



A Bone of Contention: Teacher Beliefs on the Pedagogical Value of English Idioms for Second Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Teacher beliefs are an important area of inquiry because research has found that these beliefs are often diverse (Breen et al., 2001) and strongly impact classroom practices (Borg, 1998, 2003; Burns, 1992; Farrell & Bennis, 2013). Therefore, uninformed teacher beliefs could be to the detriment of the L2 learner. Despite the fact that knowledge of idioms is a sign of proficiency (Kjellmer, 1991) and many adult L2 learners want to know them (e.g. Liontas, 2002), the classroom tends to be generally devoid of figurative words and expressions (Danesi, 1995). It is possible, however, that teacher beliefs contribute to such overly literal L2 input, especially when they are responsible for curricular choices in the classroom. To further investigate this, 15 native speaker university level EFL teachers in Japan completed a survey that elicited both quantitative and qualitative data on their beliefs about the value of metaphorical idioms for L2 learners. The data showed a considerable divide between participant raters on a number of measures. Much of this divide was due to differences in the raters' emphasis on a top-down or bottom-up view of language learning, as well as the relative importance they placed on the perceived frequency of individual idioms.

INTRODUCTION

Applied disciplines in the social sciences by their very name seek to turn research findings into practical application, which naturally is the case for applied linguistics as well. Yet pedagogical implications from research do not always translate into actual classroom practice (see Larsen-Freeman, 2015). This is why it is important to examine teacher beliefs, as they can reflect the extent to which classroom practices are informed by what has been reported in the literature. By drawing attention to any gaps that appear between research and practice, scholars in the field can have a better sense of what aspects of second language pedagogy need to be further addressed and emphasized so as to promote sound pedagogical practices in the L2 classroom.

The motivation for the present study is to bring to light the degree of convergence between teachers on their beliefs about the pedagogical value of idioms for L2 learners and compare this with the consensus reached by scholars in the literature. Furthermore, this study addresses possible explanations rooted in teachers' backgrounds that can help account for these beliefs when discrepancies are observed. In order to systematically investigate this, the following two research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent do the views of EFL teachers in this study converge with respect to their beliefs about the pedagogical value of idioms for L2 learners?
2. What possible factors can account for disagreements between teacher raters' beliefs about the pedagogical value of idioms for L2 learners?

Background

Research on teacher beliefs in L2 teaching contexts has received substantial attention in recent years. However, many of these studies focus on pre-service teacher beliefs (e.g. Busch, 2010; Macalister, 2012; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock 2001), and fewer still address vocabulary instruction and learning (Gao & Ma, 2011; Macalister, 2012; Ramonda, 2012). Moreover, no studies appear to investigate teacher beliefs as they relate specifically to figurative language. One might therefore wonder whether or not figurative language, and by extension metaphorical idioms, merit investigation in connection to teacher beliefs. After all, is there any particular reason to think that there would be disagreement among experienced teachers in this particular vein of lexica?

There is substantial evidence, however, to suggest that figurative language goes largely unaddressed in the L2 classroom (Danesi, 1995) in spite of the overwhelming evidence that metaphorical and figurative expressions are pervasive in language (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pollio, et al., 1977), and thus represents an important area of language proficiency. Moreover, studies have found that a lack of metaphorical awareness in a second language leads to difficulties for L2 learners in certain ESL contexts (Littlemore, 2001), which could mean that explicit attention to figurative language is necessary to help L2 learners cope with the demands of understanding authentic input and native speaker discourse. Idioms, as an important subclass of figurative language, offer instantiations of metaphor that could serve as a means to advance the development of L2 learners' metaphorical awareness and conceptual fluency (see Danesi, 1995). Furthermore, examining teacher beliefs on the pedagogical value of idioms could offer insights and possibly identify causes that help to account for the lack of figurative language in the L2 classroom.

Aside from serving as instantiations of metaphor, idioms, in their own right, merit explicit attention in some cases for certain L2 learners. That is certainly not to say that the teaching of idioms is warranted for all L2 learners. Those who are in the early stages of acquiring a second language have the more pressing demands of first acquiring the highest frequency vocabulary, of which idioms play very little part (see Grant, 2005; Liu, 2003). Furthermore, L2 learners in an EFL context probably stand to gain less from intentionally studying idioms in the L2 as they will not have as many opportunities to hear or use them as would those learners in an ESL environment. Yet, for many learners, there are reasons to believe that a working knowledge of idioms is very useful, both for linguistic competence and socio-cultural related reasons.

To begin with, most idioms, though infrequent at the individual item level, can occur as a class of lexica with surprising frequency, especially in genre specific registers (Boers & Lingstromberg, 2009; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Secondly, idioms act as a sign of proficiency (Kjellmer, 1991) and so it should come as no surprise that many learners are interested in learning them (Liontas, 2002). Furthermore, as Moon (1992) has pointed out, idioms can transmit cultural insights and values, which could prove useful to intrinsically motivated L2 learners who live in and desire to integrate into the target culture(s) where the L1 is spoken. Finally, a wealth of corpus-driven data has shown that idioms serve wide-ranging social functions in communication (e.g. Drew & Holt, 1988; McCarthy, 1998) and through creative language use when idioms are unpacked for humorous effects (Langlotz,

2006).

Clearly, the pedagogical value of idioms is inextricably tied to the context and needs of the L2 learner. However, it is not yet known the degree to which the relative benefits afforded by such contexts are acknowledged and agreed upon by experienced teachers. In fact, the original motivation for this study was that, anecdotally, I had witnessed starkly contrasting perceptions about the role of idioms for L2 learners among some of my colleagues. This dichotomy prompted me to investigate more systematically the importance teachers attach to the teaching and learning of idioms by means of a survey intended to elicit qualitative and quantitative data in order to answer the two research questions posed above.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

15 native speaker English instructors participated as raters. Among the 13 male and 2 female raters, there were five Americans, four Canadians, three British, two Australians, and one New Zealander. The range of years raters had lived in Japan was from 4-24, with 11.5 years being the median. All of the raters were experienced English teachers who held advanced degrees in applied linguistics or other related fields.

Instrument

The materials consisted of an 8-item paper-based survey to which participants responded via a 4-point Likert rating along with a qualitative justification for their ratings. More details on the rating scale and items are presented in the procedures.

Procedure

This survey was designed to elicit teacher beliefs and perceptions on the pedagogical and socio-cultural importance of idioms for L2 learners. Although raters were encouraged to explain their ratings, it was not a requirement, and a few participants left some parts blank. Two similar items were purposefully reversed as a means to identify raters who were completing the section too hastily without carefully considering the items. The scale and 8 items can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Rating Scale and Statements

1 strongly disagree	2 somewhat disagree	3 somewhat agree	4 strongly agree
←----->			
1. Learning idioms is important for second language learners.			
2. Learning idioms has no place in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) setting.			
3. Native speakers of English react positively when second language learners use idioms correctly.			
4. Idioms are important for second language learners to understand the culture of the target language.			
5. Idioms are important for understanding colloquial English in everyday life.			
6. Idioms are important for understanding academic English.			
7. Idioms, when used correctly, serve an important function of reducing social distance between a native speaker and a second language learner.			
8. Commercial textbooks do a good job of integrating idioms into the materials.			

RESULTS

Excepting statement 8, the statements in Table 1 above broadly correspond to two different categories of perception: how important idioms are perceived for language use and comprehension and how important idioms are perceived for socio-cultural related factors. See Table 2 below for the means and standard deviations for each of the eight statements.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Beliefs

(Range 1-4; cases where N is fewer than 15 indicate instances of 1 or more raters not assigning a rating for that item)

Statement	N	Mean	SD
1. Learning idioms is important for second language learners.	15	2.7	.9
2. Learning idioms has no place in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) setting.	14	2.2	1.1
3. Native speakers of English react positively when second language learners use idioms correctly.	15	2.7	.6
4. Idioms are important for second language learners to understand the culture of the target language.	15	2.4	.8
5. Idioms are important for understanding colloquial English in everyday life.	15	3.1	.8
6. Idioms are important for understanding academic English.	15	2.3	1.0
7. Idioms, when used correctly, serve an important function of reducing social distance between a native speaker and a second language learner.	15	2.4	.9
8. Commercial textbooks do a good job of integrating idioms into the materials.	11	2.1	.7

Perceptions on Idioms for L2 Language Use and Comprehension

The first statement, “*Learning idioms is important for second language learners*”, is the broadest in that it was meant to elicit raters’ general perceptions about the importance of learning idioms. As a result of the scope of this statement, there was a wide array of responses, some of which referred to aspects of language competency while others identified cultural understanding, language awareness, and interest level as reasons for learning idioms. Also noteworthy is that while about half of the raters “somewhat agreed” with this statement (a rating of 3), there were also ratings at each end of the scale, indicating that there were teachers that disagreed strongly on the importance of idioms to second language learners. Table 3 below presents some qualitative instantiations for some of this divergence.

Table 3. On the Importance of Idioms for Second Language Learners

Rater	Stat. & Rating	Comments
9	1-1	<i>They are infrequently used and difficult to learn without explicit instruction.</i>
6	1-2	<i>There’s an issue with their utility and frequency. If they’re important, it’s only for those at the very high level of proficiency.</i>
13	1-3	<i>Idioms become more important as proficiency advances, but they’re not so important in the early stages.</i>
15	1-4	<i>Learning idioms gives students an opportunity to understand how a language is used in unstructured ways. This is necessary for the use of language in real-world settings. It may also allow for some insight into the cultural aspects of language use.</i>

Though some raters cited the low frequency of individual idioms as their reason for assigning a rating of a 1 or 2, other raters offered a more nuanced explanation on the importance of idioms by suggesting that idioms have little value in the earlier stages of acquiring a new language, but become more relevant as proficiency level increases. This seems to imply that, infrequent as many idioms can be, learners need not overly concern themselves with learning them until they have first established a solid foundation of high frequency core vocabulary. Alternatively, the raters might simply mean that as proficiency increases, the likelihood that learners will be exposed to authentic, non-simplified written and spoken input is greater, which would likely entail a greater need for idiomatic language. In either case, raters tended to agree that learning idioms is better suited to the later stages of language acquisition.

In light of this focus on frequency, it is important to clarify the teaching context of these teachers, as it might have influenced their perceptions. All 15 participants were mid or long-term residents living in Japan from anywhere between 4 and 24 years. As such, their classroom experience would appear to be exclusively in an EFL, not ESL context. Most students in these teachers' classes were enrolled in these only as part of their core curriculum and were thus unlikely to receive significant additional exposure to the target language outside of the classroom, much less contact with native speakers. Given that idioms typically characterize native speaker discourse, it is doubtful that students in these EFL contexts would be exposed to idioms to the same degree as ESL students would. Moreover, the proficiency levels of students at the university in question tended to be fairly low evidenced by the fact that the great majority of students entering the English program had relatively low TOEFL scores. Therefore, any outside-of-class exposure to idioms through authentic materials would be inaccessible for most of these students. Some of the raters were perhaps mindful of this and based their ratings on their personal experiences.

Most important, however, is the need to identify and illuminate the sources of disagreement between the raters. It appears that a major point of disagreement between raters is related to extra-linguistic considerations or otherwise top-down views of language acquisition. Those raters that did not view idioms as important appeared to consider frequency or linguistic utility as the most important criterion, yet other raters who viewed idioms as important cited cultural understanding, inherent interest, and linguistic and metaphorical awareness. Regarding such awareness, raters 11 and 15 reasoned that "students must think beyond literal surface meanings" and "learning idioms gives students an opportunity to understand how language is used in unstructured ways".

Such comments reflect a recognition that language is often used in highly abstract and metaphorical ways, and these raters seemed to think idioms could supply learners with instantiations of such uses of language, which will benefit the second language learner. If it is the case that idioms can provide learners with good models of how language is used in a less structured and more abstract manner, then it is reasonable to posit that learning idioms can contribute to developing learners' conceptual fluency, which is an area of linguistic competence that is notably underdeveloped among second language learners (Danesi, 1995).

In sum, the responses from the raters on this statement diverge primarily between those that place more emphasis on perceived frequency and those that do not. It must be said, however, that some of the raters' perceptions about the importance of frequency might arise out of their particular teaching context. In the background section, I noted how L2 idiomatic knowledge would probably be of most benefit to ESL as opposed to EFL learners. Broadly speaking, this is because ESL learners living in the culture where the target language is spoken are far more likely to encounter idioms in their daily lives. Given that all of the raters teach EFL to Japanese learners in a Japanese context, their perceptions on the importance of idioms to L2 learners might be viewed through the lens of their teaching contexts. Indeed,

most of these raters had been living in Japan for many years (a range of 4 to 24), and their impressions of the general importance of idioms could very well differ from a similar sample of impressions coming from ESL instructors in other teaching contexts.

The Importance of Idioms in Academia

I will now give due attention to the data corresponding to statements 2 and 6, which are “*Learning idioms has no place in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) setting*”, and “*Idioms are important for understanding academic English.*” These two statements are analyzed together because they are both related to the pedagogical value of idioms in a more formal register, namely, academic English. Though similar, these statements were intentionally framed inversely for methodological reasons, in order to check for rater consistency (e.g. if a rater assigned a high rating for statement 2, then we would expect a low rating for statement 6, and vice versa). A sample of illustrative comments is presented below in Table 4.

Table 4. On the Importance of Idioms in Academia

Rater	Stat. & Rating	Comment sample
2	6-1	<i>Rarely used in AE (academic English) – if they are, they are marked or ironic, which is likely to make understanding them more difficult.</i>
13	6-3	<i>While idioms rarely occur in academic texts, lecturers often use them in class.</i>
4	6-3	<i>Less than colloquial (discourse) but idioms being used in an academic setting tend to change less.</i>

Here, once again, the ratings spanned both ends of the 4-point Likert scale, indicating sharp disagreement among some of the raters. Those raters that did not appear to value learning idioms for academic purposes cited both low frequency and inappropriate register as reasons. On the other hand, raters that did seem to advocate learning idioms for academic purposes contended that idioms could be commonplace in certain academic settings. Upon scrutinizing these responses more closely, it appears that the raters who were unimpressed by the need of idioms in an academic setting considered mainly academic writing while those raters who acknowledged a need for idioms in an academic setting cited the high frequency of idiomatic expressions and figurative language in academic lectures.

In other words, while most raters agreed that idiomatic expressions were discouraged and perhaps inappropriate in formal academic writing, some raters recognized the value of learning idioms for receptive purposes, especially for understanding lectures in an academic setting. There is, in fact, evidence that academic lecturers use a considerable amount of figurative language in their lecture discourse, and this can be problematic for second language learners (Littlemore, 2001). Though this seems to imply that idioms might be used quite often in academic discourse, it is important not to conflate metaphors with idioms. Idioms are a kind of figurative language, but metaphorical expressions are of course not by any means limited to metaphorical idioms.

The Importance of Idioms in Colloquial Discourse

Next I will address how important the raters perceive idioms to be for understanding English in a more informal register. The data for the statement “*Idioms are important for*

understanding colloquial English in everyday life” reflect the ratings and perceptions among raters regarding the utility of idioms for understanding casual, spoken English in everyday situations. Though no raters assigned a rating of 1 for this statement, the ratings were fairly evenly distributed across the remaining range of the scale, with four raters assigning a 2, six raters assigning a 3, and five raters assigning a 4. My initial interpretation of this finding was that the raters’ perceptions differed considerably for this statement, yet closer inspection of the justifications provided by the raters revealed that the disagreement found here might be due, in part, to the way in which the raters interpreted the statement itself. Table 5 below presents a sample of some of the more divisive comments related to these statements.

Table 5. On the Importance of Idioms in Colloquial Discourse

Rater	Stat. & Rating	Comment Sample
5	5-2	<i>I think they are something you pick up once your level is high enough that a colloquial English setting is an option.</i>
10	5-2	<i>Speakers can still get the meaning across without the use of idioms.</i>
12	5-4	<i>They are the spice and color of language that native speakers will naturally gravitate to.</i>
15	5-4	<i>While basic transactions such as shopping or ordering food can be conducted using highly structured, formalized language, many daily situations such as conversation or watching television require a command of idiomatic English.</i>

I first analyzed those four raters that “somewhat disagreed” (rating of 2) with the statement. Both rater 1 and rater 2 appeared to cite the low frequency of individual idioms. Rater 1, for example stated, “I don’t think there is any idiom used often enough even to native speakers to justify teaching”. This is an important distinction because the raters that tended to assign higher ratings, such as rater 4, rater 14, and rater 15, appeared to attribute their agreement to the higher frequency of idioms as a class of lexica. In other words, some raters attached more importance to the word frequency at the individual item level, while other raters considered the frequency of idioms as a group. Interestingly, both of these viewpoints on the frequency of idioms are supported by corpus-driven research, which has shown that individual idioms tend to be low frequency (Grant, 2005; Grant, 2007; Liu, 2003), yet as a class, idioms occur quite often in some discourse registers (Simpson & Mendis, 2003) and literary genres (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Herrera & White, 2010). This almost paradoxical phenomenon is perhaps one of the sources of disagreement among raters about the importance of idioms, and further implications of this will be addressed more fully in the conclusion.

In addition to frequency, raters also appeared to disagree due to differing perceptions about the mode of input and the interlocutors involved. Rater 10 stated, “Speakers can still get the meaning across without the use of idioms” to justify his rating of 2. This perception assumes that non-native speakers only need to understand colloquial English in situations where they are directly involved in a conversation. Yet, as rater 15 mentioned, learners will frequently encounter idiomatic English while watching television. Obviously, the vast majority of television programs are intended for the native speaker population, and as such this mode of input will not provide non-native speakers with modified input, devoid of any idiomatic expressions. Moreover, rater 11 and rater 12 point out that native speakers often speak to each other using highly abstract and metaphorical expressions. Rater 11 referred to the lack of “literal statements” in discourse among native speakers, which leads to speech with “hidden meaning”. Furthermore, rater 12 went a step further by explaining that idioms “are the spice and color of language that native speakers will naturally gravitate to”.

These points are crucial because non-native speakers might not often be involved in a one-to-one conversation in which their interlocutor can modify their speech and negotiate meaning so that the non-native speaker can understand more clearly. In conversations in which multiple people are involved, it is not guaranteed, or perhaps even probable that native speakers will modify their speech to accommodate non-native speakers.

Perceptions on Idioms and Socio-cultural Factors

Thus far, I have analyzed rater responses related to perceptions about idioms for language use and comprehension. However, three of the remaining four statements are concerning how idioms are perceived for socio-cultural related factors. Statements 3 and 7 will be treated together, as both of these are connected to developing rapport and gaining membership status among discourse communities. Statement 4, on the other hand, examines perceptions about idioms and how they inform non-native speakers about the target culture. We begin by examining the related data for statement 3, “*Native speakers of English react positively when second language learners use idioms correctly*” and then statement 7, “*Idioms, when used correctly, serve an important function of reducing social distance between a native speaker and a second language learner*”. Illustrative comments are found in Table 6 below.

Table 6. On the Importance of Idioms for Socio-Cultural Factors

Rater	Stat. & Rating	Comment Sample
5	7-1	<i>I think clear graded language (appropriate for the level) would be better for facilitating communication and therefore reducing social distance.</i>
3	7-2	<i>Idioms, when used correctly, can. But they are often used incorrectly and end up sounding strange.</i>
6	7-3	<i>But there is much to lose if they get it wrong.</i>
15	7-4	<i>The appropriateness of idioms demonstrates an affinity for the customs and habits of native speakers and can serve to reduce social distance between a native speaker and a second language learner.</i>

Idiom Use and the Native Speaker

For statement 3, “*Native speakers of English react positively when second language learners use idioms correctly*”, nearly all of the raters, save one, assigned a rating of a 2 or 3, which indicates that the raters agreed to a stronger degree compared to the previously examined statements. Furthermore, given that only one rater assigned a rating from one of the extremes of the scale, it appears that raters did not seem to feel strongly either in agreement or disagreement for this particular statement. Three of the five raters that assigned a rating of 2 voiced concerns that idioms are often misused, which is somewhat surprising since the statement explicitly refers to cases in which idioms are used “correctly”. It is possible that these raters are simply unconvinced that learners will use idioms correctly and this has influenced their interpretation of and response to the statement. The raters that assigned a rating of 3 seemed to offer support for their agreement, but with caveats. These caveats tended to be related to context and register, suggesting that using idioms might sound “cute”, but “rarely natural”, and though it may help learners sound more fluent, this is only the case when idioms are used “sparingly and appropriately”. Concerning fluency, Rater 6 stated that correct idiom usage might lead native speakers to overestimate the proficiency of the non-native speakers. This is interesting because it highlights the notion that non-native speakers,

by using idioms appropriately, might appear more fluent than they actually are.

Idiom Use and Social Distance

The degree of divergence for statement 7, “*Idioms, when used correctly, serve an important function of reducing social distance between a native speaker and a second language learner*”, on the other hand, was somewhat more pronounced, with raters assigning ratings from the full range of the scale. In spite of this, responses from raters were generally similar in that multiple raters expressed concern about the misuse of idioms and how that might disrupt as opposed to facilitate communication. These concerns are not unwarranted, as it is well known that idioms can be difficult to use properly due to not only the issue of transparency and figurative meaning, but also restrictions related to register and syntactical fixedness as well. Moreover, rater responses were not limited to issues about language proficiency. Rater 2 pointed out that non-native speakers using idioms might draw attention to the fact that he or she is using an idiom and convey “an unnecessary message – e.g. ‘I’m using an idiom now.’” This shows that these concerns about the productive use of idioms can extend beyond linguistic competence and also include pragmatics in discourse.

There were two raters, though, that offered a more indirect response to statements 3 and 7 by focusing on the extra-linguistic effect idioms can have at a more macro level of use. Rater 11, in response to statement 3 stated, “If an appropriate idiom is used, there is a lot of communicative value. It almost signals a sort of cultural solidarity as well”. Building upon this idea of cultural solidarity, rater 15 responded to statement 7 by saying, “The appropriateness of idioms demonstrates an affinity for the customs and habits of native speakers and can serve to reduce social distance”. These two raters have echoed what Moon (1992; 1998) has stated on how idioms reflect shared cultural values and knowledge, and such shared knowledge plays a role in building relationships (Planalp & Benson, 1992) and governing discourse (Clark, 1985). Furthermore, rater 14 responded to statement 3 by stating, “provided they are used correctly, idioms demonstrate not only a degree of confidence and competence, but also an enthusiasm for using English which native speakers often find appealing”.

Based on the overall responses for both statements 3 and 7, most raters appeared to remain skeptical to a degree about whether or not non-native speakers would in fact be able to use idioms correctly. The majority of raters that interpreted the statement as intended (i.e.—in cases where idioms are used correctly) did acknowledge that idioms would have some effect on reducing social distance between the native speakers and non-native speakers, with two of those raters citing extra-linguistic factors, such as shared cultural knowledge and enthusiasm for learning English as underlying reasons for contributing to this reduction in social distance. This issue of cultural knowledge brings us to the last statement I will analyze in the next section, which is related to idioms and cultural understanding.

Idioms and Cultural Understanding

The last statement, “*Idioms are important for second language learners to understand the culture of the target language*” was intended to measure the raters’ perceptions between idioms and culture. Though once again raters used the full range of the scales among their ratings, the responses appeared to converge more at the qualitative level. Many of the raters seemed to acknowledge a link between idioms and culture, but were more dubious about idioms being necessary for understanding culture. Two raters surmised that idioms could provide insights about culture, but did not view idioms as a prerequisite for cultural understanding. Rater 1 and rater 7 further stated that slang might be more important than

idioms for understanding culture, but did not provide any details about why they thought so. Rater 15 was the most specific in his response by pointing out particular areas of cultural knowledge idioms can convey on the macro level, such as with “degrees of deference to authority”, and on the micro level, such as with “appropriateness of behavior, social rituals, and taboos”. More illustrative comments from raters are provided below in Table 7.

Table 7. On the Importance of Idioms for Cultural Understanding

Rater	Stat. & Rating	Comment Sample
1	4-1	<i>Very limited connection to culture. Slang might be better.</i>
11	4-2	<i>I think cultural knowledge is needed to understand idioms (bible, sports, values, etc.), but they aren't absolutely essential to understanding culture.</i>
12	4-3	<i>Idioms may be indicative of cultural values, but not necessarily so.</i>
15	4-3	<i>On a macro level, idioms can provide insight into broad aspects of culture such as degrees of deference to authority or the status of minorities. On a micro level, idioms can give language learners information relating to class or status, appropriateness of behavior, social rituals, and taboos, etc.</i>

On the whole, raters perceived that idioms could provide non-native speakers with cultural insights, but these insights were collectively viewed as being more peripheral than central to understanding the target culture. This perception is not an unreasonable one, as there is no evidence to suggest that idiomatic knowledge is a prerequisite to understand cultural knowledge. Yet, the crux of the issue is the relative importance idioms play in supplementing and enhancing cultural knowledge. This is a difficult question to answer because as rater 2 intimated, the word culture itself is abstract and vague, and as a result it can be difficult to pinpoint just what kind of and to what depth cultural knowledge can be relayed through learning idioms. Aside from rater 15, no other raters cited specific areas of cultural knowledge that can be transmitted through idioms, but more than one rater specifically urged the need to study idioms in context for cultural learning to take place. In sum, the majority of raters readily recognized the link between idioms and culture, but was less explicit about how important that link was or what kind of cultural knowledge could possible spread through the study of idioms.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have examined the degree to which teacher beliefs about the importance of idioms for second language learners converge. In the first half of the discussion, I analyzed the statements corresponding to beliefs about idioms and language use and comprehension. The overarching results from this analysis showed that the raters largely disagreed on the importance of idioms. The source of this disagreement appears to be partly due to the way raters approached the statements. Those raters that approached the statements from a more bottom-up perspective largely dismissed idioms as being unimportant on the grounds of the low frequency of individual idioms. On the other hand, raters that adopted a more top-down perspective attached much more importance to how idioms could play a role in developing learners' awareness and understanding about the abstract and non-literal nature of natural discourse (i.e. via conceptual fluency and metaphorical awareness). Raters also disagreed based on statements related to language use due to focusing on either productive or receptive knowledge. For example, raters who disagreed that idioms were important in academic contexts cited the inappropriateness of using idioms in academic writing, while raters who

perceived otherwise pointed out that academic lectures were often laden with figurative language.

In the second half of the discussion, which concentrated on idioms and socio-cultural factors, raters were again sharply divided on most of the statements. Interestingly, the same raters that appeared to apply a bottom-up or top-down approach for rating statements about idioms and language use tended to perceive the importance of idioms as they related to socio-cultural factors in the same fashion. Those raters adopting a bottom-up standpoint largely focused on individual linguistic transactions and how particular instances of misuse could disrupt the flow of conversation. This contrasted sharply with the more top-down raters who perceived the value in learners using idioms to reduce social distance and elicit positive reactions from native speakers. These raters focused on the positive effects general idiom use could have as an indication of both cultural solidarity and enthusiasm for the target language.

Based on the data in this study, it is clear that at least among this sample of EFL university teachers in Japan, the raters' beliefs about the pedagogical value of idioms do not converge to any meaningful measure. Yet after taking into account the qualitative data collected here, there appear to be a number of possible explanations to account for this finding. One possible reason could be linked to the relative emphasis raters placed on idioms as individual items as opposed to idiom use in general. Given the patterns uncovered between the top-down and bottom-up raters, is it not unlikely that these two types of raters were influenced along the lines of specific versus general, and that had an impact on their subsequent rating and rationale.

Another possible contributing factor could have been the raters' notions about what constituted an idiom. Idioms as a class of lexica are difficult to define (see Moon 1998 for further discussion) and some raters might distinguish between metaphorical idioms, phraseological collocations, and proverbs (to name a few), while others might not. Moreover, the lines between idiomatic and non-idiomatic metaphorical language might be defined to greater or lesser degrees for different raters. As Moon (1998) notes, classifications for idioms often overlap and it can be challenging, from a typological perspective, to identify and strictly delimit one type of idiom. Given the complicated features of idioms specifically, and figurative expressions more generally, it is almost certain that different raters had dissimilar, however slight, conceptions about what an idiom constituted, which could have influenced their ratings and responses.

In summary, the evidence gathered could be an indication that idioms and their pedagogical value to second language learners are perceived in very different ways by second language educators. The data showed that bottom-up and top-down raters tended to place emphasis on distinct aspects of language learning, which likely influenced their ratings. The limitation concerning terminology described above might have further confounded the results, which could account for some of the divergence of agreement. Overall, however, the stark contrast in agreement among raters both at the quantitative and qualitative level suggests that second language teachers hold very different views on the usefulness of idioms for second language learners.

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