

Strategies for teaching idioms in EFL

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UČITELJSKI FAKULTET
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Eni Batinić

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Zagreb, srpanj, 2022.

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SUMMARY

This thesis deals with strategies used for teaching figurative expressions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The aim is to show how figurative expressions are taught using the cognitive linguistic approach and how implementing different strategies can facilitate understanding and remembering idioms. A lesson plan containing various strategies that can be used to teach idioms to young EFL learners is presented. All the activities include idioms connected to happiness and sadness which serve as illustrative examples. Learners are taught using different strategies and techniques so that they can better understand idioms and their meanings.

Since idioms are considered to be difficult for young learners to comprehend, they are not taught in lower primary classes. The absence of figurative language in the EFL classroom does not enable learners to think figuratively even though they can do so from a very young age. Teaching figurative expressions in the EFL classroom using the cognitive linguistic approach has a positive impact on different skills that learners obtain while learning a foreign language. The role of the teacher is important in the selection of idioms. Idioms can be understood more easily if they are grouped by meaning or conceptual metaphors. By using different strategies the teacher helps learners understand idioms more easily and remember them. The lesson plan presented in this thesis can be used to incorporate figurative language in the EFL classroom.

Key words: teaching strategies, idioms, EFL, lower primary, cognitive linguistics

SAŽETAK

Ovaj diplomski rad bavi se strategijama poučavanja figurativnih izraza u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika. Cilj je pokazati kako se figurativni izrazi poučavaju s gledišta kognitivne lingvistike i kako primjena različitih strategija može pomoći razumijevanju i pamćenju frazema. Predstavljena je nastavna priprema koji uključuje različite strategije koje se mogu koristiti u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika u nižim razredima osnovne škole. Sve aktivnosti uključuju frazeme povezane sa srećom i tugom koji služe kao ilustrativni primjeri. Učenici se poučavaju korištenjem različitih strategija i tehnika kako bi bolje razumjeli frazeme i njihova značenja.

Budući da se smatra da je djeci teško razumjeti frazeme, oni se ne poučavaju u nižim razredima osnovne škole. Nedostatak figurativnog jezika u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika onemogućuje učenicima da razmišljaju metaforički iako su sposobni već od najranije dobi. Poučavanje figurativnih izraza u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika primjenom kognitivnolingvističkog pristupa ima pozitivan utjecaj na različite vještine koje učenici stječu tijekom učenja stranog jezika. Pri odabiru frazema važna je uloga učitelja. Frazemi će se bolje razumjeti ako se grupiraju prema značenju ili konceptualnim metaforama. Koristeći različite strategije, nastavnik učenicima pomaže da lakše razumiju frazeme koji se poučavaju i upamte ih. Nastavna priprema prikazana u ovom diplomskom radu može se koristiti za uključivanje figurativnog jezika u nastavu engleskog kao stranog jezika.

Ključne riječi: strategije poučavanja, frazemi, engleski kao strani jezik, niži razredi osnovne škole, kognitivna lingvistika

1. INTRODUCTION

New approaches, methods and strategies are a sign of progress in every study, including the study of language. Traditional views remain on the sidelines as different perspectives on teaching and learning take place. For a long time, figurative language was not considered to be as important for L2 learners from the point of view of traditional linguists, and emphasis was put on different aspects of language. Even if figurative language was taught, the applied teaching strategies were not based on explicit teaching in context. It was considered that figurative expressions such as idioms were difficult to comprehend for young learners or L2 learners. It was argued that young learners are not able to think figuratively and idioms were introduced implicitly, mostly to more experienced language learners. On the other hand, the cognitive linguistic approach, based on many studies, argues that figurative language is one of the most important components that L2 learners need to be aware of. In Croatian primary schools, figurative language is introduced in the sixth grade starting with phrasal verbs, but only implicitly. As opposed to simply mentioning an expression and its meaning, learners also need to be aware of the context behind such an expression and how it is conceptualized. In most cases, language learners have no problem understanding idioms containing simple vocabulary that are adapted to their level and age. There are several important factors to keep in mind while preparing lessons for teaching idioms. Firstly, it is necessary to select appropriate idioms containing vocabulary that is simple and easy to understand, both literally and figuratively. Secondly, grouping idioms according to meaning helps learners conceptualize their meanings and remember idioms without much difficulty. Thirdly, teaching strategies should be adapted to learners' needs such as age, language level, and other needs that can be more specific to a certain group of learners. Using multiple strategies can help learners build confidence and understanding, which makes the teaching and learning processes more successful.

The aim of this paper is to showcase various strategies that can be used for teaching figurative language. As an example, I grouped idioms referring to happiness and sadness which I implemented into a lesson plan that shows the use of different teaching strategies and techniques. The activities in the lesson plan are aimed at fourth-grade primary school students. The selected idioms refer to happiness which is conceptualized as being up or off the ground and to sadness which is conceptualized as being down. The aim is also to show the cognitive linguistic approach and how it benefits teaching figurative expressions.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of different approaches to vocabulary learning, of learning strategies, and the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching

figurative language. Section 3 deals with strategies that can be used to teach figurative language in EFL. Section 4 provides examples of strategies for teaching idioms that are included in the lesson plan. Section 5 discusses the most appropriate strategies for teaching idioms in EFL. The final section is the conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Vocabulary in L2 learning

Throughout history, teaching and learning vocabulary was neglected and more emphasis was placed on grammar. It was considered that just by learning the language itself and not teaching vocabulary to L2 learners explicitly, it would be learnt somehow (Chacón-Beltrán, Abello-Contesse and Torreblanca-López 2010). Vocabulary is considered to be one of the key points in communication and having less vocabulary exposure is more likely an obstacle than having limited knowledge of grammar (Tavakoli and Gerami 2013).

A number of studies have proved that treating vocabulary as a second step in language teaching will not provide learners with the proficiency or lexical competence in order to fully learn the language. Moreover, the use of vocabulary is key to efficient communication where, in some cases, language learners can even outperform native speakers (Burt 1975; Tomiyana 1980; Khalil 1985; Sheorey 1986; Braidi 2002). The knowledge of vocabulary is not to be seen as only a form of lexical components, but also as a characteristic of the foreign language learner that has knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in communication (Read 2000). Pavičić Takač and Umiljanović (2008) pose two questions: how many words are needed for the use of language and what is the level of acquisition of those words in order to achieve communication. Factors that affect vocabulary learning are L1, age, motivation, the amount of language exposure, cultural factors and strategies for learning vocabulary. Goto Butler (2019) identified four effective vocabulary directions for learners which are to ensure frequent and repeated exposure to target (and non-target) words, providing explicit definitions and meanings in context, creating opportunities for discussions and interactions and using multimodal approaches in vocabulary teaching. She also claims that various factors influence vocabulary learning, such as children's age and proficiency levels in L1 and L2, types of target vocabulary and efficiency of vocabulary assessments.

2.1.1. Implicit and explicit vocabulary teaching

Traditional approaches to vocabulary teaching have changed and evolved, and methods such as the grammar-translation approach or direct method are much less used now. Contemporary approaches to vocabulary teaching are yet to be further researched, but two directions take place

in vocabulary learning: implicit learning and explicit learning, or a combination of both (Ketabi and Hashemi Shahraki 2011). Pavičić Takač and Umiljanović (2008) agree with many applied linguists that both implicit and explicit teaching have a role in vocabulary learning. Implicit learning is based on use and not on learning a language. In other words, it is an unconscious process where new words are learned from repeated and extensive exposure. Explicit learning involves intentional use and practice of language with a systematic learning of words. It is conscious and requires different strategies in order to activate the process of explicit teaching. Ketabi and Hashemi Shahraki (2011) suggest the use of both implicit and explicit teaching combined with using different learning strategies.

2.2. Strategies for vocabulary learning

Learning strategies are used by students to help them learn and understand the language itself. According to Oxford (1990: 8), language learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.” Such strategies help learners achieve communicative competence, support learning implicitly and explicitly, and expand the teacher’s role. Oxford (1990) divided learning strategies into direct and indirect, where direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. When selecting the right strategy, it is important to keep in mind other factors, such as learner’s awareness, task requirements that differ in each situation, teacher expectations, age (where older learners can use different strategies than younger learners), sex, nationality, individual factors like general learning style of each learner, personality traits, motivation level and purpose for language learning.

Strategies for learning vocabulary are considered to be a subcategory of language learning strategies that developed from the learner’s perspective (e.g. Pavičić Takač and Umiljanović 2008; Andraka and Jurković 2015). A number of studies were conducted in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies as a whole. Schmitt (1997) followed up on Oxford’s taxonomy (1990) and named 58 different strategies that were classified as social, cognitive, metacognitive, determination and memory strategies. They were grouped as strategies for discovering the meanings of new words and for identifying and consolidating the meanings of words that the learner has already encountered. Studies of vocabulary learning strategies in Croatia are mostly periodical, but Pavičić Takač (2008) classified vocabulary learning strategies into three categories: strategies of formal vocabulary

learning, self-initiated vocabulary learning and spontaneous vocabulary learning. Strategies of formal vocabulary learning are provided in a school setting and some of the tasks include repeating out loud, translation, dual-coding, choral repetition, writing words and having a list of words with their translations. Strategies of self-initiated vocabulary learning imply exposure to language with an effort to acquire lexical units, such as using a dictionary, connecting mental pictures, grouping words, reading and taking notes, taking notes while watching movies. Strategies of spontaneous vocabulary learning imply exposure to language outside the school and without effort in acquiring lexical units: reading a book or magazine, describing, listening to songs, connecting with familiar words, using synonyms in communication, remembering words from movies and the Internet. A study was carried out according to Pavičić Takač's strategy classification where Pavičić Takač and Umiljanović (2008) tested eighth-grade learners who had been learning English as a foreign language for four years. According to the study, the most effective strategy was spontaneous vocabulary learning where learners' exposure to digital media had a high impact on vocabulary learning while learners learn the language incidentally by doing what they think is interesting to them. By doing that, they learn not only lexical units, but also collocations, idioms and they develop substantial vocabulary itself. Andracka and Jurković (2015) studied Croatian textbooks for early learning of English in the first and fourth grade. First-grade textbooks are intended for initial learning and fourth-grade textbooks are used in the fourth year of learning. They used Schmitt's classification of activities that encouraged the development of vocabulary learning strategies that were taught explicitly or contained some additional resources for implicit teaching, which encouraged the use of a specific vocabulary learning strategy. It was discovered that all the analyzed textbooks include specific strategies that encourage learners to learn vocabulary. Fourth-grade textbooks include a variety of strategies and are more complex than those used in first-grade textbooks, but the representation was much lower. There are certain overlaps among strategies since one activity can develop more language skills. Learners could use multiple strategies, or they could use a single most appropriate strategy, which makes their learning more successful. Still, textbook activities also rely on the teacher's competence, creativity and willingness to use different strategies as well as adjust to individual learners' characteristics. According to the authors, the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching depends on the synergy of three factors: textbooks, teachers and students.

Using different strategies and implementing them in vocabulary teaching and learning encourages learners' motivation and willingness to learn vocabulary. Each learner uses strategies they believe to be appropriate which depends on age, motivation and the setting they

are in. Even though a number of studies have been carried out, it is still unclear which strategies are the best for vocabulary teaching and learning.

2.3. Teaching figurative language: The cognitive linguistic approach

Figurative language was largely disregarded in traditional approaches to teaching and it was not considered a part of everyday communication. Figurative language was not taught to young learners because it was thought that they could not comprehend figurative constructions until they reached a certain age. A number of cognitive linguistic studies have shown that raising learners' awareness using various strategies benefits learners when it comes to learning and teaching figurative expressions. Those studies have proved that young learners are able to understand figurative meanings from a very young age (Piquer Píriz 2008). The cognitive linguistic approach has a practical advantage in that it makes the teaching and learning of idioms easier in foreign language learning (Kövecses 2010: 247). In the traditional view, idioms are expressions made up of two or more words whose meanings cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituents. On the other hand, in the cognitive linguistic view idioms are considered to be motivated and a part of our conceptual system. Therefore, idioms are not linguistic, but conceptual in their nature. Figurative expressions, including idioms, are motivated by different cognitive mechanisms: conceptual metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge (Kövecses 2010: 233). Conceptual metaphor will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection.

2.3.1. Conceptual metaphor as a cognitive mechanism motivating figurative expressions

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2010). Conceptual metaphor consists of two domains: conceptual domain A and conceptual domain B, and domain A is understood in terms of domain B. Conceptual domain B, which is called the source domain, is where we draw metaphorical expressions from, in order to understand conceptual domain A, which is called the target domain. Some of the most common source domains are THE HUMAN BODY, HEALTH, MOVEMENT AND DIRECTION, HEAT AND COLD and some of the most common target domains are EMOTIONS, HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS, ECONOMY, COMMUNICATION. Conceptual metaphors go from something concrete to something abstract (Kövecses 2010: 28-29). What occurs between the two domains is referred to as mappings, meaning that elements from the source domain are

mapped onto the elements of the target domain. Here is an example of an expression motivated by the LOVE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor:

(1) We aren't *going anywhere*.

The literal meaning of the expression *go somewhere* means to travel or move in a particular direction, and yet there is no clear indication where we are going. When this sentence is used in the appropriate context, the hearer will clearly interpret it to be about love. Its figurative meaning refers to a love relationship that is not going to progress any further. Other examples of expressions motivated by conceptual metaphors include those referring to happiness, in which a happy person is conceptualized as being up (Kövecses 2010: 97). In the BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND conceptual metaphor, the source domain which refers to being off the ground maps onto the target domain of happiness. Here is an example:

(2) After the exam, I was *walking on air* for days.

Another conceptual metaphor that refers to happiness and the general concept up is HAPPY IS UP, as in:

(3) We had to *cheer him up*.

Even though these metaphors are different, they share a common source domain which is moving upwards. Conceptual metaphors help us to connect something that is familiar to something unknown and enable us to connect two things that are usually seen as completely unrelated.

2.3.2. *Applying the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language*

The cognitive linguistic approach has had a great impact on the teaching and learning of figurative expressions. This approach is different from the traditional one, and it is argued that children are able to think figuratively from a very young age. Therefore, it is essential to teach figurative language to young learners as it contributes to their conceptual knowledge, and their language and social skills (Piquer Píriz 2008: 235). Boers (2000: 566) argues that learners need to be aware that metaphor is present in everyday communication and in figurative expressions,

that figurative expressions are not arbitrary, that metaphors differ from culture to culture and from language to language. He states that learners' awareness of metaphor needs to be raised using different activities in order for them to be able to recognize metaphors, and this also improves their vocabulary learning. Learners who are aware of conceptual metaphors will have a better learning experience remembering and understanding idioms (Beréndi, Csábi and Kövecses 2011). It has also been shown that teaching figurative expressions explicitly with the help of visual images which show connections between expressions and their meanings enables better retention of idioms. Irujo (1993) and Kövecses (2010) argue that strategies used for teaching and learning idioms should be most used by teachers because they provide learners with a better understanding of their figurative meanings. Applying the cognitive linguistic approach to figurative language provides teachers with a better knowledge of how to use different strategies and activities for their learners.

A number of studies have been conducted in order to determine how the cognitive linguistic approach affects the learning of figurative expressions. For example, Piquer Píriz (2008) conducted three studies in which she exposed young EFL learners to idioms. Activities were done in groups where learners could discuss idioms' meanings by using pictures and stories. Piquer Píriz (2008) found that young learners are able to think figuratively.

The use of strategies by learners depends on their age and language development. In addition, the understanding of figurative expressions depends on the teacher and the activities which they provide (MacArthur and Piquer Píriz 2007). When selecting idioms, it is important to decide which are the best ones to teach. According to Irujo (1986: 238) the following criteria can be used by teachers: frequency of use, transparency, appropriateness, simplicity of form and vocabulary, and similarity to first-language idioms. Frequency of use means that the selected idioms need to be frequent in everyday communication. Some meanings of idioms are very difficult to understand and connections between literal and figurative meanings cannot be made, which is why it is important to teach idioms that are easy to understand and are transparent. As for the appropriateness of idioms in the school setting, colloquialisms or slang will mostly not be used by learners. Therefore, idioms need to consist of familiar words or high-frequency vocabulary so that learners can recognize the words. English idioms may have equivalents in learners' L1, so it is useful to teach those and compare them.

The cognitive linguistic approach has introduced many different methods for teaching figurative language. It puts emphasis on teaching figurative expressions explicitly, using different strategies. This will be discussed in the following section.

3. STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING IDIOMS IN EFL

In any foreign language classroom, teachers cannot rely on incidental learning as this process is rather slow and does not lead to the storage of new words and expressions in long-term memory. Raising learners' awareness of metaphor helps young learners to acquire new vocabulary faster (Kövecses 2010). Teachers have to invest time and effort in order to make learning more effective, more pervasive and eventually learners will perform better. According to Goswami (2015), children are capable of thinking and reasoning in a similar way to adults, but they lack experience, and their metacognitive and executive function skills are still developing. Therefore, idioms need to be taught explicitly using various strategies which enhance learners' ability to remember them.

3.1. *Dual coding*

Kövecses (2010) argues that elaboration is a strategy where learners are stimulated by mental pictures in connection with new words and expressions, which entails a much deeper level of understanding. There are several types of elaboration, for example associations within context, connecting it to already familiar items in L2, comparison with L1 items and associating them with mental pictures. What is meant by the latter is what is usually termed *dual coding*: pictures stimulate memorizing lexical items. When it comes to conceptual metaphors, dual coding is effective as learners become aware of concrete source domains or how certain idioms are used literally. For example, if learners come across the idiom *a shoulder to cry on* and are given a picture or if they evoke a mental image of a person crying on someone's shoulder and the other person comforting them, they will recognize the figurative expression and remember it. Dual coding has proved to be efficient for the retention of the entire context of an expression, focusing on the meaning and not the form (Boers et al. 2008).

3.2. *Comparing literal and figurative meanings*

One of the strategies that complements dual coding is comparing literal and figurative meanings of idioms. This can be done using a picture illustrating the literal meaning first where learners discuss what they see, and then a picture illustrating the figurative meaning where they compare the two or the absurdness of the figurative meaning. Irujo (1986) proposes various activities for this strategy where learners can draw literal and figurative meanings, which they match to the

idiom later. Comparing literal and figurative meanings can also be done: learners make up stories using literal meanings and later discuss the context. Another proposed activity is where learners can act out the literal meaning and other learners need to guess it in a discussion afterwards where they talk about the figurative meaning.

3.3. *Grouping idioms*

Better retention and making sense of conceptualization are what makes grouping another strategy frequently used in teaching idioms. Boers (2000) conducted a study in which he grouped idioms motivated by the same conceptual metaphor. Students that were presented with the grouped expressions outperformed the students that were presented with the metaphorical words. His study proves that grouping idioms in such a way is more effective than functional grouping. Idioms can be grouped according to conceptual metaphor or a common target domain. As Kövecses (2010: 241) states: “Giving students the task to categorize figuratively used words or idiomatic expressions themselves according to the groupings they have been introduced to is likely to have an additional beneficial effect on the students memorizing them.”

3.4. *Teaching idioms explicitly*

When teaching idioms, learners need to be aware of what is being taught to them. Many studies that have been conducted have an important focus point, which is teaching the motivation of idioms’ meanings explicitly. Beréndi, Csábi and Kövecses (2011) carried out an experiment where the results supported the hypothesis that connecting idioms to conceptual metaphors explicitly helps learners to better understand and remember them. Providing explicit definitions and meanings in context gives learners an opportunity to become aware of idioms and understand their meanings.

3.5. *Reasoning figuratively*

Piquer Píriz (2008: 235-236) encouraged learners to think figuratively in order to understand semantic extensions. In her study she found that children are able to reason figuratively from a very young age when they were exposed to idioms containing words related to body parts. Learners aged 5-11 were able to understand those expressions because they already have that knowledge from the outside world. Teachers need to be aware that at different ages, learners

should be taught expressions related to their conceptual knowledge. Different age groups were tested and there is no reason that figurative language should only be taught to older learners.

As Goto Butler (2019) stated for vocabulary strategies, the same can be used for teaching idioms. Learners need to be aware of idioms and this can be done by exposing them to such expressions frequently, by giving them explicit definitions and meanings in context, by initiating discussions where they can talk about meanings and by using visual stimuli such as pictures, videos and flashcards. Each learner develops their own strategies based on their learning style or their conceptual knowledge, but in doing so learners need the help of the teacher who has to keep in mind all the different strategies for teaching idioms. Conceptual motivation of figurative expressions should be used in the EFL classroom with younger and older learners, provided that the right strategies are used.

In the following section I will present a lesson plan that can be used to teach idioms in EFL in lower primary classes.

4. LESSON PLAN

The lesson plan consists of various activities specifically aimed at fourth-grade students who learn English as a foreign language. It can be adapted to other grades if necessary. The lesson plan (Bilić-Štefan 2017) is designed in such a way that the lesson consists of two 45-minute lessons, a total of 90 minutes. It includes various strategies and techniques used to teach idioms that refer to emotions, more specifically happiness and sadness. The selected idioms are motivated by the conceptual metaphors HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN. The idioms contain vocabulary that is simple and which learners are familiar with. The following idioms have been selected:

HAPPY IS UP

over the moon

jump for joy

SAD IS DOWN

feel down

in low spirits

<p>Topic & lesson type</p> <p>HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN – new material development</p>
<p>Aims (<i>overall</i>)</p> <p>A) Linguistic introducing new vocabulary (idioms), listening for specific information, improving speaking, listening skills</p> <p>B) Functional (communicative) talking about emotions, talking about free time, routines and other activities, non-verbal communication, writing short texts</p> <p>C) Educational developing literacy skills, recognizing the context, taking responsibility for one’s own language learning, problem solving</p>
<p>Outcomes</p> <p>Students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ describe the emotions they see in the pictures ○ recognize the meaning of target idioms used in sentences and match them to the pictures ○ explain the literal meaning of each target idiom ○ use the target figurative expressions in sentences ○ differentiate between literal and figurative meanings of the target idioms ○ produce short texts using their knowledge about figurative language
<p>Interaction patterns</p> <p>T-S, T-Ss, Ss-Ss, lockstep, individual work, pair work, group work</p>
<p>Teaching aids and media</p> <p>board, flashcards, pictures</p>
<p>Teaching material</p> <p>/</p>
<p>Notes</p>

Lesson structure

Activity 1:

Activity objective: using pictures to describe emotions connected with the idioms we will mention

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S

Teaching methods / techniques: discussing

Estimated time: 10 minutes

Description / TT:

Pictures (Appendix 1) are provided with Anna doing her daily routine. In each picture we can see Anna's emotions when doing a certain activity. The students are given the pictures and the first task is to try and describe each picture just by looking at it.

T: You will be given Anna's daily routine during the weekend. The task is to look at the pictures and try to describe what Anna is doing and how Anna is feeling. First, discuss it in pairs and then we'll describe them together.

S: Yes/No.

(pair discussions)

T: Let's start with the first picture. What is Anna doing?

S: Anna is eating chocolate.

T: How is Anna feeling?

S: Anna is smiling, so she is feeling happy.

T: What is Anna doing in the second picture?

S: Anna is doing her homework.

T: And how is she feeling?

S: Anna is feeling sad.

T: What is happening in the third picture?

S: Anna is crying because her dog is sick.

T: So Anna is feeling sad.

S: Yes.

T: The next picture?

S: Anna is sitting and feeling sad.

T: What is Anna doing in the next picture?

S: She is watching TV.

T: Is she feeling happy or sad?

S: She is feeling happy.

T: What about the last picture?

S: She is playing with a friend and feeling happy.

T: Excellent! We have described what Anna is doing and how she is feeling based on the pictures we see.

Activity 2:

Activity objective: picture-word matching and introducing idioms that describe the pictures

Interaction pattern: lockstep

Teaching methods / techniques: matching sentences with pictures

Estimated time: 12 minutes

Description / TT:

The students are now given six sentences (Appendix 2) that describe each picture, and the task is to match the number from the picture with the correct sentence. Idioms are introduced in four sentences and there are two additional sentences that describe Anna's emotions as feeling happy or sad. Afterwards, the students will be asked to colour the words that describe Anna's feelings.

T: We now have six sentences that must be matched to each picture. At the beginning of each sentence write down the number of the picture that matches it.

T: Let's start with the first one.

S: Anna is jumping for joy because she can watch her favourite TV show. (picture number 5)

S: Anna is feeling down because she has to do her homework. (picture number 2)

S: Anna is in low spirits because her dog is not feeling well. (picture number 3)

S: Anna is over the moon because she can go to the playground. (picture number 6)

S: Anna is sad because she can't play tennis this weekend. (picture number 4)

S: Anna is happy because she is eating chocolate. (picture number 1)

T: Please use your crayons and in each sentence colour the words you think describe how Anna is feeling.

T: What did you colour?

S: Jumping for joy, feeling down, in low spirits, over the moon, sad, happy.

T: Do we all understand the meanings of the words? For example, *spirits*?

T: A spirit is a ghost, but (we can use Croatian here so that students really understand the meaning) *spirits* "u množini" means our mood, "naše raspoloženje, odnosno kako se osjećamo".

Activity 3:

Activity objective: creating flashcards that represent the literal meanings of idioms

Interaction pattern: lockstep, individual work, pair work

Teaching methods / techniques: flashcards, drawing

Estimated time: 14 minutes

Description / TT:

The students are given a task in which they create flashcards with the literal meanings of the four idioms. Each student is given four sheets of paper in the form of a flashcard. Using crayons, they have to present the literal meanings of idioms. The idioms are written on the blackboard so the students can read and see them.

T: The next task is to use your crayons and by looking at the words here on the board, draw whatever you think these phrases mean and represent.

(students are making their own picture flashcards)

T: When you're done, give your flashcards to your partner and your partner has to guess which phrase you drew and write it on the back of the flashcard.

Activity 4:

Activity objective: discussing figurative meanings of idioms and connecting happy/sad to up/down

Interaction pattern: T-S, T-Ss

Teaching methods / techniques: discussion

Estimated time: 12 minutes

Description / TT:

The teacher starts a discussion about the figurative meanings of idioms and in conversation with the students connects them with HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN.

T: Let's talk about these new phrases! So, we said that these phrases represent our emotions. Which two emotions did we talk about?

S: Happiness and sadness.

T: Right! And when we are happy, how do we act?

S: We have a smile on our faces, we have more energy and we play and have fun.

T: Yes, so if you see a young boy walking with his head up, would you say that he is happy or sad?

S: He is happy.

T: Yes. And if we see him walking with his head down, and without a smile on his face?

S: He is sad.

T: Yes. When we use phrases like *jump for joy* and *over the moon*, are we happy or sad?

S: We are happy.

T: Yes. And if we are happy, are we up or down?

S: We are up.

T: Yes, so happy is up. And what is down?

S: Sad.

T: And which two phrases do we use for sadness?

S: *In low spirits* and *feel down*.

T: So for example when I say: *I am over the moon because I am going on holiday*, does it mean I am actually going over the moon?

S: No, it means that you are happy.

T: Right, so these phrases we learned have both the literal (doslovno) and figurative (figurativno, metaforičko) meaning. In conversations, as in this example I gave you, we use their figurative meaning.

Activity 5:

Activity objective: putting idioms in the right context using familiar topics

Interaction pattern: pair work

Teaching methods / techniques: checking comprehension

Estimated time: 10 minutes

Description / TT:

Students work in pairs and use idioms in context. They need to come up with four sentences for each idiom's figurative meaning. The topic is free time and activities. For example, *I am over the moon because I am going on vacation during the Easter holidays*.

T: Think about what you do in your free time, what you like to do and what you don't like to do but you have to. Work in pairs and come up with four sentences using these phrases from the blackboard once again. Make sure that you use them correctly and in the right context. Swap notebooks once each person in your pair has come up with sentences, and your partner will decide if you used the phrase correctly.

(once the pairs are finished, they read the sentences so the teacher can check comprehension)

Activity 6:

Activity objective: understanding the difference between literal and figurative meaning

Interaction pattern: group work, Ss-Ss

Teaching methods / techniques: playing a game, charades

Estimated time: 20 minutes

Description / TT:

Students are divided into pairs and must select a representative to stand in front of them with their back to the board. The idioms are written on the board and their literal and figurative meanings have to be acted out by each team. The literal meaning will be acted out in the first round, and the figurative meaning in the second round. The most important rule is that nobody can speak during the game. A point is awarded to the first student who guesses the idiom.

T: We are going to play a game of charades in two teams. Each team picks a representative that will stand in front of you.

(students pick their representatives)

T: The goal of the game is for the students in each team to describe a phrase with actions. The phrase cannot be spoken or spelled in the air by the teams. The two representatives, watch your team because you have to guess the phrase. Are there any questions?

T: The way you need to act out is like we did with the flashcards where you drew what you thought was their meaning. (using Croatian to specify what we mean; igrom pantomime odglumiti doslovno značenje izraza)

T: Let's begin with this phrase (the teacher points to the idiom on the blackboard).

(when the representative from the team guesses the idiom, their team gets a point, then they choose the next representative)

T: Let's begin with the second round where you will mime the same phrases but in their figurative meanings as you did when you came up with sentences. (using Croatian to specify what we mean; igrom pantomime odglumiti figurativno značenje riječi)

(since the two idioms for happiness and the two idioms for sadness can be acted out in the same way, they act out one in each category)

Activity 7:

Activity objective: using idioms into a nonsense rhyme

Interaction pattern: lockstep, individual work

Teaching methods / techniques: nonsense rhyme, cloze, TPR

Estimated time: 12 minutes

Description / TT:

The students are given a nonsense rhyme in which idioms have been omitted. They need to fill in the blanks with the missing idioms.

T: You have a song in front of you where you need to fill in the missing parts. First, we will read it with those missing parts and then each one of you will try and think which words belong there. We'll check it and then get up and try to sing it together with movements.

T: Let's read it first.

S: I was -- _____ ,
when my cat gave me a spoon.

But I was _____ ,
when I realized it was a clown.

I am scared of clowns,
and that's why I was feeling --- _____ .

Since then my fears disappeared,
and now I am _____ ,
when I get a clown toy.

Everyone was _____ ,
because they could hear the crickets.
And everyone was afraid,
when the clown played charades.

But I was talking to the clown,
and it made me so happy,
that I was _____ ,
and again my cat gave me a spoon.

T: Do we understand the rhyme? What is a cricket?

S: It is an animal.

T: Yes, it is an animal that is known for its sounds.

T: What does it mean to realize something?

S: To find out something or to understand something.

T: And what does it mean to disappear?

S: Something that is gone.

T: Something that we cannot see because it no longer exists or is no longer there.

T: Now, fill in the missing words. The rhyme will help you figure out which words are missing.

T: Let's check it!

S: I was --*over the moon*

when my cat gave me a spoon.

But I was *feeling down*,

when I realized it was a clown.

I am scared of clowns,

and that's why I was feeling ---*down*.

Since then my fears disappeared,

and now I am *jumping for joy*,

when I get a clown toy.

Everyone was *in low spirits*,

because they could hear the crickets.

And everyone was afraid,

when the clown played charades.

But I was talking to the clown,

and it made me so happy,

that I was *over the moon*,

and again my cat gave me a spoon.

T: Great, let's sing it together, you can dance, or mime, whichever you prefer.

Additional activities:

Activity objective: using drama to practice implementing idioms into everyday experiences

Interaction pattern: group work, lockstep

Teaching methods / techniques: drama play, acting

Estimated time: 15 minutes

Description / TT:

Students are divided into two groups, and each group has to come up with a play in which they will use the idioms we learned. The task is to write a short script where they talk about their activities during summer time. They need to include idioms in the script and use them in the right context. After they have finished the script, half the group will read the roles from the script and the other half will act it out, they are all present together on stage. They can use any object in the classroom to help them with their play.

Board plan:

JUMP FOR JOY

OVER THE MOON

FEEL DOWN

IN LOW SPIRITS

5. DISCUSSION

As has been shown by cognitive linguistic studies, a number of strategies can be used to teach idioms. In this section I will discuss the strategies included in the lesson plan, which I believe are the best and most effective for teaching English idioms to L2 learners.

Picture-word relationship is very important in any aspect of teaching. Very often learners are not able to fully understand the verbal element without connecting it to the visual element. Using dual coding with idioms such as *over the moon* and *jump for joy* can help learners connect mental images of the source domain with the target domain, and therefore they will rely on conceptual metaphor. Dual coding is used in Activity 1, where the visual element is first discussed and then connected to the verbal element in Activity 2, as well as the one in Activity 3 where learners need to make their own flashcards. When teaching idioms, it is important for learners to understand that an idiom has two meanings: literal and figurative. The literal meaning is accessible first. For example, *over the moon* refers to someone being high up and it reflects the HAPPY IS UP conceptual metaphor. Therefore, the figurative meaning of *over the moon* is 'being extremely happy'. The literal meaning is to be discussed before the figurative meaning and by making links between the two, learners practice understanding and using idioms in communication. Comparison can be used in explicit communication or in activities such as charades or drawing where the literal meaning is explained first, and the figurative meaning second, such as in Activities 5 and 6. Total Physical Response is a strategy frequently used with young learners whereby they obtain information much better through physical movement, including activities such as songs, chants, rhymes, creating flashcards, using different art material. By doing something physical, learners have a better opportunity to remember idioms e.g. in Activity 3 where they use their drawing skills, in Activity 6 where they play charades and in Activity 7 where they dance to a song which contains idioms. If idioms are discussed and taught explicitly, learners can understand why a certain expression is used and taught. Learners can discuss them with their teacher or peers, as shown in Activity 4. Grouping idioms that share the same conceptual element helps students remember their figurative meanings better. For example, the happy is up/sad is down conceptual metaphor motivates idioms that refer to emotions. When grouping idioms, the teacher needs to select those which have similar meanings or those which reflect the same conceptual metaphor, otherwise it will not be clear why those idioms are taught together and it will not help learners at any level.

I believe that using these strategies and implementing them when teaching idioms would have a positive impact on learners, their understanding of idioms, language development, communication, social and cognitive skills. Strategies are very often used by learners which help them gain new knowledge and remember different information. When planning to teach figurative language, in this case idioms, it is important to choose idioms that can be understood easily by learners and that contain simple vocabulary. It is also important to choose the right teaching activities that support the learning process and include all four language skills, i.e. speaking, writing, reading and listening. There are many more strategies that cognitive linguists are yet to explore further and prove their effectiveness in the foreign language classroom.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to present various strategies which can be used to teach figurative language in the EFL classroom. In order to achieve that, I designed a lesson plan for teaching idioms to young EFL learners which refer to happiness and sadness. The aim was also to show how figurative language is taught using the cognitive linguistic approach.

There are many reasons why figurative expressions should be taught to young EFL learners as studies have shown that they are able to think figuratively. In Croatia there is little mention of figurative language in EFL textbooks until the sixth grade, and only in high school are students taught idioms, phrasal verbs and similes, but still not explicitly and in ways in which they would understand their meanings better. It is absolutely necessary for EFL teachers and learners to understand figurative language and its benefits. This especially applies to existing strategies and approaches that can be implemented in the EFL classroom.

Using idioms connected to happiness and sadness I have shown how figurative expressions can be taught in the fourth grade of primary school using various strategies and specific activities. All the activities are easy to perform and no extra materials are required. Idioms are grouped based on a common element, so that it is easy for learners to understand their meanings. The vocabulary which idioms contain is familiar to fourth graders. By grouping them according to meaning, learners would not have any problems understanding and remembering them.

Figurative expressions, more specifically idioms, are largely neglected in the Croatian educational system. If they are taught in the first place, they are taught implicitly. They are not grouped based on a common element, which makes it very difficult to understand them and learners are not familiar with their meanings because they are not aware of what is taught to them. The cognitive linguistic approach proves that if idioms are taught explicitly, learners acquire knowledge about language and its many aspects. Figurative language should be implemented in the EFL classroom starting from the fourth grade, where learners have already been familiar with the language for four years and have enough knowledge about the language itself to understand figurative expressions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Pictures of Anna's daily routine



Appendix 2: Sentences for picture-word matching

- Anna is jumping for joy because she can watch her favourite TV show.
- Anna is feeling down because she has to write her homework.
- Anna is in low spirits because her dog is not feeling well.
- Anna is over the moon because she can go to the playground.
- Anna is sad because she can't play tennis this weekend.
- Anna is happy because she is eating a chocolate.

Appendix 3: A nonsense rhyme

I was _____,
when my cat gave me a spoon.
But I was _____,
when I realized it was a clown.

I am scared of clowns,
and that's why I was feeling _____.
Since then my fears disappeared,
and now I am _____,
when I get a clown toy.

Everyone was _____,
because they could hear the crickets.
And everyone was afraid,
when the clown played charades.

But I was talking to the clown,
and it made me so happy,
that I was _____,
and again my cat gave me a spoon!



Izjava o izvornosti rada

Ovom izjavom, ja, Eni Batinić, studentica Učiteljskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, izjavljujem i svojim potpisom jamčim da sam samostalno istražila literaturu i napisala diplomski rad na temu: Strategies for teaching idioms in EFL. Izjavljujem da nijedan dio diplomskog rada nije napisan na nedozvoljen način ni prepisan iz kojeg necitiranog rada.

Zagreb, 2022.

(vlastoručni potpis studenta)