The Effect of Explicit Teaching of Idioms on Strategy Choice for EFL Learners in a Reading Comprehension Test

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Abstract: Research has shown that students tend to choose their preferred strategy when they are asked to find the meaning of idiomatic phrases in a text. This study investigates how English learners choose their preferred strategies to find the correct definition of idiomatic phrases. Thirty-three learners of English were given a reading passage which consisted of twenty idiomatic expressions, and their strategy choice in finding the correct definition of each phrase was examined. The participants were divided into two groups. The experimental group (with seventeen students) was taught idioms explicitly during the course and the control group (with sixteen students) did not receive any explicit instruction in learning idioms. The results showed that among the given strategies, the group which was taught explicitly tended to choose "using dictionary" more often whereas the other group preferred to "ask the teacher". As Rodríguez and Winnberg (2013) observed, learners try different strategies and techniques when they encounter a problem and as teachers it is important to notice that every student has a particular way of learning. This study suggests that teaching idioms explicitly should be combined with implicit learning in EFL contexts. Furthermore, learners need more exposure (explicit or implicit) to the meaning and usage of idiomatic phrases in order to master this complex field of learning.

Keywords: Idioms | Explicit Teaching

El efecto de la enseñanza explícita de modismos en la elección de estrategias por parte de estudiantes de inglés en una prueba de comprensión lectora

Resumen: La investigación muestra que los estudiantes tienden a escoger su estrategia preferida al pedirles que encuentren el significado de modismos en un texto. Este estudio investiga la elección de estrategias preferidas por parte de estudiantes de inglés para encontrar la definición correcta de estas expresiones. A treinta y tres estudiantes de inglés se les proporcionó un texto escrito que consistía en veinte modismos y se examinó la estrategia elegida para encontrar la definición correcta de cada frase. Los participantes se dividieron en dos grupos. Al grupo experimental (con diecisiete estudiantes) se le enseñaron modismos de forma explícita durante el curso. El grupo control (con dieciséis estudiantes) no recibió instrucción explícita de las expresiones. Los resultados muestran que de las estrategias proporcionadas, el grupo que recibió instrucción explícita eligió "usar el diccionario" más a menudo mientras el otro grupo prefería "preguntar al profesor". Como observaron Rodríguez y Winnberg (2013), los estudiantes prueban diferentes estrategias y técnicas cuando encuentran un problema y como profesores es importante tener en cuenta que cada estudiante tiene un estilo particular de aprendizaje. Este estudio sugiere que la enseñanza explícita de modismos se debe combinar con el aprendizaje implícito en contextos de aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera. Además, los estudiantes necesitan más contacto (explícito o implícito) con el significado y uso de modismos para dominar esta complicada área de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Modismos | Enseñanza Explícita

1. Introduction

According to Spears (2005), "all languages have phrases that cannot be understood literally and, therefore, cannot be used with confidence". He adds that idioms are unclear or erratic because their meaning is not fixed and easily understood by nature. As Wang and Wang (2013) have noted "Idiom is a language in the formation of the

unique and fixed expressions in the using process". They say that idioms have exclusive features and patterns and they are frequently used in speech or printed form because they can convey not only the language that is desired by the speaker or writer but also the cultural norms which exist within the language and society.

The definition that Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary proposes is as follows "an idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit" (1997, p.734). According to Zengxin (2004) the meaning of idioms is not the sum total of every word or phrase. These definitions show that idioms are used to convey the message indirectly. But in a non-naturalistic setting learners need to know the meaning of idioms and have the knowledge to use them appropriately. There are different strategies and techniques that learners use in order to solve an idiom.

The purpose of this study is to examine what kinds of strategies are preferred by students in comprehending the correct meaning of idiomatic phrases in different contexts. For this reason they were given some strategies and their choice of strategies was examined. There are difficulties for learners to have a clear understanding of idioms. Grant and Bauer (2004) remind us that many figurative expressions can be "undone" or "unpicked" to work out the meaning; linguists refer to these as "transparent" or "decomposable" idioms. On the other hand, there are opaque idioms that have little (if any) overlap with the literal meaning. Since not all idioms are equal, there is not one single definition accepted by all scholars. Research shows that idioms have more specific and complex meanings than their literal paraphrases (Gibbs, 1992). According to Gibbs, Wilson, and Bryant (2012) idiomatic phrases are those expressions that usually bring an image to mind and they are frequently used in different types of communication almost everywhere so the fact that the meaning of each idiomatic phrase needs to be recognized in the context is undeniable since the image can differ considerably for every individual unless it occurs in a particular context.

Contextual clues are useful to learners in comprehending unknown idioms. Cooper (1999) explored the comprehension strategies used by L2 learners when trying to decipher the meanings of English idioms in one- or two-sentence contexts. The most commonly used strategies were guessing from context, discussing and analyzing the idiom, and using the literal meaning. Overall, guessing from context was the most successful strategy, leading to correct interpretation in 57 percent of the cases (Zyzik 2009). Cain and Towse (2008) believe that idiomatic expressions are understood in relation to the context in which they are used. For most idioms different scenarios could be used to support the literal and figurative interpretations, although not all idioms can support a sensible literal interpretation. As a result, the skills used to process and understand language in context are thought to be important for the development of idiom understanding (Levorato and Cacciari, 1995). When an idiom is unfamiliar, it may be (partly) understood by analysis of the meanings of the words in the phrase (Nippold and Taylor, 1995). In this sense, the context can be a useful tool for students to understand the definitions of idioms. Learners mostly prefer strategies that are context-based. In this study, we examine if any other types of strategies such as using a dictionary or getting help from the context are used by the learners in a class context. Subsequently, we sought to determine the effect of teaching idioms explicitly to the learners.

Although it is unlikely (and unrealistic) to expect an ESL student to master the 5,000 idioms in the Cambridge dictionary of American idioms (Heacock, 2003), teaching idioms as opposed to implicit learning plays an essential role in learners'

comprehension of the meanings of idioms and helps them make use of them in their everyday utterances more easily. Teaching idioms based on their underlying themes or literal origins is a potentially useful approach. It shows that explicitly teaching idioms can make a considerable difference in learning them. For example, Boers et al. (2004) outlines a teaching method based on problem-solving tasks in which students are made aware of the origin of figurative idioms.

The main question that is raised is the strategy that learners adopt when they encounter an idiomatic expression in a context. The main aim of this study is to investigate the role of teaching idioms explicitly on students' recognition of idioms. The strategy can be context-dependent or independent.

1.4 Research Questions

Studies (Cain and Towse, 2008; Nippold and Taylor, 1995; Cooper, 1999) show that the right definition of idiomatic phrases comes out of context but none of them have investigated the effects of explicit teaching of idioms on understanding the meaning of them and the kinds of strategies that are preferred by students who have been learning idioms directly. As a result this study aims to answer these two questions:

1. How does teaching idioms explicitly influence understanding the meaning of them?

2. What kinds of strategies are mostly used by students who were taught idioms directly? And how do these strategies differ from students who have not been taught explicitly?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Thirty three learners (male and female) of upper intermediate level of English participated in this study. Participants were divided into two groups of students, a control group with 16 students and an experimental group with 17 students. The age range for both groups was fourteen to nineteen. Gender was not taken into account in this study. The main book assigned for these courses was English Result Upper-intermediate. The book of "idioms and phrasal verbs" published by Oxford University Press was also being taught along with the main book (English Result) for the experimental group (the group which were taught idioms explicitly). The study was done in order to evaluate what types of strategies are preferred by each group of learners and the effect of explicit teaching have on learners' strategy choice in a reading comprehension test.

2.2 Instrument and Procedure

A text of 287 words, consisting of 20 idiomatic phrases with the title of "English language is full of fun stuff" was given to each student in both groups (see appendix for the full text). They had twenty minutes to read and understand the meaning of all the idioms. Then they were asked to fill in the table with the strategy they had used to define the phrase. Five strategies were given as follows: "using a dictionary", "asking the teacher", "wise guessing", "asking peers" and "ignoring". They were asked to write only the definition of the idiomatic phrases that they were sure of and for the cases that they could not come up with the right definition they were asked to choose "ignoring" strategy.

3. Analysis

The reading comprehension test consisting of twenty idiomatic phrases was given to both groups of learners and the following results, as shown in table 1, were observed for the experimental group. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of choice of strategies by the learners that were being taught the idioms explicitly during their course. For example student #1 (S1) used the strategy of "using dictionary" six times as his/her most preferred strategy and "asking peers" just for one item, which was the least likely strategy for this learner. This learner could define 14 idioms correctly and used "ignoring" strategy six times. This observation shows that student #1 was a competent learner and showed mastery in the field of idiom recognition.

Student number 9 achieved the best score, 17. As shown in the table he/she used the dictionary for eight items and the least used strategy was "asking the teacher". As will be discussed in more detail, despite learners' level of English and the procedures that were used in their course they generally did not achieve high scores. The frequency usage of each strategy is shown in figure 1. Students in the experimental group which had the book of "idioms and phrasal verbs" unsurprisingly could give the right definition to more items than the control group.

Students / Strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17
Using Dictionary	6	6	8	4	7	6	5	3	8	6	6	7	7	5	3	4	7
Wise Guessing	3	3	2	1	2	3	3	0	4	3	2	2	2	1	0	1	2
Asking peers	1	2	3	2	3	5	2	2	3	2	0	3	3	2	0	4	2
Asking the teacher	4	2	3	3	3	1	2	4	2	3	4	1	3	3	5	1	3
Ignoring	6	7	4	10	5	5	8	11	3	6	8	7	5	9	12	10	5
Score	14	13	16	10	15	15	12	9	17	14	12	13	15	11	8	10	15

Table 1. Scores of experimental group

As shown in figure 1 "ignoring" strategy is used most frequently. When a considerable number of students have chosen to ignore defining the idiomatic phrase it shows that the task was slightly higher than the level of the students' proficiency. Among other types of strategies "using dictionary" was used more often than the others and it shows that although they were taught idioms explicitly they tended to use their dictionaries more. Using a dictionary for this group is in line with what Angel (2014) investigated. As she found out trained learners tend to use their dictionaries more than untrained learners. Consequently the group who were more aware of structures of idioms used this strategy more often and it can be concluded that teaching explicitly may lead learners to use their dictionary for finding the appropriate definition of idiomatic phrases.
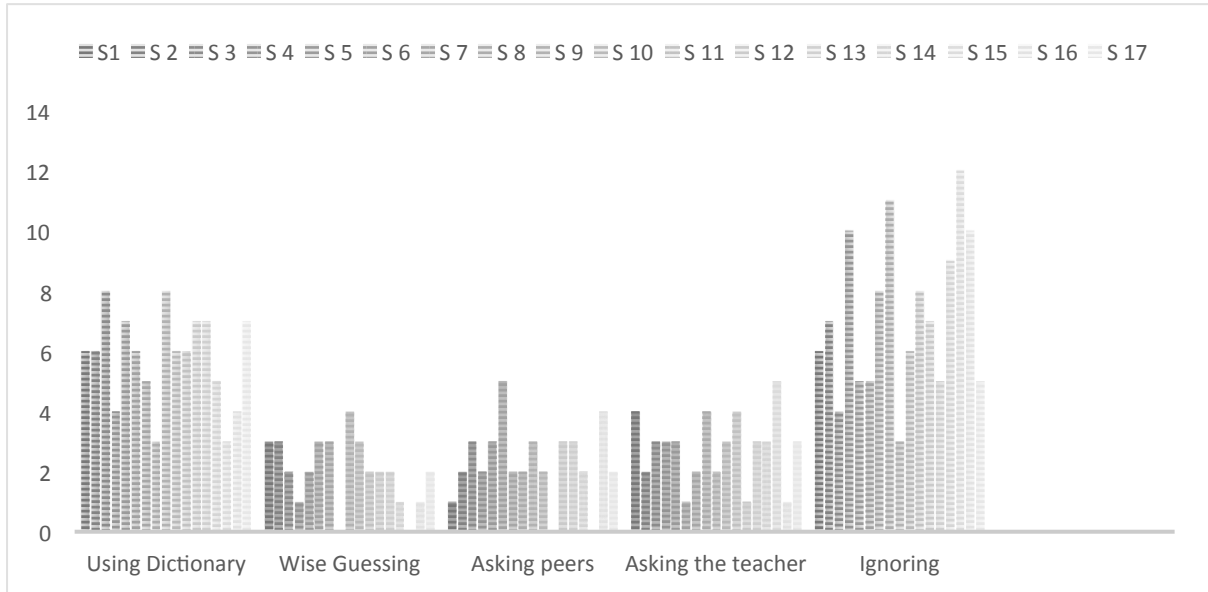
Figure 1. Students' Performance in the Experimental Group

Table 2 shows the measures of central tendency. The most common score is 15 while the mean is 12.88 and this measure is nearly at the middle score, median. The scores show that although students had been taught idioms explicitly and are studying at a high level of proficiency they could not find and define them effectively. As Nippold (1995) observed, this could be because of limited exposure to authentic everyday language.

Measures of Central Tendency	
Mode	15
Mean	12.88
Median	13
Range	9

Table 2. Measures of central tendency

The score of 12.88 (approximately 13) represents the mean; therefore, the scores higher than 13 ~~as~~ are considered high scores and scores lower than the mean are considered lowscores. As a result more proficient students tended to use their dictionary more whereas students with scores lower than 13 used the strategy of "asking the teacher" more often.
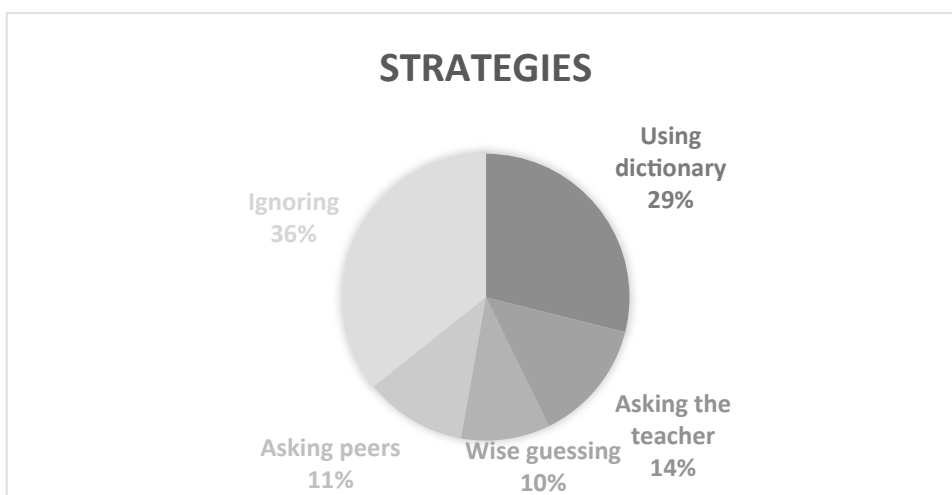
Figure 2. Frequency of strategies used by experimental group

The scores obtained by the second group are shown in table 3. As reflected although the control group did not have the opportunity to use the book of "idioms" which was part of the syllabus in the first group (they were exposed to the idioms implicitly, unlike the first group), they performed nearly the same as the experimental group. This shows that although the book had a positive effect during the course, this impact was not considerable and both groups that were studying English in the upper intermediate level had almost the same performance. That shows us that explicit teaching of idioms during only one term did not make a significant difference and the learners need to be exposed to idioms explicitly throughout their English program.

Students / Strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
Using Dictionary	3	4	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	2
Wise Guessing	2	3	0	1	2	0	3	1	1	1	3	2	2	3	1	2
Asking Peers	3	2	2	3	4	2	3	2	4	2	2	4	4	3	4	3
Asking the teacher	2	2	3	6	5	3	4	6	3	4	6	2	5	6	3	5
Ignoring	10	9	12	7	6	13	8	9	10	11	6	9	9	5	10	8
Score	10	11	8	13	14	7	12	11	10	9	14	11	11	15	10	12

Table 3. Scores of Control group

The frequency of strategy usage is shown in figure 3. For the second group however there was an interesting finding that they tended to ask their teacher more than other strategies (again ignoring was used ~~at~~ most probably because of the difficulty of the task). As ~~it is~~ shown in table 3 the usage of "ignoring" is higher among these students which could be due to the ~~and it can be an effect of~~ absence of the "idiom" book in their syllabus. Asking the teacher and asking peers are two frequent strategies among these students. For these learners that did not have the chance of explicitly learning ~~of~~ idioms ~~usage of~~ using a dictionary is in the third position.
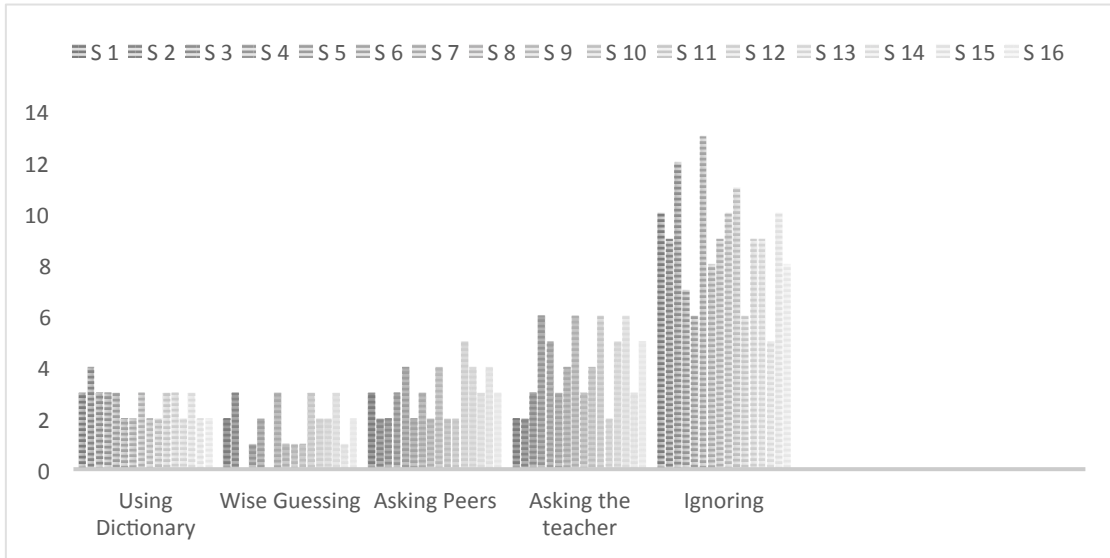
Figure 3. Students' Performance in the control group

As shown in table 4, although students in the second group tended to ask the teacher or their peers, tendency toward using their dictionary or guessing wisely for those who received a score over 11 was higher than the students with lower scores which could be a result of their proficiency. Interestingly, the mode, mean and median are almost the same. Still the fact that these students haven't yet gained mastery over idioms is obvious but there is a slight difference between the two groups. According to tables 3 and 4 the students in the experimental group that had the book of idioms did slightly better than the second group although still the two groups lag behind considerably.

Measures of central tendency	
Mode	11
Mean	11.125
Median	11
Range	8

Table 4. Measures of central tendency

As shown in Figure 4 students in the second group had a preference towards asking their teacher in order to find the right definition of the idiomatic phrase, and they even preferred asking their peers rather than using their dictionary or trying to guess wisely. The highest percentage is for "ignoring" which tells us that these students tended to ignore more choices.
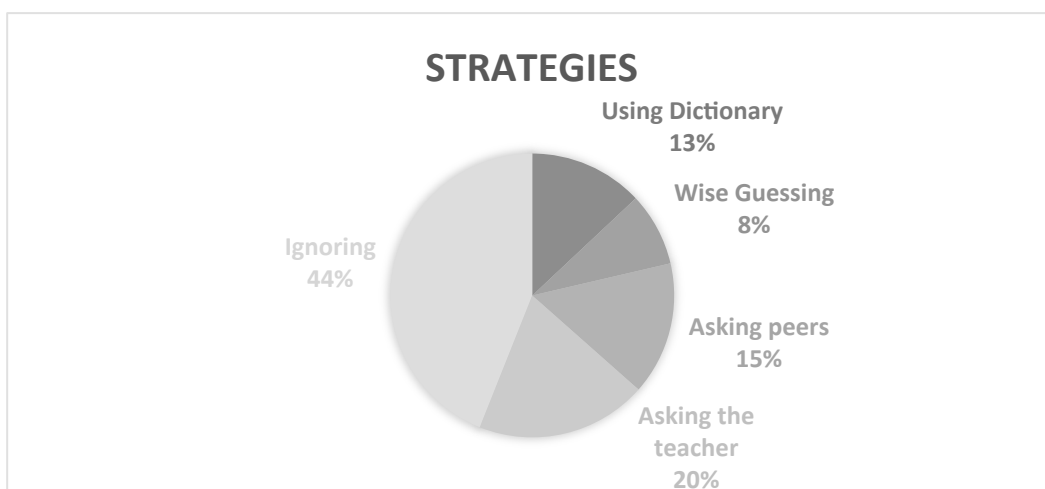
STRATEGIES

Using Dictionary
13%

Wise Guessing
8%

Asking peers
15%

Asking the
teacher
20%

Ignoring
44%

Figure 4. Frequency of strategies used by control group

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Idioms are an integral part of every language and learners need to be taught whether implicitly or explicitly both the meaning of idioms and how to use them. Schmitt (2000) proposes that by explicit learning we emphasize the knowledge that is going to be learned directly which can lead to acquisition of the desired knowledge. According to Brown (2007) explicit learning is "conscious awareness and intention to learn" as a result the findings for the learners who worked on the idioms in a direct way are scientifically clear although this explicit way of teaching had a slight effect on the first group. In line with what Zyzik (2011) found after giving students explicit instruction, the results indicated a significant effect of the treatment; however no significant advantage was found for the thematic grouping of idioms. In contrast to our findings Vahid Dastjerdy and A'lipour (2010) believe that "a combination of both implicit and explicit techniques would be the best recipe for EFL learners" but note that an inclination toward the explicit end of the continuum can be more productive, because there is no regular pattern of languages, namely, the words of a language cannot be changed. We also believe that implicit teaching should not be put aside but the findings show that students could have made use of explicit teaching to have better performance.

Another point that can be drawn is that using the book of idioms and explicit teaching of idioms did not cause a considerable variation on the two groups. Comparing the two means (11.125 and 12.88) ~~says~~ shows that using this book during one term did not have a high impact on the results of the test, although the first group did better and used the strategy of "ignoring" less than the other group.

Explicitly teaching the idioms undeniably had a positive effect on the recognition of the definition of idiomatic phrases but the case is that ~~they~~ students used their dictionary often. Moreover as Swain (1993) indicates in his output hypothesis "through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur". Therefore, it can be concluded that explicit teaching not only can result in a better understanding of idioms in the test but shows the~~ir~~ slight mastery which led to the use of dictionaries more often than the control group.

Angel (2014) found that learners who have been taught idioms explicitly tended to use their dictionaries more than untrained students, which is in line with our findings. Based on our findings and in terms of the strategies that were used more often by learners, students who had the book tended to use their dictionary (13% for the control group, 29% for students in the experimental group) whereas students who did not receive

explicit teaching of idioms, did not have the book in their syllabus, asked their teacher (20% for the second group and 14% for the first group) or their peers (15% for the second group and 11% for the first group) more often. This shows that students who had the supplementary book referred more to a dictionary whereas students that didn't have it in their syllabus asked more.

The strategy of "wise guessing" was picked up in Angel's study however it had the least frequency among the strategies (8% for the second group and 10% for the first group), possibly because of their knowledge of idioms or the inefficiency of this strategy. As Rodriguez and Winnberg (2013) investigated, this variation among strategy usage shows the uniqueness of the learners which indicates that each learner chooses his/her own preferred strategy for finding the acceptable solution.

According to Zyzik (2009) "guessing from context, discussing and analyzing the idiom, and using the literal meaning" have been the most used strategies, but in this study we can refer to analyzing the idioms or literal meaning through the strategy labeled as "using dictionary" which was most often chosen by learners who were taught idioms explicitly. Consequently teaching idioms explicitly can lead to highly positive results in terms of idiom recognition and definition.

This study shows that for upper-intermediate students that already had the chance of learning idiomatic phrases and phrasal verbs during their routine lessons, teaching a book such as the one we had (idioms and phrasal verbs by Oxford University Press) although it can have clear positive effect on their recognition and understanding of idioms would show that these learners would refer more to their dictionaries than their teacher, which as previously mentioned happens because of their slight mastery of this language knowledge.

In conclusion, having the supplementary book in our syllabus students not only did better on the test and had a more effective performance on strategy choosing but also could be more independent and rely on themselves rather than asking the teacher or their peers. The students without the book tended to get more help from others (teacher or peers). All in all teachers should sporadically use explicit teaching regarding idioms and use activities that require students to cope with idioms more directly.

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Appendix

The following piece of a story was given to the students; they were asked to choose the method they used for finding the correct definition of each underlined idiomatic phrase.

Give the right definition to the underlined idiomatic phrases, then choose which strategy you used. **Just write the definition of those that you know the right meaning**, if you don't know the definition choose "ignoring" strategy.

Well, to make a long story short, Sugar Daddy finds his heart in his mouth when he sees what a pickle he's in. So he grabs his cell phone and calls his flavor of the month (my friend) and starts crying in his beer about how he's going to be toast if she doesn't hustle her bustle over there and help him put some lipstick on the pig before the police throw him in the pokey.

Now, I have to admit, she's a little wet behind the ears, otherwise she would have known that he was feeding her a line. But no, she swallows it hook, line and sinker. She throws caution to the wind and lays rubber all the way across town to rescue a drunk who's dumber than a stump.

When she walked in the bar, the victim was still out cold and she actually thought he had kicked the bucket - you know, bought the farm. But she got him on his feet and paid through the nose for a cab to take him home. Then she and Sugar Daddy took a powder before the cavalry arrived.

But here's the icing on the cake. The next day, Sugar Daddy hands my friend the green weenie! That's right. He says he needs some space, wants to consider his options, and thinks they should cool it.

Well, I tried to soft peddle it for my friend's sake, but she really kissed the pooch on this one. I should have just put my cards on the table and told her that's what happens when you wear your heart on your sleeve. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!

Oh well, that's how the cookie crumbles.

No	The right Definition	Strategies				
		Using dictionary	Wise guessing	Asking peers	Asking the teacher	ignoring
01						
02						
03						
…						