

Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Awareness of Selected English Proverbs

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Abstract

Learning English as a foreign language does not refer to the mastery of the rules or merely the grammar of English. Rather, it refers to the full understanding of the semantic (and syntactic) concepts of that language, and employing this in real life situations. In this sense, the current research represents an attempt at investigating the Iraqi EFL Learners' recognition and production of selected English proverbs. The study is divided into five sections (an introduction, three sections and a conclusion). Evidence shows that English proverbs represent a very important component in learning English as a foreign language, and that Iraqi EFL learners face considerable difficulties in understanding and employing them in real life situations.

Key words : English Proverbs, Arabic Proverbs, Oxford English Dictionary of English Proverbs

المستخلص

ان تعلم اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية لا يشير الى (او يقتصر على) مجرد فهم وادراك قواعد اللغة الانكليزية فقط، بل يشير الى الفهم التام للمفردات النحوية والدلالية وتطبيقها عمليا في مواقف الحياة اليومية. لذلك، يهدف البحث الحالي الى دراسة الامثال وتطبيقاتها في اللغة الانكليزية، ودراسة اداء طلبة اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في فهم وتطبيق الامثال الانكليزية. يتكون البحث من مقدمة وثلاثة فصول وخاتمة، حيث تظهر الدراسة ان للأمثال الاثر البالغ في تعلم اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية، وان الطلبة العراقيين يواجهون صعوبة في فهم الامثال وتطبيقها في مواقف الحياة اليومية.

Section One : Introduction

This research is devoted to investigate the performance of Iraqi EFL learners with reference to English Proverbs. By definition, proverbs are short pithy sayings in common and recognized use that represent concrete fragments of wisdom . Evidence shows that proverbs (and preverbal expressions) represent a problematic area for EFL learners. Based on this, the present research aims at theoretically investigating the English proverbs and their syntactic and semantic features and practically studying the Iraqi EFL learners' performance with reference to English proverbs levels.

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in dealing with English proverbs in both recognition and production levels . The researcher employed a test of two questions, one for the recognition level and another for the production level. The research falls into five sections. The first section represents a short introduction to English proverbs, with reference to their main features and definitions. The second section is devoted to study the English proverbs in modern standard English (hence, MSE) , giving examples and illustrations to their employment and semantic significance. The third section is an attempt at investigating the predicted Arabic counterparts to the English proverbs, and their employment in contexts. Section four is devoted for the test, in which learners of English as a foreign language were tested in situations and sentences containing selected English proverbs that are devoted to study the Iraqi EFL learners' awareness of English proverbs in both recognition and production levels. Finally, the fifth section is devoted to the main conclusions , findings and recommendations of the present research.

Section Two: English proverbs

Proverbs take us to on extremely amazing world, in which a person travels through the knowledge and experience of other cultures and generations, in a very brilliant, charming and useful manner. As far as the etymology of the word "Proverb" is concerned ,it is noted that the English word "Proverb" has a Latin origin "i.e. Proverbium" which literally means an "old saying" . The Oxford English Dictionary, (hence OED) reveals that the word "Proverbium" indicates " a recognized set of words put forth , and a concise sentence that is characterized by its metaphorical and alliterative form" .Similarly, the Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (or WD) also shows this Latin origin. WD shows that proverbs conation or imply "a truth ascertained by

experience or observation ..". Thus, a proverb normally contains certain concepts of general acceptance as the above definitions declare (Kelso, 1914: 421). Furthermore, Heseltine (1960: VIII – IX) adds that "Preverbal utterances such as these transmitted by oral tradition long before they were put on paper were concrete fragments of wisdom and the result of observation. They were commonplaces in the oldest sense of the word, because they embodied universal truths". The Longman modern English Dictionary (shortly put as LD) points out that a proverb is "a brief familiar maxim of folk wisdom, usually compressed in form, often involving a bold image and frequently a jingle that catches the memory".

When dealing with the semantic component of English proverbs, it can be recognized that metaphor is one of the most significant figures of speech that is obviously found in proverbs .

2.2 The History of English proverbs:

Heseltine (1960: VIII) shows that the earliest traces of proverbial expressions belong to the first half of the eighth century and similar traces can also be observed in the earliest Anglo – Saxon literature of the same period . English proverbs began to flourish during the Renaissance period owing to the increased interest in ancient Latin and Greek literatures (which were rich in proverbs). As far as teaching English grammar and literature is concerned, Scholars found in proverbs what they needed. The peak and climax of English proverbs were during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I , when citing proverbs was recognized as a symbol of aristocracy. Thus, it was clearly seen that all scholars, writers, courtiers (and even the Queen Elizabeth herself) spoke, wrote and invented proverb, (ibid, XIV). This tendency was greatly enriched with the attempts of translating other nations' literatures on proverbs, as seen in the attempt of the English orientalist Edward Pockok (1604 – 1691) to translate and publish "Majmaa Al-Amthal" (The Collection of proverbs). (Sellheim, 1971: 13). Furthermore, the literatures of other nations in Europe were also transferred into English, that's why numerous English proverbs can be found to correspond to similar proverbs in other languages such as French, German, Italian, Spanish, etc. (cf. Gluski, 1971) in addition to Arabic.

Nowadays, proverbs still exist in the English language, but they have a rather lesser range of usage in comparison with the Renaissance.

Dictionaries of English proverbs are currently published, focusing on their significance in learning English as a foreign language .

It can also be noted that English celebrities participated in /involving more English proverbs, as in Shakespear's "All that lives must die" , " All's well that ends well ", or "When you are at Rome, do as Rome does" (Kelso, 1914: 413).

2.3 Types of English Proverbs:

It is noted that proverbs in English flourished in a particular period of history and deteriorated in another, they generally reveal the tendency to imply or cover wise sayings of various meanings and themes, such as: the proverbs :

- ' Tell a woman she is fair and she will soon turn fool ', (Which implies a criticism of women).
- ' Half a loaf is better than no bread ',
(Which is an advice on satisfaction).
- ' After dinner sit a while, after supper walk a mile ', (Which gives an advice on health).
- ' A friend is need is a friend indeed ',
(Which is an advice on faithful friends).
- ' A bird in hand is worth two in the bush ',
(Which implies satisfaction).

As for as form is concerned, English proverbs can be classified into two main types " versual and prosaic". Versual proverbs are those having rhyme and rhythm. These can be illustrated as follows:

- Thomas Gray's: ' Where ignorance is bless 'tis folly to be wise '
- ' East or west, home is best '.
- ' What can't be cured, must be endured '.
- ' There is many a slip, between the cup and the lip '. (Oxford Dictionary of English proverbs) (henceforth ODEP)

Prosaic proverbs , on the other hand, are larger in number than versual ones and can be illustrated in the following:

- ' If the blind led the blind, both shall fall into the ditch '. Mat. 15. 14
(ibid)

- Chaucer's: strike while the iron is hot. (ibid)

From the above illustrations, it can be easily noted that proverbs cover all aspects of life without any exception. That's why learning English proverbs is a crucial and basic component for learning English as a foreign language, because learning a particular language is basically understanding the underlying meaning of sentences for the sake of best communication levels.

2.4 Basic characteristics of English proverbs

2.4.1 Wisdom

This is defined in the OED as the "capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life". Thus a proverb is (in most cases) a piece of wisdom.

2.4.2 Popularity

It refers to intimacy and familiarity of the people with a given proverb. Thus, no utterance can be judged as a proverb unless it carries the public approval.

2.4.3 Currency

This is an indispensable feature of proverbs, whether in English or any other language. In this sense , popularity seems as the immediate acceptance that a particular saying gains among the folk.

2.4.4 Didacticity

The process of teaching other virtues and urging them to follow these virtues requires the employment of didactic methods. Proverbs are surely among these methods, as they (i. e. proverbs) are full of wisdom and experience.

2.4.5 Universality

In general, it can be argued that proverbs are of universal use. All cultures of the world (the developed and the primitive ones) . In this sense, Kelso (1914: 414) mentions that "Non – literary people, the savages of primitive cultures, have had their proverbs, which have been learned only through direct intercourse with the people". Fergal (1995: 189) states that "proverbs of one culture may converge or diverge with those of other cultures". For example, the proverb "Forbidden fruit is sweet" (ODEP) corresponds with the Arabic proverb "كُلُّ مَمْنُوعٍ مَتَّبُوعٌ" (Lit. Whatever forbidden is followed). Similarly, the English proverb "Every Jack has his

Jill" (ODEP) corresponds with the Arabic proverb "وافقَ شَنَ طَبَقَةً" (Lit. Shan agrees with Tabaqah). In addition, the English proverb "As they Sow, so let them reap" (ODPEP) has its counterpart in Arabic "كما تزرع تحصد" (Lit. As you sow, you will reap).

Section Three : Proverbs in Modern Standard Arabic

3.1 Origin of Arabic proverbs

As far as Arabic proverbs are concerned, it is noted that most of old Arabic proverbs arose in correspondence with certain notable events that occurred in the history of a tribe or some considerable experience or event (Kelso, 1914: 413). The Arabic proverbs

- إقتلوني ومَالِكاً (Lit. kill me and Malik), was a statement said by Abdullah I bn Az-zubair in Al-Jamal (a battle) while fighting someone called Malik. Furthermore, some Arabic proverbs occur with mythical stories which are told by animals, as in:
- إِنَّمَا أَكَلْتُ يَوْمَ أَكَلَ الثَّورُ الْأَبْيَضَ (Lit. I was eaten when the white bull was eaten), which is told by a bull.

This section is devoted to study the Arabic counterparts to the English proverbs. Hence the word "mathal" is employed as a basic counterpart to the English proverbs.

3.2 Quranic Parable and Arabic proverbs

Despite its numerous occurrence in the Holy Quran, the word "mathal" is never intended to function as a proverb. It, mostly, meant other linguistic functions as "parable, example, similitude, likeness, etc". The Quranic mathal, hence, differs from Arabic proverbs as in:

﴿مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي اسْتَوْقَدَ نَاراً فَلَمَّا أَضَاءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُ ذَهَبَ اللَّهُ بِنُورِهِمْ وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِي ظُلُمَاتٍ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ﴾

Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire, when it lighted all around him God took away their light And left them in utter darkness so they could not see. (Ali, 1980).

Al-Tikritiy (1984: 18) agrees with the above – mentioned concept stating clearly that Quranic parables are completely irrelevant to proverbs.

- قالت امرأة عجوز فقيرة للأمير: إني لأشكو إليك قلة الجرذان في البيت! (وتعني قلة المال حيث ليس لديها طعام).

- An old woman to the prince: I complain to you that no rats are in this house.

Where the woman wanted to tell the prince that she suffers poverty that there's no any piece of bread in her house, consequently no rats will enter into it. (Al - Jurjaniy, 2002:112)

Also,

- نصحت محمدا بان يضرب الحديد وهو ساخن.

- I advised Mohammad to strike while the iron is hot.

where the intended meaning of the proverb is "to act at the right moment" (Salih, 2014:143)

Section Four : The Test

4.1 Background:

In order to reach the required aims of the present research, a test has been made to identify the aspects of difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL students in recognizing and producing sentences with proverbs to diagnose the causes of their errors. The test consists of two questions. The first question measures the students' responses on the recognition level. The second question, however, is specialized to measure their responses on the production level. The first question includes twenty – five items that are designed to measure the students' ability to recognize or underline the English proverbs in the given sentences. The second question contains twenty – five items that are intended to measure the students' ability to employ selected proverbs in given sentences.

The test has been applied to a sample of thirty Iraqi EFL university student . They are supposed to have a great deal of information about the proverbs in English. It is supposed that students have already become aware of these expressions in their syllabus .

In this section, an attempt is made to present the results of the students' performance regarding the test. The degree to which they master the English proverbs is, thus, conditioned by their correct responses.

As mentioned above, the first question of the test is constructed to measure the students' performance at the recognition level. In brief, the students' total performance of question one is presented respectively in the following table:

Table (1): Subjects' Total performance at the recognition level in Question (1)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
1	425	34	780	62.4	45	3.6

As Table (1) shows, the total number of correct responses in question (1) is (425, 34%), while the incorrect responses (in addition to the avoided ones) is (825, 66%). The rate of the correct responses reflects the subjects' inability in (1) identifying the English proverbs and (2) in matching between sentences or situations and the adequate proverbs to be used in the first question of the test. The rate of the incorrect responses, indeed, reflects that some of them have encountered difficulty in identifying the proverbs employed in this question.

As for the question of the subjects' performance at the production level, table (2) summarizes the results:

Table (2): Subjects' Total performance at the production level in Question (2)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
2	325	26	895	71.6	30	2.4

Depending on the results presented in Table (2), it can be concluded that most of the subjects are incompetent in (1) identifying the intended meanings of the English proverbs and (2) in employing the proverbs in written sentences because most of their responses to the second question are incorrect (925, 74%) when compared with their correct ones (325, 26%).

Finally the subjects' performance of the entire test with respect to the recognition and production level can be revealed in the following table:

Table (3): Subjects' Total performance at the Recognition production levels

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
1	425	34	780	62.4	45	3.6
2	325	26	895	71.6	30	2.4

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Findings

In this research, it is concluded that proverbs in modern standard English are very important in everyday spoken and written language. Thus, due attention must be given to their study and meaning. In addition, it is found that English proverbial expressions reveal, in many cases, differences from their counterparts in Arabic. According to the results of the test, it is found that Iraqi undergraduate students face difficulties in recognizing and

producing the English proverbs. Thus, such expressions must be adequately studied. EFL teachers and lectures must pay due attention to the study of these constructions in order to help students thoroughly understand and produce these expressions in their spoken and written English.

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The Test

Q1: Underline the English proverbs in these sentences .

1- X: Why did you turn down that job offer when you don't have anything concrete in hand at the moment?

Y: Well, I'm confident I'll land one of the two jobs I interviewed for last week. And they're better than this one.

X: In my opinion, you should've taken it. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.

2- X: The turkey isn't cooked well because the oven is not functioning well.

Y: Well, it's the case of a bad workman blaming his tools.

3- I'm glad you finally got here, even though your car had a flat tire on the way. Oh well, all's well that ends well.

4- X: I want to be a movie star when I grow up.

Y: Film industry looks good from the distance, but it has its own problems. Remember, all that glitters is not gold.

5- Switch from chips to apples for your snack. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

6-You've got entangled in few cases of fraud. That's a result of your illegal get-rich-quick methods. You should have known as you sow, so you shall reap.

7- I know curiosity killed the cat, but I can't stop the investigation until I know where the donations are really going.

8-I've to prepare for my campaign. Y: But you haven't been nominated yet. Don't count your chickens before they hatch.

9-Almost entire revenue of the Company comes from the Facebook platform. If Facebook tweaks its policies in future, the Company may sink. They shouldn't put all their eggs in the same basket.

10-X: Did you get the compensation for damage to your vehicle?

Y: I was hoping for \$2,000, but the judge awarded only \$800.

X: Well, half a loaf is better than none.

Q2 : Put the following proverbs in meaningful sentences .

1-Strike while the iron is hot .

2-A friend in need is a friend indeed.

3-East or west, home is best.

4-Every Jack has his Jill.

5-After dinner sit a while, after supper walk a mile.

6-What can't be cured, must be endured.

7-Tell a woman she is fair and she will soon turn fool.

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الاساس/ اربيل للمدة ١٠-١١ شباط ٢٠٢٠



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8-When you are at Rome, do as Rome does.

9-Forbidden fruit is sweet.

10-It's no use crying over spilt milk.