International Journal of Research in English Education

The Effect of Role-Play through Dialogues vs. Written Practice on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Knowledge of English Idioms

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Received: September 10, 2017 Accepted: December 20, 2017 Online Published: March 20, 2018

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of role-play through dialogues vs. written practice on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of English idioms. The question this study tried to answer is if role-play through dialogues vs. written practice has a significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of English idioms. To find the answer to the question, 30 intermediate level students from Iranian institute were selected. They were both male and female. Intermediate level students who were dealt for the current study were selected because they were learning all skills of language at the same time, they were familiar with words, and their English proficiency was enough to speak English and understand the importance of speaking. The students were selected administrating OPT which divided into two groups, one experimental group (Role-Play through Dialogues) and one control group (Written Practice). The results of this study revealed that the experimental participants performed better on learning idiom.

Keywords: role-play, dialogues, written practice, English idioms, semantic, etymology

1. Introduction

Figurative idioms have received a great deal of attention from pedagogical point of view in recent years, although they were neglected before the 20th century; nowadays these inseparable aspects of human language are very frequent in everyday language use. Idioms play the important role in foreign language learning. Most English speakers say about 20 million idioms per lifetime; hence, using proper figurative language would be a sign of native-like speech in every language. On the other hand, teaching and learning idioms is one of the most difficult areas in second language acquisition.

According to Charteris (2002), figurative idioms are demanding for second language teachers and learners since the meanings of many idioms do not arise from the sum of their grammatical and lexical parts and this causes difficulties in the systematic education of idioms in SL classrooms. As a result, applying a suitable approach to teaching idioms has always been of overwhelming interest among language teachers.

Boers, Demecheleer, and Eyckmans (2004) say that the meaning of idioms is not completely arbitrary to be only learnt through blind memorization. They have inspired new insights into the field of applied linguistics suggesting more insightful and systematic approaches to L2 idioms learning. Glucksberg (2001) claims that the meaning of the idioms can be guessed from the meaning of one of their subcomponents but usually the meaning is totally different, this is the reason why they are so tricky for pupils. Teaching and learning idioms is one of the difficult areas in second language acquisition because most of them have an arbitrary nature (Zarei & Rahimi, 2012).

Between different units of a language (vocabulary, grammar, phrasal verbs, idioms, expression), learning the idioms is probably the most difficult task to be accomplished. In one hand, learning idioms has always been a big problem for pupils, especially foreign language learners. On the other hand, any foreign language learner knows that idioms are necessary and their shortage leads to a feeling of insecurity (Sadeghi, 2005).

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[DOI: 10.29252/ijree.3.1.59]

The objective of the present study is to investigate some strategies which are more likely to be effective in second language idiom learning. Previous studies on idioms acquisition have demonstrated the positive effect which these strategies have in second language idiom learning.

2. Literature review

Van Ments (1983) supplied some support and interpretation on the advantages that gather from using role play activities by stating that perceptions are formed when one's brain codes and groups data. Comparisons and decisions can be made as people examine the way others behave in different situations. He further stated that roles act as shorthand ways of recognizing, identifying, and labeling a set of appearances and behaviors. People form opinions based on appearance, behavior, and characteristic of a particular person. They predict what they will do in a given situation. Van Ments (1983) describes role as a way of explaining or expression group norms and society's ability to handle an individual or a group. Livingstone (1983) states that how role-plays enable students to work with formality, register, function, attitude, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic characteristics, and acceptability and suitability. Jones (1982) indicates such special linguistic features, but when giving reasons for using simulations (i.e. role-plays), lists motivation, icebreaking, realism, and chances for monitoring language use. Larsson (2004) believes that role-plays have an effect on the whole classroom dynamic, leading to more relaxed relations between teacher and students.

Holt and Kysilka (2006) investigated that context or the environment where you will be placed can affect your role behavior. When you see yourself or other role-players as members of group, an audience or participants in a parade, then the way you behave, changes in accordance with your surrounding (Holt & Kysilka, 2006). For example, the way that you used to behave with your friend is different from the way that you behave in formal situations. They acknowledged that roles can also be influenced by a person's function or aim. For example, people in the hotel industry may be carrying out the tasks of a manager, front desk staff, bell person, or representative. People who work in an airport will be carrying out the tasks of travel agent, flight attendant, captain or passenger. Since roles are dependent on context, function, and purpose, the instructor needs to carefully think through the enactment when he or she would like to employ role play activity in the classroom. The teacher will have to consider the students' engagement, role assessing, duration of the activity, and debriefing of the enactment (Holt & Kysilka, 2006).

Ladousse (1987) says that role plays as 'low input-high output', but this is contradicted both by research, and my own experience. More importantly, she writes 'role play' is fun; it automatically leads to inferior learning. There has been some research on the contribution role-plays make to second language learning, as reported by Scarcella and Crookall (1990). They refer to Krashen's (1981) theories of language learning and note how role-plays help large quantities of comprehensible input, active involvement, and positive affect.

Cook (2000) has critically examined the relationship between work, play, and learning. One of his first findings is that the boundaries are less clear than many visualizers. Moreover, by examining how first-language acquisition really happens, he notes the importance of play — and related non-work activities such as games and stories — in learning. Among his conclusions is that the ability to engage successfully in actual, everyday social interaction is largely developed through interaction with fictional characters in games and stories. He is not advocating the wholesale adoption of play as a means of second-language instruction. Nevertheless, his findings contradict the arguments of those who object to 'non-serious' activities such as role-plays.

Moore (2005) says that teachers often use role-playing to help learner communication and involvement in the process of decision making. Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) notice the chief benefit of role-playing to be that pupils are active participants rather than passive spectators and so must make decisions. Dell Olio and Donk (2007) say that role-playing assists pupils make dependable autonomous choices because it prepares a forum for exploring multiple methods of acting and reacting in a given situation.

Hall, Quinn, and Gollnick (2008) show that experiences obtained through role-play can take the place of firsthand experiences that perhaps impossible to otherwise obtain, and more describe that teacher-education candidates often mention such experiences as the most informative and influential part of their teacher–education coursework. Randel et al. (1992) discovered that pupils reported more interest in role-playing when compared to traditional ways of teaching.

So Liu and Ding (2009) mention that there are four essential factors for the success of role-play: the topic chosen should be real and relevant; the teachers need 'feed-in' the suitable language; correct errors in a proper way; some of

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the teachers' roles are facilitator, spectator, or participant. Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and also a lot of fun.

Langer (2002) found that in effective schools, learning and teaching related to knowledge and conventions of English and high literacy takes place as separated, simulated, and integrated experiences. Separated and simulated activities refer to the introduction of a skill or knowledge item to the class, and the integrated activity is the purposeful application of it. The effective teaching of writing involves all three of these learning experiences, with an emphasis on the writer's creativity, the use of high-quality writing exemplars, time for classroom writing practice and thoughtful reflection before, during, and after the writing.

According to Afshar and Esmaeili (2017), idioms are omnipresent in the world's languages. Despite their pervasiveness, idioms are often a stumbling block to second and foreign language learners. This article has as main purpose to share the results of a small scale project based on guiding students in the use of idioms through dialogues and readings, in order to improve students' communicative skill. The project was applied at Islamic Azad University of Guilan, Iran, with one group of 38 Translation Training students who attend to an undergraduate education program. The selected 38 participants were divided randomly into two experimental groups, namely, conversation and paragraph writing groups. The two experimental groups received different treatments. In one class, idioms were taught and learners were asked to make a conversation practicing the new idioms, and in the other class, they were asked to write short paragraphs using the idioms. In the third class, the control group, the new idioms were presented and then practiced through different written exercises. At the end of the treatment period, the researchers administered an idiom posttest. The data were collected though questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and reflective writing. The results indicated significant effects of the context in idiom learning when idioms were creatively used in integrated skill tasks. The findings also implied that idiom learning should receive more attention in EFL learning context.

2.1 Research Question

The main purpose of the study is to answer the following question:

Does role-play through dialogues vs. written practice have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of idioms?

2.2 Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H0: Role-play through dialogues vs. written practice does not have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of idioms.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Design of the Study

In order to investigate the effect of role-play through dialogues vs. written practice on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of English idioms, this study adopts a quantitative approach. Quantitative methods are research techniques that are used to gather quantitative data-information dealing with numbers and anything that is measurable. In other words, quantitative methods are a systematic process in which numerical data are controlled and measured to address the accumulation of facts and then utilized to obtain information about the world. This study found a quantitative research design to be appropriate for this study because it is statistically reliable and allows results to be analyzed and compared with similar studies.

The current study consists of two groups of intermediate EFL students participated in class with a teacher in which one group was thought idioms according to written practice, and the other group learned it through dialogues. Both groups had pretest and posttest to measure their idioms. Only experimental group received role play through dialogue to improve idioms, that is, the other group (control group) didn't receive any dialogue at all. At the end of the study, the results of pre- and post-tests of both groups were compared with each other to see the possible effect of role play through dialogue.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the current study included 30 intermediate level students selected out of 100 from a number of Iranian institutes. They were of the identical L1 level. They were of both genders. Intermediate-level learners were

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[DOI: 10.29252/ijree.3.1.59]

considered suitable for the current study since they were managing to learn the four skills of language simultaneously, and they were acquainted with certain words, further, their English proficiency was so ample that they could speak English and understand the significance of idioms, however, they were not promoted enough to use idioms in their speech. The students were selected via administrating an OPT which categorized them into an experimental (Role-play through dialogues) and a control group (Written practice).

3.3 Instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of an OPT, a pretest of idiom, treatment through role-play through dialogues vs. written practice, and a post-test.

To obtain the highest degree of homogeneity among the participants in terms of their general English proficiency, an OPT was administered at the beginning of the study. Then, the selected participants were divided into a control and an experimental group. Next, a pretest of idioms was administered to both groups of the study. The test was constructed in the form of multiple choice, with the reliability of 0.72 estimated by KR-21 formula. The rating scale used throughout the treatment itself was remained unchanged, to gain information on their idiom proficiency before the treatment, and to compare it with the post-test taken at the end of the treatment. The test contained 20 general questions which examined the aspects in learners' idioms.

Then, during the five treatment sessions, the participants in the experimental group were instructed idioms through dialogue from "101 American English Idioms" by Collis (1994), and the control group received written practice from "Advanced Vocabulary & Idioms" written by Thomas (1989). Finally, a posttest was administered to investigate the possible effect of the independent variables. The characteristics of the posttest of the study were exactly similar to those of the pretest.

3.4 Procedure

After the subject-selection process using an OPT, and prior to the treatment, a pretest was conducted to gain information on the participants' idiom knowledge in order to compare with the post-test taken at the end of the treatment. During the pretest administration, the participant learners were given a multiple choice test to answer. The items consisted of idiomatic sentences with which the participants seemed to have difficulty. The total score for each participant was 20. The same process happened for the posttest.

When the necessary data on the participants' idiom through the pretest was obtained, the treatment lasted for about five sessions started. In each session, the participants were given a number of idioms. Throughout the sessions, each participant in the experimental group learned idioms through dialogue. At the end, a posttest was administered, similar to the pretest, to evaluate the changes that might have occurred in the participants' idiom knowledge as the result of applying the role play (dialogue) practice and the traditional way of teaching idioms (written practice).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data resulted from testing the hypothesis of the study were analyzed via applying the descriptive statistics as well as running the inferential statistical methods of Independent Samples T-test for determining the effect of the independent variable of the study on the dependent variable. Additionally, the degree of progress of the participants' scores from the pretest to the posttest of the study was shown via running a Paired Sample t-test.

4. Results

Below, the results of the statistical findings of the study have been illustrated in tabular manner. As will be explained, Table 1 and Table 2 represent the descriptive statistical findings, and Table 3 will indicate the inferential statistical results of the Independent Samples T-test of the study. In addition, statistical analysis and interpretation of the content of the tables have been under-mentioned for each single table.

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Table 1. Descriptive results of the experimental group of the study

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test EX	14.3333	15	1.11270	0.28730
	Post-test EX	16.7333	15	2.05171	0.52975

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics such as mean, number of the participants (n=15), and standard deviation. The subjects' performance is revealed by the mean scores. The mean score of the pre-test is 14.3333 (N=15, SD = 1.11270) and the mean score of the post- test is 16.7333 (N=15, SD=2.05171). Table 1 manifested that the mean score of the experimental group was raised significantly after being exposed to the treatment (using the practice of dialogue). It means that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores in terms of their mean scores. The standard deviation revealed that the participants of the experimental group performed differently before and after practice of dialogue.

Table 2. Descriptive results of the control group of the study

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Pre-test CON	12.1333	15	2.50333	0.64636
	Post-test CON	12.4000	15	2.77231	0.71581

Table 2 indicates the descriptive statistics of the control group who received written practice for idioms. As it is shown, the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test in the control group are M= 12.1333 (N=15, SD= 2.50333) and M= 12.4000 (n=15, SD = 2.77231), respectively. The mean scores of the control group were raised from 12.1333 to 12.4000 but the mean scores of the experimental group were raised higher. These descriptive statistics represented the difference between pre-test and post-test score of both experimental and control groups.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-test results of the study

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Observed t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Idioms	Equal variances assumed	4.866	28	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed	4.866	25.797	0.000
		Critical t = 2.048		

Based on the Table 3, the observed t value of the study for independent samples T-test was calculated as to be 4.866 (tobs = 4.866), and the degree of freedom was 28 (df=28). The observed t value calculated by SPSS was 4.866 (t obs= 4.866) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2- tailed significance level of 0.00 (p = 0.00) was 2.048 (t crit = 2.048). Thus the observed t was higher than the critical t and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of this study. Finally, the level of significance was calculated as to be 0.00 (p=0.00) which has been used in interpreting the data for the rejection or support of the hypothesis of the study.

The next inferential analysis of the data of this study was related to the degree of progress of the participants from the pretest to the posttest of the study. This was indicated by calculating the paired sample t-test. The results of the paired

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sample t-test from pretest to posttest scores of the experimental and control group of the study have been illustrated in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Paired sample results of the study

		Observed t	Critical t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pre-test EX – Posttest EX	3.948	2.145	14	0.001
Pair 2	Pre-test Con – Posttest Con	1. 293	2.145	14	0.021

As it is clear in the above Table, the observed t between the pretest and post-test of the experimental group is 3.948, and the observed t between the pretest and the post-test of the control group is 1.293 and the critical t was 2.048 (t_{crit} = 2.048). Also the level of significance in both pairs is lower than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) which indicates that the obtained data have been dependable enough and calculations are error-free.

5. Discussion

The current study aimed at making a comparison between two methods, namely dialogue role play and written practice, for EFL learners' idiomatic competence. In other words, the aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of using role-play through dialogues vs. written practice on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of English idioms. The study concluded that although both methods of instruction for idiomatic competence were helpful at improving Iranian EFL learners' idiomatic knowledge after the treatment, learners who received instruction in idiomatic competence through role playing in dialogue significantly outperformed the learners who were taught dialogue idioms via written practice. The results of the study reconfirm the importance of dialogue and role play practice in language learning. Thus, the findings of the current study are in line with what Scott and Ytreberg (2000), Nunan (2003), Wilkins (1976), and Fraser, Rintell, and Walters (1980) believe, to name but a few.

According to Scott and Ytreberg (2000), "Dialogues can provide situations for students to practice ordinary conversation and offer students ample practice with basic speaking skills in context. Firstly, dialogues can be viewed as short plays and used for students to act out rather than simply read aloud. Moreover, the dialogues the students write function as basic communication at all levels. In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role- play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels" (P. 176). Nunan (2003) stated that role-plays are also great activities for learners to speak and communicate in a relatively safe environment of the classroom before entering the real life communication in an actual conversational environment.

As a result, it is strongly advised that dialogue and role play practice can provide an atmosphere for language learners to act out and practice oral skill prior to playing major roles in the actual conversations out of the classroom environments. The improvement in learners' idiomatic competence has to do with their increased vocabulary knowledge, improved communicative skill, increased understanding of communicative events which all of them gave the right meaning of idioms to the learners. This contextualization was far more effective in dialogue than in written practice. Role play activities provided both the contexts and opportunities for learners to learn idioms more effectively.

In addition, the importance of teaching and learning idiomatic expression in contexts has been the recurrent theme in idiomatic competence development in recent years. In fact, teaching idioms give the students the chance to take part in natural conversational events. The results of this study, though limited in scope, are also in line with other researchers who suggest that for learning idioms, using them in production is more effective than de-contextualized learning (e.g., Swain, 1996). The results of the study further challenge Waring (1997), Nation (1994), and Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), who have tried to cast doubt on the effectiveness of contextualized methods of vocabulary and idioms learning for all learners and believe that learning words 'out of context' and in a de-contextualized manner such as studying word lists, doing vocabulary exercises, or even by reading through a learners' dictionary, are more effective, especially for beginning and intermediate learners. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it can be implied that attempts should be made to provide learners with situations in which English words and idioms are presented in the context of speaking and writing. The findings of the study which suggested a significant difference between

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conversation and paragraph writing groups in favor of the conversation group, further support this idea that contextualization matters a great deal in language learning.

To recapitulate the findings of the study, out of the two treatments given to the two experimental groups, dialogue role play had a significantly higher impact on the idiom learning of the participants largely due to the fact that in designing and performing the conversations, the learners needed to interact with one another cooperatively, whereas in the paragraph writing group, the learners engaged in an individual activity rather than an interactive and communicative one. Interaction and cooperative learning are key factors in language education and many investigations indicated their effectiveness in language learning. Interaction is said to be input providing, to cause negotiation of meaning or interactional modifications, and to attract interlocutors' attention to focus on the form of the input (Swain, 2000).

Similarly, Swain (2000) asserts that, "When a collaborative effort is being made by participants in an activity, their speaking (or writing) mediates this effort. As each participant speaks, their 'saying' becomes 'what they said', providing an object for reflection" (p. 113). In conclusion, she points out that collaboration and interaction can lead to the construction of the new knowledge because they improve learners' performance and language use. Eventually, as Swain (2000) emphasizes, collaborative dialogue moves learners towards engagement in problem-solving and knowledge-building process. Therefore, one can interpret that interaction was a main reason why the dialogue group outperformed the written practice group in terms of improvement in its idiomatic knowledge.

6. Conclusion

The results of the present study enunciated that role-play through dialogues seems to provide a sort of enjoyable environment for learners to flourish in. This reason leads to better attention and stimulates learners to participate in role-play through dialogues activities. In these activities, students learn idioms through dialogues and using the dialogue classroom enhances learners' knowledge of idioms The results of this study were positive and there was a positive relationship between role play through dialogues and knowledge of English idioms of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that visualization technique is effective in the improvement of learning idioms of EFL learners. It can be inferred that considering idiom teaching, the traditional way of vocabulary and idioms teaching makes the students lazy and bored. The teachers need something different to make students interested and motivated. They should combine their idiom teaching method with different learning techniques. The suggested visualization technique requires the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques in classroom teaching. It can simultaneously meet various needs of learners to enhance memory and learning.

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