Teaching of Idiomatic Expressions in Teaching English as a second Language in Sri Lanka

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Abstract— Idioms are one vital component every language around the world owns which entails an intended meaning behind them. Idioms and idiomaticity enable one to develop figurative competency, a component of communicative competency, which ultimately enables one to master overall language competency. Since there are different varieties of the English language, there are idioms from such varieties that can be used to identify the culture of the language and any hidden meanings. When teaching English as a second language (ESL), it is essential to expose the second language (L2) learners to such idioms from varieties of English. A corpus-based textbook analysis was done using the English grade 10 and 11 textbooks from the local syllabus in Sri Lanka to determine to what extent second language acquisition through idioms is supported by these texts. The findings indicate that idiom usage is very confined in English textbooks for grades 10 and 11, and that all those idioms that are included are of one specific variety —British English—and are not from different varieties. The study's findings unambiguously support the Sri Lankan L2 learners' minimal exposure to idiomaticity. This talk will highlight these findings and propose improvements that can be made to the syllabus to increase learner understanding of idioms.

*Keywords— **ESL, idioms, varieties of English, communicative competence***

I. INTRODUCTION

Idioms are one vital component in every language around the world. Idiomatic expressions are phrases or groups of words with a meaning different from the literal interpretation of the individual words. They often carry a figurative or metaphorical meaning and are unique to a particular language or culture. Idioms have their origins deeply intertwined with a language's history, customs, and traditions. They hold a significant function in everyday dialogues, literature, and casual communication. (Blinova, 2021). Teaching idiomatic expressions in the context of teaching English as a second language is an important aspect of language learning. Idioms add depth and richness to communication, allowing learners to sound more fluent and natural. Therefore, materials and content in textbooks of second language learners should incorporate idioms of varieties of English such as localized English, American English, Australian English…etc. In Sri Lankan context a good exposure to idiomaticity of varieties of English can greatly enhance students' language proficiency and cultural understanding (Bouherar, 2017). Therefore, incorporating them into language lessons can help students develop more natural and fluent (Maisa et al 2013), communication competency.

II. IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

Teaching idiomatic expressions is significant in the context of teaching English as a second language and language learning, as it directly contributes to the developing communicative competence; the ability to use and comprehend language effectively and appropriately in various social and cultural contexts. It encompasses not only the grammatical and lexical aspects of language but also understanding and using language in context. Idiomatic expressions, which are phrases or sentences that have a meaning beyond the literal interpretation, are an integral part of authentic language use. The second language learners in the context of English language education needs to be exposed to idiomaticity from different varieties of English not just one exact variety. The exposure they get will benefit them in various ways. Learners who are familiar with idiomatic expressions often can better comprehend and respond to authentic language in context. By teaching idioms, learners gain insight into cultural background and context in which the language is used. This understanding enhances their ability to communicate in an effective way with both native and non-native speakers and interpret language in its cultural context.

Several studies have been conducted on the area of idiomaticity in several countries in the context of second language teaching and language learning.

A study conducted by Blinova et al (2021) on idiomaticity sheds lights on an "idiomatic paradox", where, native speakers in speaking discourse cling on to idioms while even advanced learners find it hard to comprehend and decode the meaning behind them (Prodromou, 2003 cited in Blinova et. Al., 2021). This study discusses why idioms present difficulties for learners and the common difficulties that the learners face in the presence of idioms (Blinova et al., 2021).

Another corpus-based study conducted on idiomaticity by Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi (2019), explores a more effective approach to teaching and learning idioms by categorizing them based on their common themes and topics. The traditional method of teaching idioms usually relies on the judgement of teachers or materials writers, often on an individual basis. To address this, the study utilizes corpus linguistics, specifically the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which is a large and freely available collection of texts, aiming to design and develop more authentic and systematic teaching materials for idioms using comprehensive corpora, as they provide the best representation of the target language. The study employs a manuscript written by a professional computer programmer, specifically created for this purpose. The researchers searched for the thematic index of 1506 idioms under 81 categories at the end of the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms. They then used the COCA corpus, which consists of over 520 million words, to analyze the idioms and determine their frequencies within their respective theme-based categories. The findings of the study resulted in a list of idioms sorted by their frequencies under specific thematic categories. This list can be used by materials designers, teachers, and learners of English to focus on the more frequently used idioms in real contexts. It can serve as a valuable resource for incorporating idioms into textbooks and designing engaging classroom activities centered around idiomatic expressions (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2019).

The study conducted by Callies (2017) explores the culture-specific aspects of figurative language, specifically idioms, in different varieties of English. The paper examines idiomatic expressions related food and eating in various English varieties, particularly focusing on (West) African Englishes. This study suggests that idioms are conceptually motivated by underlying metaphorical mappings and reflect the intersection of language and culture. By analyzing data from large-scale web corpora, the paper investigates the lexico-grammatical and conceptual variations in selected food and eating idioms. The findings reveal patterns of lexico-grammatical variation and innovation in idiomatic expressions in West African Englishes. The research confirms previous studies that highlight the significance and frequency of food and eating-related concepts as source domains in conceptual metaphorical mappings within West African cultures (Callies, 2017).

Although several studies have been conducted on idiomaticity around the world, the lack of research focused on this area, particularly in Sri Lankan context, is evident. It is crucial to draw necessary attention to this area since idiomaticity enhances one's language competence. Therefore, this study sheds lights on to the importance of teaching of idiomatic expressions in teaching English as a second language in Si Lanka.

The study aims to address the following question.

- To what extent the English as a second language acquisition through idioms is supported by the grade 10 and 11 textbooks of local syllabus in Sri Lanka.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To conduct the corpus based textbook analysis, particularly to analyse the use of idiomatic language in grades 10 and 11 English pupils' books, the computer-based software; LancsBox is used. As the main objective of this research, is to identify the frequency of idiomatic language and to ensure the textbooks represent and cover a range of topics relevant to idiomatic language that are used in grade 10 and 11 English textbooks, the soft copies of the textbooks are imported into Lancsbox, ensuring each book is treated as a separate document. Then pre-processed the texts to prepare them for analysis by applying necessary pre-processing steps and customized the pre-processing settings based on the textbook analysis requirements. As the next step specified the analysis features the idiomatic language and sets up specific parameters related to idiomatic languages. Next functioned the additional settings to analyse the frequency of idiomatic language and run the analysis. Finally, the software processed the texts and generated the results based on the criteria included in the Lancsbox.

V. FINDINGS

According to the textbook analysis results, there was only one activity in the grade 10 English pupils' book and one activity in the grade 11 English pupils' book on idioms. Idioms were used only in the eleventh activity of the fourth chapter (Let's Talk) of the grade 10 textbook and, in the thirteenth activity of the fifth chapter (Best use of time) of the year 11 textbook. Both in the grade 10 and 11 English textbooks, there were only two activities to match the idioms with the meanings. Moreover, these activities were just isolated without any contexts in which they had been used. Based on the analysis there were not any lessons related to idioms. The aim of this analysis was to find out to what extent the idiomatic language has been used in grade 10 and 11 English textbooks. The results show that a

very limited exposure to idiomatic language has been provided, and the idiomatic language used in the textbook is not from different varieties of English but just only British English. Moreover, the results show the zero amount of example provided to demonstrate how these idioms are used in real language contexts.

.VI. SUGGESTIONS

The grade 10 and 11 English textbooks from Sri Lankan local syllabus need to incorporate more lessons that include idiomatic expressions from verities of English and make sure the books include localized Sri Lankan varieties as well since the Sri Lankan learners are already familiar with localized idioms. The activities based on idioms need to be followed by examples where the learners get exposed to how idioms are used in real life contexts.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The English textbooks of grade 10 and 11 of Sri Lanka gives limited exposure of idioms of English to the second language learners. The limited idioms mentioned in the two books are from British English only. No other variations of idioms in English such as localized variations, American English, Australian English…etc. seem to be mentioned alongside the British English. Moreover, the second language learners are not exposed to how those idioms are used in real life context since there is no lessons with examples and passage, dialogues, and contexts in these two books in which idioms are used. This limited exposure to idioms may obstruct the learner's communicative competency in real life since they are not exposed to idioms from varieties of English. When communicative competency is hindered with limited exposure the learner may struggle in real life language situations by not being able to decode the discourse, hidden meaning, intended meaning.

VII. CONCLUSION

The corpus based textbook analysis which was conducted using the English grade 10 and 11 textbooks from local syllabus in Sri Lanka to determine to what extent second language acquisition through idioms is supported by these texts, demonstrate the limited exposure that the second language learners have been provided. The limited exposure of idioms, particularly the idioms from varieties of English may result in the obstruction of the communicative competence of the second language learners. Therefore, these textbooks should take measures to approach this issue in a way that is effective. The local English textbooks should incorporate idioms from varieties of English, not just, one variety of English alongside the textbooks need to include idioms not separately but how it is used in authentic contexts using real life examples.

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