Experimental Study of the Use of Proverbs in Forming the Communicative Competence at University Level

Studiu experimental al utilizării proverbelor în formarea competenței de comunicare în învățământul universitar

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Abstract

The article describes an experimental study conducted through surveys, which were used to determine the degree to which the proverbs are used and how they are used to improve and form the communicative competence in the study of English. Through this research, it was established how effective the foreign language teachers from two universities (State Pedagogical University „Ion Creanga" and Free International University of Moldova) use the proverbs in the formation of the communicative competence in the foreign language. The research also examines how students who study English at the universities mentioned above have experienced the use of proverbs during their classes.

Keywords: communicative competence, proverbs, teacher survey, research, questionnaire models.

Rezumat

În acest articol se descrie un studiu experimental realizat prin sondaje pentru profesori, care au fost utilizate pentru a determina nivelul în care se folosesc proverbele și modul în care sunt utilizate pentru a îmbunătăți și forma competența de comunicare ale studenților în învățarea limbii engleze. Prin această cercetare, s-a stabilit cât de eficient folosesc profesorii de limbi străine din două universități (Universitatea Pedagogică de Stat „Ion Creangă" și Universitatea Liberă Internațională din Moldova) proverbele în formarea competenței de comunicare în limba străină. Cercetarea examinează, de asemenea, și modul în care studenții care învață limba engleză în universitățile menționate mai sus au experimentat utilizarea proverbelor în timpul lecțiilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: competența de comunicare, proverbe, sondaj pentru profesori, cercetarea, modele de chestionare.

The term *communicative competence* first appeared in the mid-1960s and has increased in popularity among those who study and teach language ever since. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence refers to „the underlying systems of knowledge and skill required for communication", including knowledge of vocabulary and skill in using sociolinguistic conventions of a given language [4, p. 5].

Models of Communicative Competence

As described by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell, the first model of communicative competence was developed by Canale and Swain

and suggested that there are four components of communicative competence:

1. Grammatical competence – the knowledge of the language code;

2. Sociolinguistic competence – the sociocultural code of language use;

3. Discourse competence – the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive texts;

4. Strategic competence – the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that enhance efficiency of communication and enable the learner to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur [5, p. 7].

Other models have been proposed since then, such as the one developed by Bachman and Palmer, which divides competence into organizational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Bachman and Palmer's model is similar to the earlier model but elaborates the skills in different ways. Regardless of the model, communicative competence can be taught and developed in language learners and, in recent years, one of the most accepted instructional frameworks in second or foreign language programs is what is sometimes referred to as *Communicative Language Teaching.* In that model of teaching, the goal is to increase learners' communicative competence. More specifically, this refers to teaching students to be „able to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately in the target language and culture" [2, p. 157]. One especially effective way to develop several areas of communicative competence appears to be the use of proverbs from the second or foreign language.

The Importance of Proverbs

Research going as far back the 1960s has found that practical competence in a new language can be improved by using the proverbs of the target culture. This is especially true when it comes to sociolinguistic competence. Arewa and Dundes argued that proverbs are „impersonal vehicles for personal communication" because in studying proverbs „one is interested in not only the rules of a language but also the rules for the use of the language [1, p. 70]. Similarly, Barajas noted that, „the interrogation of proverbs cultivates among less-experienced writers some analytical and linguistic skills that that corresponds with academic writing demands" [3, p. 335]. Beyond the benefits to the academic use of language Catană, in her study of Romanian language learning, described how proverbs, „could offer the students a wider perspective on approaching and respecting cultural differences for our comfortable journey through life in a multicultural environment, for our successful cooperation with the people around us, for our appropriate behavior, actions and judgement of things" [6, p. 508].

It is not only scholars who have found benefits in the use of proverbs for teaching language. The Turkish and Georgian teachers of English in Gözpinar's study identified the benefits of using proverbs with their students as including: improved oral presentation effectiveness, reading skills, written communication skills, listening and comprehension, considered vital in understanding cultural differences and similarities, humor, using figurative language. Even with all these benefits, though, proverbs are not used enough attention in language learning classrooms. When they are used,

they are used only as time-fillers or fun activities [8, p. 4]. So, when we have such an important tool for improving students' available to us, language programs should be sure they are using the tool and using it well.

Research Methods

To conduct this study surveys were administered to university faculty and students in English language programs in universities in Chisinau, Moldova. The surveys were used to determine the degree to which proverbs are used and how they are used to improve communicative competence in the study of English. In this section I will list the questions that guided the research, the methods used to conduct the research, the instruments used to gather the data, and the procedures used to analyze and interpret the data.

Research Questions

In this research I will determine if, and how effectively, language teachers in two universities at „Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University and Free International University of Moldova, are using proverbs to teach communicative competence in foreign languages. The research will also examine how the students studying English language in the universities have experienced the use of proverbs in their classes. More specifically, the questions that guide this research are:

1. Do faculty who teach English language in „Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University and Free International University of Moldova use proverbs as a regular part of their teaching?

2. What do university faculty see as the benefits and problems in using proverbs in the teaching of English?

3. What are the activities university faculty perceive as the most effective when teaching with proverbs?

4. To what extent have university students who study English experienced the use of proverbs by the teachers in their classes?

5. Do university students perceive the use of proverbs to improve communicative competence as a valuable part of their English language learning?

Teacher Survey

The first step in the research was to survey university English language faculty to determine if they use proverbs in their teaching and, if they do, how they use them. The survey (see below) was distributed to 50 teachers at „Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University and Free International University of Moldova. The teachers were all faculty members who teach some level of English language to university level students. The teaching experience, courses taught and level of student varied among the participants.

The survey that was used with teachers was adapted from a study done by Turkish researcher, HalisGözpinar. Gözpinar's questions were focused on how important teachers believe it is to include proverbs in the teaching of English. The survey used in this study went a little farther to ask teachers more about their actual use of proverbs in their teaching and some of the specific activities they use [8, p. 6]. The survey is divided into two parts.

The first nine rating scale questions ask about the teachers' perceptions of how important or valuable proverbs are in relation to the learning and use of English. The questions in the second part focus on the teachers' own experiences with proverbs both as teachers and when they were English language learners themselves. This section was added to help determine how the teachers' personal experiences might have influenced their attitudes toward the use of proverbs. The final questions are in short answer format and ask teachers to share expand on their own experience with or use of proverbs in their teaching.

Teachers' Attitudes and Practices Regarding the Use of Proverbs

Part 1. Perceptions of the Value of the Use of Proverbs.

1. Learning proverbs is integral to the overall English language learning experience.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

2. To communicate effectively in English, you need to learn to use proverbs.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

3. Using proverbs in oral presentations will make them more effective.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

4. Using proverbs in written communication will improve my writings skills.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

5. Understanding proverbs improves listening comprehension.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

6. English proverbs are important in understanding cultural differences and similarities.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

7. Knowing English proverbs is helpful in understanding English humor.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

8. Learning English proverbs is helpful in expressing oneself using figurative language.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

9. Proverbs should be included in English textbooks.

Agree   Disagree   Not sure

Part 2. Your Own Experience with English Proverbs.

The questions in this section should be answered according to your own experience as an English learner and teacher.

1. I am familiar with proverbs from the U.S. or United Kingdom?

 a. Very familiar   c. Not very familiar

 b. Somewhat familiar   d. Not at all familiar

2. My own teachers used proverbs when you learned English?

      a. Very often   c. Seldom

      b. Occasionally   d. Never

3. I use proverbs when you teach your students?

      a. Very often   c. Seldom

      b. Occasionally   d. Never

4. When I use proverbs in my class the students seem to find them useful?

    a. Always   c. Unsure

    b. Depends on the lesson   d. No

Short Answer Questions.

In this section please share a brief description of your own practices using proverbs.

1. If you use proverbs in your teaching: How do you use them? What are the challenges in using them? What do students seem to like or dislike about them?

2. If you *don't* use proverbs in your teaching: Why do you not use them? What would you need to know to start using them?

The teacher survey was given to the teachers and they were asked to respond to the survey and return it within two weeks.

Results of the experiment

The first part of the survey showed positive results, as English teachers responded with over 60% – Agree, 10% – Disagree, 20% – Not sure. This confirms the need to teach proverbs and confirms the views of previous research which claims that proverbs can help form a clearer and natural language and develop communication. Although teachers consistently expressed a very positive attitude towards learning proverbs, only 12 teachers (24%) said they teach proverbs in classes, and 15 teachers (30%) were not sure if they would teach 23 teachers (46%) do not include time for proverbs in their course material.

Majority of the teachers were in agreement to the importance of learning English proverbs for effective communication.

Proverb education helps with language education and is integral to the overall English language learning experience. Proverbs also help develop effective communication skills. English proverbs are considered vital in understanding cultural differences and similarities. Knowledge of English proverbs is helpful in understanding English humor and learning English proverbs is helpful in expressing oneself by using figurative language. Teachers agree that English proverbs should have a place in the course book and teaching proverbs should be part of the English language curriculum.

With this study, we aim to motivate for the designing of new materials for teachers to use in the classroom to increase their awareness for teaching proverbs. Our findings support the view that proverbs play a key role in cultural understandings and support development of ELT teaching.

However, we identified a contradiction between the views and practice of teachers in this regard. The belief that proverbs are an integral part of learning is evident, but the practice of such teaching is absent. We believe that material development is necessary in this area to support teachers with proverb education.

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teaching is absent. We believe that material development is necessary to support teachers with proverb education. The teachers don't allocate special time for the use of proverbs to improve the various skills discussed. That data shows that they don't teach proverbs in English language classes and the use of proverbs is insufficient for different language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening etc.

Students have a great opportunity to learn proverbs either from teachers or course books and thereby improve their English communicative abilities. As it is seen in the previous questions, the teachers are not so much interested in teaching proverbs. If the course books don't include a list of proverbs or the teachers don't use those exercises, then how will learners deal with proverbs?

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