

Enhancing ESL Learners' Idiom Competence: Bridging the Gap between BICS and CALP

By

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Abstract

Second language learners at the college level, especially those who come from the mother tongue medium schools, seem to lack the knowledge and competence of 'figurative language' that marks fluency and creative language construction. This lack of knowledge of phrases or multi-word-units, in particular, most frequently occurring academic idioms, poses a number of difficulties for these learners in learning academic language which involves cognitive processes, complex relationships, and abstract concepts that are difficult to see, point to, touch, or act out (Zwiers, 2007). Consequently, these learners carry out academic language only with basic interpersonal communication skills in English (BICS) (Cummins, 1979). Hence, academic language in terms of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979) is absent. In this context, the present study emerges as an immediate need to bridge the gap between the learners' BICS and academic success by improving learners' CALP i.e. by integrating idioms as one of the core dimensions of academic language. The sample of the study was 100 first generation/disadvantaged adult learners from two Government English medium colleges. They were within the age group of 19-22 years. Learners belong to subject streams such as arts, science, and commerce. Research tools such as learner questionnaire, academic idiom checklist and informal interviews with learners were used to gather data. Learners were taught some useful idiom comprehension strategies to enhance their idiom competence. The data was interpreted qualitatively. A noticeable finding in the process of learning was that learners began thinking and reflecting on the authenticity of their guessing the meanings. Some learners, while guessing the meanings, even separated idioms into their constituent parts. These strategies of self-inquiry and analyzing can be seen as examples of the cognitive decision-making processes that the learners used to interact with the text and formulate and test their already known version of meanings of idioms against the new meanings.

Keywords: Enhancing, Academic Idioms, ESL Learner, Competence, Academic Language