

**Teaching english through proverbs
Utilizarea proverbelor în predarea limbii
engleze**

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Abstract

Maxims, proverbs and other forms of folk wisdom reveal the truth about the human nature and the physical world, and each culture expresses this truth in its own unique way. This article zeroes in on the relevance of proverbs as an effective pedagogic resource. The work tends to draw attention to the fact that the utilisation of proverbs in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, in this instance the English language, is a pragmatic approach and a more stimulating, more thought-provoking and more effective way of instruction and comprehension of the material under study, and that diverse forms of popular wisdom can afford a basis for a multitude of classroom activities which would demonstrate their considerable didactic potential and impact.

Keywords: teaching proverbs, teaching the English language.

Rezumat

Maximele, proverbele și alte formule care prezintă înțelepciunea populară dezvăluie adevărul despre natura umană și mediul înconjurător pe care fiecare cultură îl exprimă în felul său, unic. Acest articol are ca scop relevarea importanței proverbelor în calitate de resursă instructivă eficientă. Studiul tinde să sublinieze faptul că utilizarea proverbelor în procesul de predarea-învățare a unei limbi, în cazul de față, a limbii engleze, constituie o abordare pragmatică și un mod mai stimulat, mai eficient de însușire a materialului studiat și că diversele forme de exprimare a înțelepciunii populare pot fi încadrate într-o multitudine de activități, care demonstrează potențialul și impactul didactic considerabil al acestora

Cuvinte-cheie:

predarea proverbelor, predarea limbii engleze.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS

Proverbs are a part of every language and culture. They have been used to spread knowledge, wisdom and truths about life from ancient times up to now. Proverbs belong to the traditional verbal folklore genres, and the wisdom of proverbs has been

counsel for people worldwide in their social interaction.

The science which studies the etymology and pragmatics of proverbs, describes and classifies them is called paremiology (from Greek *παροιμία* – *paroimía*, “proverb”). Paremiographers deals with the collection and classification of proverbs, and paremiologists address questions concerning the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning and the value of proverbs. Even though proverbs have been collected and studied for centuries – it can be dated back to Aristotle’s times – there is a major question that arises every now and again, namely, whether proverbs are of great importance for modern civilization, or if they are on their way to extinction in highly developed cultures. Many proverb scholars such as Friedrich Seiler, Raymond William Firth, Archer Taylor, Wolfgang Mieder, Lutz Röhrich, Roger Abrahams, Bengt Holbek; Alan Dundes, Galit Hasan-Rokem, George Milner and Peter Seitel among many others show that proverbs are still alive and illustrate the complex communicative functions the sayings possess. The famous paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder said that “*a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and easily remembered*

form and which is handed down from generation to generation” [1]. The same savant stated that proverbs had derived from the human need to exchange experience. There are proverbs for every conceivable context, and they are thus as irreconcilable as life itself. As Mieder pointed out, “*proverbs are a significant rhetorical force in various modes of communication, from friendly chats, powerful political speeches, and religious sermons to lyrical poetry, best-seller novels, and the influential mass media. Proverbs are in fact everywhere, and it is exactly their ubiquity that has led scholars from many disciplines to study them from classical times to the modern age*” [2]. Their role in building the identity of the societies in which they emerge cannot be denied. That is, they allow us to interpret the experience of a given community through revelation of their food preferences and habits, their symbolic-religious capital, their prejudices, their weather forecasting methods and farming techniques.

In modern times, the interest in paremiology is displayed in the various articles, papers and books dedicated to the study of proverbial texts which are applied in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, linguistics, pedagogy and other domains.

2. THE USE OF PROVERBS IN ENGLISH TEACHING

Proverbs have always been considered an important part of the fostering of children, as they convey moral values and give a person reasons for obeying rules. Many influential studies carried out by Hanzén, Hulstijn, Joe and Laufer, to name but a few, state that proverbs play a consequential role in language teaching, as they can be used as a medium of vocabulary development as well as a medium of gaining cultural knowledge, metaphorical understanding and communicative competence [3; 4; 5; 6].

The use of proverbs in the teaching of modern languages has long been discussed. Many linguists put forward strong arguments for using proverbs as a teaching resource. Various scholars highlight some characteristics of these texts which enhance learning in a wide range of areas: grammar and syntax, phonetics, vocabulary development, culture, reading, speaking and writing [7; 3]. According to the paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder, proverbs have been used and should be used in teaching as didactic tools because *“they belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers, they are indeed very effective devices to communicate wisdom and knowledge about human nature and the world at large”* [8].

He also states that *“proverbs also play a major role in the teaching of English as a second language, where they are included as part of metaphorical and cultural learning”* [2]. Durbin Rowland is another scholar who points at some arguments pro the use of proverbs, namely that proverbs *“stick in the mind”, “build up vocabulary”, “illustrate admirably the phraseology and idiomatic expressions of the foreign tongue”, “contribute gradually to a surer feeling for the foreign tongue”* and *“consume very little time”* [9]. Of no small importance is that proverbs are not only melodic and witty, rhythmic and full of imagery; proverbs also reflect the way of thinking.

Teaching a foreign language can only be successful by developing learners' cultural awareness. One possible approach to that is using authentic texts, and proverbs are the shortest examples of such texts. Curriculums and textbooks for teaching English as a second language should contain proverbs that are part of the Anglo-American paremiological minimum, because proverbs are a significant tool to effectively communicate and to comprehend different spoken and written interlocutions. The person who does not acquire competence in using proverbs will be limited in conversation, and will have difficulty comprehending a wide variety of printed matter, radio and television broadcasts and

songs. It is also important to know that communicative competence requires not only to learn a proverb, but also to know how to use it adequately in different sociocultural situations. To learn a proverb fully entails much more than to understand its meaning; the real linguistic assignment begins when the language learner attempts to learn when and how to apply the proverb to a concrete communicative circumstances.

As proverbs are universal, there are similar proverbs in different nations that put into words tantamount cultural patterns. But, similarities can occur at the phraseological level or at the semantic level; perfect equivalents of proverbs in different cultures happen very rarely. So, the proverbial text is a method of demonstrating that the translation can't be literal, allowing comparison and contrast.

Proverbs also provides a historical perspective of the traditions of a country as “*many proverbs refer to old measurements, obscure professions, outdated weapons, unknown tools, plants, animals, names, and various other traditional matters*” [2]. Teachers should let each student seek and discover meanings, beauty or wit in his/her own manner in accordance with his/her background.

Proverbs are also useful in teaching the differences between spoken and written language, something that often confuses

language learners. Students usually try to use conversational style when they write. Proverbs are a way to assist them in memorizing better the distinction between oral and written English.

Alongside the utilisation of proverbs in order to exemplify grammatical issues, to establish contrastive relations between different linguistic systems, to practice pronunciation, to teach vocabulary and to exercise creative language, they can also be used to approach figurative meaning. Figurative language is used not only in proverbs but also in sayings and maxims, and it is often a problem to foreign language learners to understand them due to their intrinsic metaphorical nature. Some authorities affirm that one way of developing figurative and metaphorical understanding is by using proverbs in the teaching of a foreign language, as “*the vast majority of proverbial sayings are metaphorical*” [10], and because a characteristic of proverbial language is its extensive reliance on colourful speech.

To learn a new word and retain it entails much cognitive exertion on the part of students. A proverb has usually a short form and contains frequently used vocabulary; therefore, it is quite easy to memorize [11]. Hulstijn and Laufer demonstrated that students who had participated in a composition task could

retain target words better than those who had been engaged in a reading-comprehension or fill-in task [6]. Teaching vocabulary with the aid of proverbs can be an effective technique; in this case students are more motivated because they learn authentic language, which can be used in both oral and written communication.

3. CLASS ACTIVITIES

The use of proverbs diversifies the educational process making it more thought-provoking and entertaining. Besides, proverbial texts are short and funny, i.e. they make the learning process easier and more effective. Proverbs and sayings can be used in any stage of a lesson: in warm-up activities, in practicing lexical items, grammar structures, and pronunciation, and in triggering a discussion or a debate. They can also be used as a resource for project work or essay writing. Their capacity for multitasks (coding, decoding, interpretation, translation, etc.) is prodigious.

Here are some very challenging and motivating activities that can be developed in a foreign language class.

1. Ask students to learn one new proverb a week. They have to write it on several ‘sticky notes’ and post them in different places, where they will see them often during the day. As a follow-up activity, each student has to fill-in a worksheet designed to generate a

wordbook/thesaurus, which would include the proverb itself, its explanation (e.g. *Speech is silver, silence is golden. **Meaning:** talk may be beneficial, but sometimes acquiescence may be the best option to take.*) and its mother tongue equivalence, as well as words connected to the topic – nouns, verbs and adjectives.

2. Ask a student to tell a proverb in his/her native language, then asks another student to translate it into English / ask the class to interpret the proverb in English.
3. Ask the class to find the English equivalent of a proverb in the students’ mother tongue (or vice-versa) or its direct translation (if possible).
4. Ask students to match up proverbs that have been cut in half.
5. Ask students to fill in the blanks in a list of proverbs.
6. Ask students to write an essay the topic of which would be an English proverb.
7. Ask students to make up a background to a proverb.
8. Ask students to explore a few examples of proverbs with the same meaning, but with non-existent lexical equivalence.
9. Ask the students to find and compile a list of proverbs on the same topic and with the same or similar meaning.

10. Ask students to create dialogues or role-play in which they would use as many proverbs as possible.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the experience shows, the incorporation of different forms of popular wisdom in the foreign language classroom is regrettably rare, although their utilisation helps to improve students' language skills. When proverbs are included, they are often used only as time fillers, whereas there are a lot of ways of their employment. In addition to providing a way into grammar and linguistic items (e.g. *No news is good news*) which help students gain new apprehension of the native way of speaking, they can help to form critical thinking and deepen student's understanding of themselves and other people. These short, well-known pithy sayings, stating a general truth or piece of advice play an important role in developing the cultural and metaphorical knowledge of the learners since proverbs afford ground for finding and drawing a parallel between the activities and experiences that constitute a person's normal existence and the worldly wisdom. Studying and learning proverbs and sayings, students have the opportunity to work out the similarities and differences between two certain cultures. This is important, because a language learner should be aware of the interaction between

language and civilisation. They will also be able to build cross-cultural knowledge that can effectively serve their daily, professional and international communicative objectives.

Different branches of economic activity are a rich domain of proverbial inheritance in most civilisations, and thus this legacy can be also used to good effect for various purposes within an English for specific purposes (ESP) class as well.

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