and intangible aspects of human behavior and manners.

One of the pioneering works to understand the concept of intercultural communication came from Hall (1976), who made the distinction between high-context culture and low-context culture. He referred to the former as “one in which most of information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded” and the latter as exactly the opposite, where the mass of information is vested in the explicit code. In 1985, Allwood claimed that intercultural communication was “the sharing of information on different levels of awareness and control between people with different cultural backgrounds, where different cultural backgrounds include both national cultural differences and differences which are connected with participation in the different activities that exist within a national unit”. More recently, Justin (2018) defined this term as “the verbal and nonverbal interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds, a situation where a person tries to interact with others in foreign environments. Its aim is to allow for positive and productive interaction”.

As for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Sercu (2005) highlights that in order to deal with intercultural experiences, a person needs a number of intercultural competences identified as willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the abilities to look upon oneself from the outside; to see the world through the others’ eyes, to cope with uncertainty, to act as a cultural mediator, to evaluate others’ points of view, to consciously use culture learning skills and to read the cultural context, and to understand that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities. Fantini (2020) noted that in an intercultural situation, “effectiveness” in new cultural contexts is tied to “appropriateness”, judged from the host culture’s viewpoint. Hence, entering the host’s worldview and learning to see the world anew is the challenge. This requires transcending one’s native paradigm and recognizing how one’s native worldview may be the biggest impediment to being able to see things differently and language is central to this process.

Out of all languages in the world, English is particularly rich in idioms, which play an essential role in maintaining its humorous, conversational and witty touch. According to Ifil (2002), idioms are “fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be taken as a combination of the meanings of its component parts”. In the same way, recent authors call idioms to “a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements” (Kovalyuk, 2018). The authors of the present research will refer to idioms as all expressions more or less stable in its structure, with a figurative meaning that cannot be understood or assumed by the meaning of each of its constituent parts.

Thus, it is possible to say that idioms are able to mirror life, men, society and culture. Several idioms like "in seventh heaven" and "to carry the weight of the world on one’s shoulders", have their origin in mythology. Similarly, some are based on biblical passages like "not to know someone from Adam", "to turn the other cheek" and "like a lamb to the slaughter". Likewise, others are inspired by literature like "Achilles' heel", "to bite the dust" and "it's all Greek to me", and some others in history such as "to have an axe to grind", "when the balloon goes up" and "it’s like the Black Hole of Calcutta" (Casas, 1995). Hence, learning idioms and their origins may provide learners with a good opportunity to acquire

information about the language's culture, as well as the beliefs of the community of speakers, their social attitudes, and norms. In addition, the appropriateness of idioms demonstrates an affinity for the customs and habits of native speakers and can serve to reduce social distance (Ramonda, 2017).

The study herein presented was motivated by the existing need for English Language students to incorporate idioms into their language learning process so that they can achieve the desired level of Intercultural Communicative Competence that will enable them to perform better in their future professional lives. Therefore, the overall aim of the study was to propose a set of actions to enhance Intercultural Communicative Competence in the classroom through the teaching and learning of idioms.

This set of actions encompasses some methodological procedures to work with idioms during lessons, activities intended to enhance students' knowledge of these expressions, and finally, the design of an app dictionary of idioms, to be used inside or outside the classroom by both professors and students.

## Methodology

Considering the scenario and the interests of the researchers, the methodology of the present study adopted a mixed-method approach, as it focused on collecting, studying, and processing quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more accurate understanding of the situation and the research problem (Creswell and Plano, 2011). The following methods were applied:

**Theoretical methods:** historical and logical, analysis and synthesis, inductive and educative, structural and systemic, for constructing a theoretical framework to systematize the main concepts associated with the topic of research and their relationships.

**Empirical methods:** surveys and participant observation, for collecting and processing data.

**Statistical and mathematical methods:** percentage analysis in order to tabulate and analyze the data and purposive nonprobability sampling in order to select a representative sample to conduct the study.

Currently, two Curricula are being implemented in the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language: Curriculum D and E. Using a purposive nonprobability sampling, the researchers decided as the most suitable sample, the second-year as they take Curriculum E and fourth-year students, who take Curriculum D and continue taking the discipline English Language II. In total, the sample for this research engrosses 35 students: 19 from second year and 16 from fourth year. To choose the sample, some other criteria were taken into consideration: academic level of students, and willingness to collaborate with the research.

The whole research process consisted of three main stages: 1) bibliographic review in order to construct a theoretical framework to systematize the main concepts associated with the topic of research and their relationships, 2) needs analysis concerning the current situation of ICC in the aforementioned degree course through the evaluation of the knowledge students possess about idioms and 3) design of a set of actions to enhance ICC in the classroom through the teaching of idioms.

## Results

A survey was designed and applied to 35 students (16 students from second year and 19 students from fourth year). Its purpose was to determine the knowledge students possess about idioms and their opinion about how these expressions can contribute to enhance their ICC. Similarly, an observation guide was designed and applied in order to evaluate the treatment idioms receive in English Language lessons and also, to assess the knowledge students possess about this linguistic category. In order to do so, the authors



of the present research paper observed 20 lessons: firstly, 10 of the subject English Language II in the second year of the major (Curriculum E) and other 10 belonging to the subject English Language III in the fourth year (Curriculum D).

After analyzing the results of the survey and the participant observation, the following regularities were noticed:

- Student's ICC is unsatisfactory.
- The frequency with which students encounter idioms outside the classroom is high.
- Little emphasis is put on idioms during English lessons.
- Most students agreed that the bibliography available on this topic is insufficient.
- Students have a vague knowledge of these linguistic categories and, therefore, they avoid their usage.
- Most students acknowledged that mastering idioms could be very useful to enhance their ICC.

All regularities, resulting from the different research methods, proved the gap the authors had empirically envisioned in this research and revealed that indeed, there is a need for English Language learners to incorporate idioms in order to enhance their ICC. Accordingly, with the aim of meeting this need, a set of actions was proposed to be put forward in the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas.

## Discussion

The first of these actions was the elaboration of a methodological procedure to teach idioms based on the criteria of different authors like Howard (1998), Liontas (2002) and Infante-Frómata (2017).

The latter claims that, in order to make the process of teaching idioms more comprehensible and meaningful for students, professors need to take into consideration aspects such as the level of learners, influence of student's first language, context in which the expressions may be found, frequency of usage, connotation, lexical variations and cultural value.

Based on these aspects, the authors of the present study suggest the following procedures to introduce idioms in English lessons:

- Idioms should be introduced as early as possible.
- Most frequently used idioms should be taught first.
- Identical and similar idioms in the student's first language should be taught first while different or dissimilar idioms with difficult vocabulary should be left until last.
- Idioms are easier to understand if placed into a meaningful context.
- Highly colloquial idioms, slangs and vulgarisms should be avoided but not completely disregarded, as students may encounter those as well.
- Syntactically frozen idioms are easier to learn than syntactically flexible idioms.
- Organizing idioms into semantic fields will make them easier to learn.
- Idioms containing cultural aspects should be taught comparatively.



- The grammatical form, collocations, frequency, register, polysemy, connotation and cultural value of idioms should be explored for better understanding and higher retention.
- Idioms should be exposed and practice through different types of activities, both at a receptive and a productive level.

The second action proposed are some activities intended to enhance second and third-year students' idiomatic knowledge and with it, their intercultural communicative competence in order to train them to improve their performance as future professionals. All of the activities proposed meet the following requirements:

- They were designed according to educative and intercultural communication criteria.
- They may encourage students to be aware of and to develop an interest for their own culture and for foreign cultures.
- They can foster students' skills of observation, interpretation, and critical cultural awareness.
- They can help students to manage and mediate the cross-cultural clashes and misunderstandings which might arise when encountering idioms.

A sample of the activities proposed is provided below. All of them contain five sections: Topic, Objective, Technique, Time and Procedure.

#### Activity 1

- Topic: Acting idioms out
- Objective: Students should be able to recognize idioms and their meanings.
- Technique: Group work.
- Time: 30 minutes

Procedure: The professor splits the class into several small groups and assign each group a worksheet with several idioms from which they have to choose one and look up its meaning. Once they are clear on the meaning of the expression, they have to act it out for the rest of the groups to guess what idioms they are performing. The group with the highest number of correct guesses is the winner.

Some idioms that could work out well for this activity include:

- Crying over spilt milk
- All in the same boat
- Have one's head in the clouds
- When pigs might fly
- Wear one's heart on one's sleeve
- Let the cat out of the bag

#### Activity 2

- Topic: Idiomatic Research Project
- Objective: Students should be able to discuss about idioms, their meanings, usage, equivalents, and origins.



- Technique: Individual or pair work.
- Time: 5-10 minutes

Procedure: Alone or in pairs, the professor previously asks the students to carry out a research on a given idiom and be ready to give a 5 to 10-minute presentation in front of the class on the expression. In the presentation, they should:

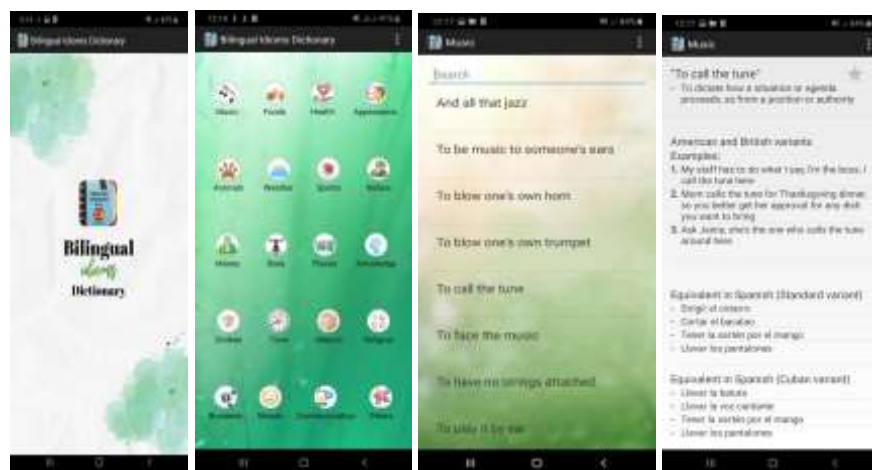
- Explain the meaning of the given expression.
- Provide examples of its usage.
- Find an equivalent idiom in Spanish and discuss the differences both expressions have.
- Comment on the origin of the expression.

### Activity 3

- Topic: Using idioms in meaningful conversations
- Objective: Students should be able to use idioms correctly while speaking
- Technique: Pair work.
- Time: 5-10 minutes

Procedure: The professor asks students to choose a partner to work with and hands out a worksheet with several idioms grouped in categories like “business and work”, “food and drinks”, “people’s appearance”, “feelings and emotions”, etc. The professor assigns one of these categories to each pair. Students are supposed to build a meaningful dialogue with the corresponding topic using as many idioms from the list as they can.

The last action proposed is the creation of a dictionary of idioms presented as an Android application for it to be more manageable and easier to consult. This dictionary app is intended for either students or professors, as it could be used as a tool for self-learning or as a teaching aid. It has an attractive interface, grouping idioms by semantic fields with the purpose of making easier to find specific entries and also, to learn new idioms with each search. Each entry contains not only idioms and their meanings, but also examples of its usage in different contexts and its possible equivalents in Spanish, as well as usage and cultural clarifications. It has more than 1000 entries and covers both American and British variants (Figure 1. Bilingual Idioms Dictionary App).



As stated in the introduction, this paper reports a study conducted in the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language at the Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” of Las Villas. The study was aimed at proposing a set of actions to enhance Intercultural Communicative Competence through the teaching of idioms in the second and fourth years of the previously mentioned degree course, in order to help students to become interculturally competent professionals. The system of actions proposed could be useful for training students in this respect and it will be greatly advantageous for professors to improve the quality of their English lessons. For further work, it will be advisable to conduct similar studies with other subjects of the aforementioned degree course in order to integrate contents dealing with ICC in all of them.

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### **Declaración de conflictos de interés y conflictos éticos**

Los autores declaramos que este manuscrito es original, no contiene elementos clasificados ni restringidos para su divulgación ni para la institución en la que se realizó y no han sido publicados con anterioridad, ni están siendo sometidos a la valoración de otra editorial.

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### **Contribuciones de los autores**

Autor 1 P T Dra. Mayra Rodríguez Ruiz: redacción del artículo, fundamentos teóricos, diseño de la metodología, revisión de todo el contenido.

Autor 2 Lic. Edith María Carmona Ramos: diseño del artículo, fundamentos teóricos metodológicos, revisión de todo el contenido.

