

Linguo-Cultural Basis and Strategies of Teaching English Phraseology to Language 2 Students at Higher Schools

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Abstract

The paper considers phraseology as a multifaceted linguo-cultural phenomenon which represents one of the most challenging tasks in teaching English as a second language (ESL) at higher schools. Phraseological units constitute expressive resources of the vocabulary with partly or fully transferred meaning reflecting conventional metaphorical cognition of the world that, if used with care, ornament and enrich the language. Numerous works have been devoted to the study of their semantic, cognitive, linguo-cultural and functional aspects in different languages. Much attention was paid to their interpretation in various socio-cultural contexts and genre types of discourse. However, all these papers are of scholarly nature while Language 2 (L2) teachers and learners experience the lack of summarizing works which would make both corresponding processes easier and more successful. The present paper offers a multilateral and comprehensive analysis of English phraseological units disclosing those linguistic and cultural peculiarities on the basis of which some strategies of their teaching to L2 students at higher schools have been worked out.

Key words: Intercultural communicative competence; Phraseology; Stable multiword expressions with partly or fully transferred meaning; Teaching strategies

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INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges faced by universities in the 21st century is to prepare their graduates for effective international collaboration that requires high degree of communicative competence which will help them cope easily with multicultural work situations. Therefore, cross-cultural awareness has become the focus of teaching English together with phonetics, vocabulary and grammar as the set of these components builds a solid foundation for language proficiencies and cross-cultural communicative competence of L2 learners (Byram, 1997; Dema & Moeller, 2012; Frank, 2013; Nugent & Catalano, 2015; Liton & Qaid, 2016; Kirvalidze, 2017; 2019; Samnidze, 2017). Many of them postulate that it is of vital importance for foreign language teachers to create an efficient intercultural speaker who would exhibit certain skills, competences and knowledge (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). In this respect, teaching L2 phraseology becomes particularly relevant as employing idiomatic expressions in a discourse serves as an indicator of the speaker's efficiency in using a foreign language. L2 students find it difficult to master foreign phraseologisms because of their figurativeness which requires a vast amount of cultural and linguistic knowledge. It is unanimously acknowledged that "native speakers have a lifetime of exposure to their own language and culture that helps them understand figurative speech and make an abundant use of idiomatic expressions spontaneously in their own speech (Kirvalidze, 2020, p.5141)". However, the complex nature of these lingual units, predetermined by their culture-based figurativeness, structural and functional-semantic peculiarities, makes teaching and learning processes of L2 phraseology problematic and challenging.

The present paper offers an integrated method of teaching English phraseological units to L2 students of higher schools, aiming to reveal their multifaceted nature and peculiarities that form a theoretical basis for working

out some strategies that will facilitate both their teaching and learning processes.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PAPER: LINGUO-CULTURAL ESSENCE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AND MAIN TRENDS IN THEIR RESEARCH

The paper considers phraseology as a multifaceted linguo-cultural phenomenon which represents one of the most challenging tasks in teaching English as a second language (TESL) at higher schools. Phraseological units constitute expressive resources of the vocabulary that, if used with care, ornament and enrich the language. The term “phraseology” was introduced by a prominent Swiss scholar of French origin Ch. Bally at the beginning of the 20-th century. However, the first to raise the question of phraseology as a linguistic subject was academician V. Vinogradov, whose classification of Russian phraseologisms stimulated their extensive research in other languages (Vinogradov, 1977). A considerable contribution to the study of English phraseology, presenting it as an independent branch of linguistics, was made by A. Kunin (1970), who focused on different aspects of phraseological units. Moreover, Kunin was the first to compile and publish an *English-Russian Dictionary of Phraseological Units* (1967) containing about 20 000 entries. His influence on the development of the theory and practice of world phraseography is great. It is particularly evident in the papers of such outstanding scholars as Cowie (1998), Gläser (1998), Naciscione (2014) and others. Since then much has been done in this field. In 1999, linguists from European countries founded the European Society of Phraseology (“Europhras”) which organizes annual international conferences, thus facilitating worldwide cooperation among phraseologists.

Today phraseology is reviewed as the most colourful and expressive layer of vocabulary which reflects vivid scenes of the nation’s customs and traditions, prejudices, recollections of its past history, fairy-tales, etc. In the expressions – *a dark horse*, *a bull in a china shop*, *a white elephant*, etc. – *a dark horse* is actually not a horse but a person about whom no one knows anything definite or what can be expected from him; the idiom *a bull in a china shop* describes a clumsy person; *a white elephant* represents a valuable object which involves great expense or trouble for its owner.

One of the main trends in the research of phraseology is comparative studies, predetermined by the bilingual situation in most countries of the world due to the role of English as a lingua franca at a global level. Numerous works are devoted to the study of semantic, cognitive, linguo-cultural and functional aspects of idiomatic expressions of various languages, aiming to define their

common and specific features (Demyanenko, 2003; Venzhynovych, 2006; Burger et al. 2007; Álvarez, 2008. Cf. also papers on Arsenteva, 2014).

However, all these papers are of scholarly nature, devoted to the study of some particular aspect of phraseological units while ESL teachers and learners experience the lack of summarizing works which would make both corresponding processes easier and more successful. Below we offer a brief multilateral analysis of English phraseological units aiming to disclose their linguistic and cultural peculiarities in a systematic and comprehensive way.

2. DIFFERENTIATING FEATURES OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AND FREE WORD-GROUPS

In modern linguistics, there is a considerable confusion concerning the terminology which is associated with phraseological units, or idioms, as they are called by most western scholars. There are some other terms denoting the same linguistic phenomenon, such as *stable multi-word expressions*, *set-expressions*, *set-phrases*, *phrases*, *fixed word-groups*, *collocations*, etc. The confusion in the terminology reflects insufficiency of the criteria by which phraseological units differ from free word-groups and marginal cases, which share with phraseological units their structural stability but lack their semantic unity and figurativeness (for instance, *to go to school*, *to go by bus*, *to commit suicide*, etc.).

There are two major criteria for distinguishing between phraseological units and free word-groups: semantic and structural. **Semantically**, phraseological units are characterized by the metaphorical, transferred meaning and its unity. If we compare two widespread examples – 1) *I’m told they are inviting more American professors to this university. Isn’t it rather carrying coals to Newcastle?* and 2) *This cargo ship is carrying coal to Liverpool.* – we would see that they both contain the identical phrase – *is carrying coal*. In the second example it is used in its direct meaning, reflecting the process of taking some hard, black substance from one place to another, whereas the context of the first example shows that the same phrase has nothing to do with coal or its transportation, its meaning fully transferred as the meanings of its constituents merge to produce an entirely new meaning. In the Anglophone culture *to carry coals to Newcastle* means to take something to a place where it is not needed because a large amount of it is already there. Thus, phraseological expressions are characterized by semantic unity conveying a single concept whereas in free word-groups each meaningful component stands for a separate concept and each time they are built up anew according to the situation or context.

Structural criterion for distinguishing phraseologisms from free word-groups implies the structural invariability

of the former as they are used as ready-made units with fixed membership and order. Structural invariability of phraseological units finds its expression in a number of restrictions.

The first is restriction in substitution. A phraseological unit does not permit any substitution of its meaningful components without destroying its semantics, whereas in free word-groups substitution does not lead to any serious consequences. For instance, the idiom *to give somebody a cold shoulder* means to treat somebody coldly, to ignore or cut him, while *to give somebody a warm shoulder* or *a cold elbow* would make no sense at all.

The second restriction concerns the introduction of additional components into the structure of a phraseological unit. In free word-groups such changes can be made without affecting the general meaning of the utterance (cf.: *This big ship is carrying a large cargo of coal to the port of Liverpool.*), whereas in phraseological units (such as – *to carry coal to Newcastle*) no additional components can be introduced.

The third type of structural restrictions in phraseological units implies their grammatical invariability. Students often make a typical mistake by using the plural form in the unit *from head to foot*, as they are apt to use the plural form *feet* in this phrase. Though, there are some exceptions to this rule. For instance, one *can build a castle in the air*, but also *castles*; a discreditable or embarrassing family secret is described as *a skeleton in the cupboard*, the first component being frequently used in the plural form, as in *They have skeletons in every cupboard*, etc.

3. DIFFERENT CLASSIFICATIONS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

Linguists differentiate phraseological units according to various criteria. Below we offer a brief analysis of those classifications that seem more relevant for teaching purposes.

Thematic classification. It is the oldest, traditional classification of phraseological units based on their content. This approach is widely used in English and American guides to idioms and phrase books in which idioms are classified according to the particular sphere of human activity, of natural phenomena, etc. L.P. Smith (1925), the British scholar, studied a great number of idioms used by different groups of people, that are thematically associated with the realia, phenomena and conditions of their occupations. Many of them are associated with body parts, animals and birds, agriculture, sports, arts, and so on. Smith writes, that “The human head, with its hair, its eyes and ears and nose and mouth, is the source of more than two hundred idioms (Ibid., p. 279)”. Below, we offer some of the thematic groups of idioms:

Body parts:

- If you are feeling nervous, you might say *you have butterflies in your stomach*.

- If someone wants you to be quiet, they may tell you *to zip your lip*.

- If something is teasing you, *they are pulling your leg*.

- If you want someone to know that you are listening carefully, you can say that *you're all ears*.

Animals:

- If you need to be brave or bold about something, you need *to take the bull by the horns*.

- If someone is afraid of something, they might be called *a scared cat*.

- If you cannot sit still, you might say *the person has ants in his pants*.

- If you are very hungry, you might say that *you are so hungry you could eat a horse*.

Colours:

- If you tell something that is not true and won't hurt anyone, you *tell a white lie*.

- If you are jealous of something or somebody, *you are green*.

- If you are feeling sad, *you are feeling blue*.

- If something really pleases you, *you are tickled pink*.

Etymological classification. It is culture-based classification of phraseological units according to the sources of their origin. It is not surprising at all that the Anglophone culture has preserved many idioms depicting various scenes of naval life that laid the cognitive foundation for the metaphorical transformation of their meanings. For instance:

To be all at sea = to be unable to understand; to be in a state of ignorance or bewilderment about something. You can [say](#) that *someone is all at sea* when they are in a state of [confusion](#) or [uncertainty](#). British scholar V.H. Collins remarks: “The metaphor in this idiom is that of a boat tossed about out of control, with its occupants not knowing where they are (Collins, 1972, p.23)”.

To be in the same boat with somebody = to be in a situation in which people share the same difficulties and dangers. People say *they are in the same boat* when they share the same [unpleasant](#) situation. The metaphor here is that of passengers in the life-boat of a sunken ship.

To sail under false colours = to act or operate under the disguise of one's true nature or intentions; sometimes, to pose as a friend and, at the same time, have hostile intentions. The metaphor in this case is based on the image of an enemy/ or a pirate ship sailing under the national flag of its intended prey.

To weather (to ride out) the storm = to overcome difficulties without being harmed or damaged too much.

To sink or swim = to fail or succeed (e.g. *It is a case of sink or swim*).

All these phrases witness that the memories of the sea adventures are still alive in the Anglophone culture and psychology. They revive the distant past of pirates,

sea battles and other naval episodes. The analysis of the empirical material enables us to conclude that the expressiveness of phraseological units greatly depend on their ability to create two images at once – direct and metaphorical. For instance, in the case of – *to weather / ride out the storm* – two images arise simultaneously: that of a ship safely coming out of the storm, and that of a man overcoming his troubles and difficulties.

Classification of phraseology according to the degree of meaning transformation. In linguistic literature it is known as Vinogradov's classification. This scholar differentiates phraseological units according to the degree of meaning transformation into three classes: phraseological combinations, phraseological unities, and phraseological fusions (Vinogradov, 2007). Phraseological combination is a word-group with a partly changed meaning which is clearly motivated, as it can be easily deduced from the meanings of its components – one word is used figuratively while the rest retain their direct meaning. For instance, *to deliver a lecture, to wage war, to commit suicide*, etc. The components of phraseological combinations preserve not only their semantic meaning, but all their grammatical forms. For instance, *to clench one's fist* is a phraseological combination and it is possible to say – *He clenched his fists/has clenched his fists*, etc.

Phraseological unity is a semantically indivisible unit the meaning of which is not formed by the sum of the meanings of its components but it can be inferred from the image created metaphorically by them. For instance, in the phrase *to stick to one's guns*, which means to be true to one's views or convictions, the image is that of a gunner who does not desert his gun even if a battle seems almost lost. In the idiom *to catch/clutch at a straw* which implies the idea that, when in extreme danger, one should avail themselves of even the slightest chance of rescue, the image is that of a drowning man who is making desperate attempts to stay alive. Other examples of phraseological unities are: *to lock the stable door after the horse is stolen* = to take precautions too late; *to ride the high horse* = to behave in a superior, overbearing way; *the last drop/straw* = the final culminating circumstance that makes a situation unendurable, and so on.

Phraseological fusions are word-groups with a fully changed demotivated meaning as it cannot be inferred from the meanings of their components. Therefore, fusions are the most idiomatic of all types of phraseological units. For instance, *to pull one's leg* = to deceive; *at sixes and sevens* = in confusion; *once in a blue moon* = very seldom; *to cry for the moon* = to demand unreal; *to show the white feather* = to show cowardice; *neck and crop* = entirely, altogether, thoroughly, etc. However, it is obvious that the border-line between unities and fusions is vague and even subjective as one and the same phraseological unit may appear motivated to one person and demotivated to another. And this is predetermined by the degree of one's

command of the language and the knowledge of its history and culture.

4. BILINGUAL APPROACH TO TEACHING L2 PHRASEOLOGY, ITS COGNITIVE AND ETHNO-CULTURAL BASES

The Acquisition of English phraseological units by L2 students requires a vast amount of cultural and linguistic knowledge. As we have already mentioned, native speakers have a lifetime of exposure to their own language and culture that helps them understand figurative speech and use idiomatic expressions without any difficulties in everyday discourse. However, the complex nature of these lingual units, predetermined by their culture-based figurativeness as well as structural and semantic peculiarities, makes their teaching and learning processes problematic and challenging.

Figurative speech relies heavily on cognitive metaphor to convey its message, and vice versa, metaphor often relies heavily on culture for its meaning (Kiravaldze, 2008, p. 127). American scholars Lakoff and Johnson worked out a theory according to which people use cognitive metaphors to perceive the world around them conventionally by making sense of abstract concepts through the terms of other concepts that are more concrete (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They claim that cognitive metaphors are based mainly on two sources: the environment in which we live, and culture. Environmental metaphors have to do with our physiological makeup or general truths present everywhere. Many of them are universal as the things that are common to us all tend to be viewed in similar metaphorical terms. Unlike them, culture-based metaphors are motivated by ethno-cultural and psychological vision of the world and values that vary from culture to culture. As a result, they are difficult to understand and need to be explained to those who have different worldviews because of their own culture and ethnic psychology. To substantiate this theory with empirical material, we would refer to a recent research on comparative analysis of English and Georgian phraseological units conducted by Prof. Nino Kirvalidze (2020). The results of her study showed that, despite great typological and cultural differences between these two languages, both of them share a considerable number of identical and semi-identical phraseological units that are motivated by the universal nature of mental, cognitive processes and sense perception of the environment by humans.

Identical phraseological units of the English and the Georgian languages coincide both in meaning and form; that is, the same meaning is explicated by the same lexical entities in both languages. For instance, if something is very near you and you are close to finding it, in both

languages you may say *It is right under your nose* / ცხვირწინ გაქვს რაიმე. If someone is crying but the tears aren't real, they are *crying crocodile tears* / ნიანგის ცრემლებით ტირის. If someone talks too much, they *have a big mouth* / გრძელი ენა აქვს. If you don't want to tell someone where you heard information from, you can say that *a little bird told you* / ჩიტმა ამბავი მოგიტანათ, and so on.

Semi-identical phraseological units coincide in meaning while they differ in form by some lexemes. For instance, if you want to save time and get two things done at the same time, the English say – *You can kill two birds with one stone*, while the Georgians express the same meaning in a similar but a bit different way – *მოკლა ორი კურდღელი ერთი გასროლით* (*to kill two rabbits with one shot*). When the rain is falling in torrents, English-speaking population use the idiomatic expression – *It rains cats and dogs*, whereas in a similar situation Georgians employ the phrase *კოკისპირულად წვიმს*, which literally means – *Rain is pouring as from a pitcher or a jug*. Therefore, *torrential rain* and Georgian *კოკისპირული წვიმა* [*kokispiruli tsvima*] can be regarded as semi-identical phrases. If something happens rarely, the English say – *It happens once in a blue moon*, while in Georgian the same idea is expressed by the semi-identical phrase – *ათასში ერთხელ*, which literally means *once in a thousand years*. Thus, semi-identical phraseologisms coincide in meaning but differ in form by some lexical entities.

However, the majority of English and Georgian phraseologisms are represented by unique phrases that embody ethno-cultural and psychological peculiarities of their creators. For instance, if someone is extremely poor, the British say *They are as poor as a church mouse*. If someone accidentally reveals a secret, they say *He let the cat out of the bag*. The idiom *at sixes and sevens* is used to describe a state of confusion or disarray. The phrase *between the devil and the deep blue sea* is an idiom referring to a dilemma, a choice between two undesirable situations. If you *give someone the cold shoulder*, you deliberately ignore them. The research showed that these phraseological units don't have equivalents in the Georgian language, and vice versa, there are a lot of idiomatic expressions that are purely Georgian, motivated by the country's cultural traditions and ethno-psychology. The phrase – *შენს პირს შაქარი!* (*Sugar to your mouth!*) – is used by Georgians when a person gets good news and wishes it to be true. This idiom comes from the time when a messenger would get sweets from the addressee upon delivering good news as a gesture of gratitude. The Georgian phrase – *მეცამეტე გოჭი* (*a thirteenth piglet*) – refers to a person who tries to meddle into a conversation to state his/her opinion or attract attention, even though no one asked them to do so. This expression derives from the fact that a mother pig usually has 12 breasts to feed her piglets, and when a 13th piglet is born, there is no

spare one left and the piglet has to make efforts to get it. When it's raining on a sunny day, Georgians say – *მზე პირს იბანს* (*The sun is washing its face*). The phrase *არც მწვადი დაწვა და არც მამფური* (*Burn neither the steak, nor the facilitate*) refers to a person who is moderate both in actions and speech, and so on (Kirvalidze 2020, pp. 5141-5150).

Many researches have been carried out on metaphorical phrases of different languages and how they affect L2 acquisition (Arsenteva, 2014). The findings indicate that the acquisition of L2 phraseological units greatly depends on the degree of similarity existing between these verbal entities in native and target languages. People with shared or similar cultures understand and use these expressions without much trouble, whereas people with different cultural background have to make special efforts to learn and utilize them in their own speech. Therefore, bilingual approach based on the cognition and sense perception of the environment as well as ethno-cultural and psychological peculiarities of their creators have become of paramount importance both in teaching and learning processes of L2 phraseology.

5. STRATEGIES OF TEACHING ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY TO L2 STUDENTS AT HIGHER SCHOOLS

In this section we offer some teaching strategies that are aimed to facilitate the acquisition of English phraseological units by L2 students at higher schools and enhance their cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. We assume, these strategies might appear universal for many languages and cultures.

- Introduce new phraseological units only with the vocabulary and grammatical structures that are already known to your students. If the students have to labour too much with the new vocabulary and sentence structure of a given expression in addition to learning its figurative, metaphorical meaning, the chances of its acquisition by L2 students are greatly reduced.

While introducing new expressions, you may refer to a few semantically related expressions that students already know. For instance, if you are presenting the idiomatic expression *hot under the collar*, and the students are already familiar with such phrases as *hot-headed*, *hot-tempered*, *quick-tempered* or *cool-headed* and *cool-tempered*, you can reintroduce them along with the new one. This method will help L2 students both to infer the meaning of the new expression and strengthen their previously acquired knowledge.

Present new phraseological expressions in a suitable situation or context. Take advantage of the moment when a topic comes up naturally in class – introduce a new phrase and explain why you used it. Moreover, some phraseological units are characterized by semantic duality.

One cannot define for sure the meaning of such phrases in isolation from the context. For instance, depending upon the context, the idiom *to sit on the fence* can be used both as a free word-combination (cf.: *The boy sat on the fence whistling.*), and as an idiomatic expression (cf.: *The chairman sat on the fence*, implying that he remained neutral and did not take sides in a dispute).

- Most difficult for L2 students is the acquisition of culture-based phraseological expressions the origin of which is unfamiliar to the learners. Discuss the cultural background of such phrases as, when students are acquainted with their origin, they are more likely to understand and use them correctly. So, provide your students with the necessary knowledge to make inferences and grasp the meaning of an idiom. For instance, unless the students are acquainted with the game of baseball, they would not be able to grasp the meaning of such idioms as *Hit it out of the park* which means to do/perform something extraordinarily well (an allusion to a baseball that implies *hitting a ball* so hard that it flies over the spectators' seats and lands outside the stadium); or *Strike out*, the meaning of which is to fail at something (again an allusion to American baseball denoting the failure of a batter to put the ball in play). Therefore, it is advisable to learn about the cultural basis of phraseological expressions before teaching them in class.

- Use different methods that will help students retain and activate idiomatic expressions. Using imagery, for instance, provokes multisensory input and provides L2 learners with stimuli that can be easily absorbed. Image related many activities can be easily incorporated into presenting idioms. The Internet offers a great choice of illustrated idioms that will facilitate their acquisition.

- Make students use phraseological units frequently as the repeated use of vocabulary and structures in different contexts is essential for gaining communicative competence. By presenting the material in various ways, you can bring your students into closer contact with that material, thus increasing their chances for achieving fluency.

- To develop L2 students' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence via phraseology, teachers should refer to their different classifications according to thematic and etymological criteria, as well as to the degree of metaphorisation of their meaning and the similarity existing between English idiomatic expressions and that of the students' native ones. Such groupings of phraseological units make it easier for students to understand and remember them.

- Make students learn and use phraseologisms in their speech by employing such methods as using the Internet, finding examples of the given expressions in short videos and stories, songs, anecdotes or sketches, and role-play them in class. This will help L2 students master the language and gain fluency in using figurative speech.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research enable us to conclude, that, despite typological and cultural differences between languages, many of them share a considerable number of identical and semi-identical phraseological units that are motivated by the universal nature of mental, cognitive processes and sense perception of the environment by humans. Identical phraseological units coincide both in meaning and form; that is, the same meaning is explicated by the same lexical means in both English and L2 students' native one. Correspondingly, semi-identical phraseologisms coincide in meaning but differ in form by some lexical entities. Therefore, their meaning is easily understood by non-native speakers. However, the majority of phraseological units are represented by unique idiomatic expressions that reflect ethno-cultural and psychological peculiarities of the world-view of their creators. The less related a metaphoric concept used in English idiom is to that of the L2 students' own one, the less likely they are able to understand, learn and use such expressions. Because of this, ESL teachers must provide themselves with the methods and knowledge necessary to help their students understand and use phraseology in everyday speech effectively.

When teaching English phraseology to L2 students at higher schools, teachers should present new material using various strategies such as: avoiding the vocabulary and grammatical structures that are unfamiliar to students; reintroducing and revising previously acquired phraseological units that are related to the new one; encouraging mental imagery conveyed in idiomatic expressions thus helping students to grasp their meaning; discussing socio-cultural background of culture-based idioms that facilitates to infer their meaning; developing L2 students' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence by referring to different classifications of phraseological units according to thematic and etymological criteria, the degree of metaphorisation of their meaning and the similarity existing between English idioms and that of the students' native ones. And finally, L2 teachers should make their students learn and use English phraseology in their own speech by employing various activities that can help them master the language and gain fluency.

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