

A Spice of Classroom: Incorporating Proverbial Expressions in EFL Classes

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English is rich in multi-word lexemes, such as idioms, proverbs, and other fixed expressions that might be stumbling blocks for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Providing a theoretical background and a pedagogical rationale for inclusion of proverbial expressions, this paper presents some activities with proverbs for language teachers, particularly EFL teachers, to make their classes more lively and exciting. The paper suggests, at the end, that adding variety to the classroom activities might contribute to the learners' consciousness-raising that will in turn increase their language proficiency in general and proverbial knowledge in particular.

Key words: proverbs, activity, foreign language learners, fixed expressions

INTRODUCTION

To ensure the active participation of the learners and create a lively and stimulating situation for language learning, innovative activities are warranted. The involvement of language learners in class participation requires a repertoire of ready-made or on-the-spot interactive activities or prompts. Experience shows that enthusiasm for any activity falls thin in language classrooms if it is used for too long with little change, hence the need for novel exercises and activities. This issue explains why “variety is the spice of

life”, and probably, the spice of classroom.

An important component of language learning and teaching is vocabulary (Stæhr, 2008). It is a necessity for language teachers to be able to teach vocabulary in a pleasantly planned way. Fixed expressions such as collocations, idioms, proverbs, and the like, comprise a large section of the vocabulary in any language, thus deserving special attention (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992). These expressions are sometimes handled within vocabulary or reading courses. However, in some EFL programs at university level, the expressions are taught in a separate two-hour course, mainly offered in the fifth semester of the undergraduate level. In Iran, students have English study for three hours on average in middle (guidance) and high school for six years running, before entering the university. In the meantime, many students attend private English institutes. Thus, the university students taking the course on the expressions in the fifth semester have a good command of English. They have had reading courses and a lesson in study skills, offering dictionary use and searching electronic software for words. They have read *an introduction to literature*, thus understanding the culture as well as the value of proverbs from a metaphorical point of view among other things.

The Importance of Fixed Expressions

English particularly seems to be idiomatic, figurative, and rich in multi-word lexemes (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990). Fixed expressions give language color, feeling, charm, and precision (Adkins, 1968). In their analysis of a large and representative corpus, Goulden et al. (1990) found that compound entries outnumber the entries for basic words. Interestingly enough, in an analysis by Anglin (1993), it was pointed out that more than half of the compound entries are idioms, a type of fixed expressions.

It is argued that mature, fluent discourse requires an amalgamation of formulaic, conventionalized language and language generated for a particular occasion or situation by utilizing and applying internalized grammatical rules to the resources of the mental lexicon. On the other hand, the rejection of all

conventionalized language makes discourse difficult both to produce and comprehend which leads to overtaxing both the powers of the speaker/writer and the reader/listener (Fillmore, 1979). Without a knowledge of idiomatic and proverbial expressions, language learners' spoken and written English will remain stilted and foreign-sounding.

Proverbs

One type of fixed expressions is proverbs or proverbial expressions. They concisely and effectively express a truth relating to everyday experience, a word of advice or warning, or a wise general comment on a situation.

Byrne (2005) mentions three main functions for proverbs. Firstly, they transmit wisdom and cultural values from one generation to another. Secondly, they advise and warn children about proper and dangerous behavior, i.e. *a burnt child fears the fire*. Thirdly, many proverbs have a playful and provocative tendency; they embellish speech and cap arguments. All these make proverbs easy to remember and use.

Pedagogic Rationale for the Activities with Proverbs

The paper intends to offer some 'activities' for teaching proverbs of any language effectively though the author's focus is on EFL context. 'Activities' engage language learners and are done to achieve a pedagogical goal. They provide an opportunity for language learners to identify the meaning and significance of proverbs, and to consider common themes in proverbs across cultures. Sometimes, it is said that the proverb is going out of fashion. However, such views ignore and overlook the point that while the role of proverbs in English literature has changed, their use has long been and is still popular (Bessmertnyi, 1994). Nevertheless, the remainder of the following section gives evidence to this popularity.

There are many instances of proverbial expressions, still common in standard English. It is interesting to understand that "the man who says "So

help me God” uses a proverbial formula already current in Roman speech” (Taylor, 1996, p. 14). Bessmertnyi (1994) states that proverbs often have the status of universal truths and are used to confirm or refute an argument.

Moreover, the study of proverbs and idioms fulfills at least three of the language-specific standards developed for grades K-16 for nine distinct foreign language groups in the US (Table 1)¹, underscoring the “seriousness with which the intellectual community is dealing with the study of foreign languages” (Mac Dougall, 2004, p. 10).

TABLE 1
The Three Standards

Standard 3.2	Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints, only available through the foreign language and its cultures.
Standard 4.1	They demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
Standard 4.2	They demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the culture studied and their own.

As another evidence to proverbs’ popularity, *De Proverbio*, founded in 1995, is the world’s first multilingual electronic journal of proverb studies. Users may browse all the original articles and e-books on proverbs published over the years. Since 2006, it has introduced an extensive collection of more than 40,000 quotations that can be browsed by author and/or by topic. Also, the site offers its users a quote of the day on the quotations page and a free Proverb of the Day in six languages (English, Italian, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Portuguese) to listen to online or to subscribe to. This indicates the increasing academic approach to studying proverbs.

In addition, the study of proverbs can provide cultural insights and stimulate communication. Proverbs offer foreign language students an excellent opportunity to practice and develop their oral communication (Mac Dougall, 2004). Nuessel and Cicogna (1994) consider proverbs as an ideal form for introducing metaphorical language and, as a result, metaphorical

¹ National Standards for Foreign Language Education(1996) <http://www.actfl.org>

competence for several reasons: (a) proverbs are short and easy to remember, (b) the language of proverbs is fairly simple and “corresponds to the basic vocabulary of the elementary and intermediate class,” (c) they are a “persistent element of the language under study,” (d) developing proverbial language ability will result in an important discourse strategy in students, like that of indirect speech acts, that allows the speaker “to disguise his true feelings,” and (e) proverbs have a literal meaning and a secondary, figurative meaning. In this sense, they are a special kind of indirect speech act. This indicates metaphoric competence because the students must make an appropriate analogy between the proverb and the specific situation (Nuessel & Cicogna, 1994, Proverbial language).

Likewise, Mac Dougall (2004) believes that idioms and proverbs can provide a snapshot of other cultures, hence allowing for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture. Without grasping the meaning of these types of sayings, we are confined to a unilateral understanding, providing fertile ground toward the development of cultural and linguistic ethnocentrism. He further states that the wisdom inherent in proverbs has demonstrated its value over an extended period of time. Students, translators, interpreters, and linguists also will benefit from constantly updating their understanding and use of these gems of wisdom, since they can offer culturally-specific insights.

In translating proverbs from one language to another, extreme care should be exercised to provide a natural counterpart. A literal, word-for-word rendering pales in comparison to its natural counterpart. Its sound is stilted to the ear of a native speaker. For example, in Spanish “*La cara es el espejo del alma*” is equivalent to “*The eyes are the window of the soul.*” (Quintans, 1999, p. 1, as cited in Mac Dougall, 2004). In Turkish, “*Qurd dan olan qurd olar*” is an equivalent proverb to “*blood will tell*” or “*Alişmiş kudurmuştan beterdir*” equals “*once a thief, always a thief*” (Çakir, 2006). In Farsi, “*Khahi aziz shavi, ya dour sho ya kour sho*” is a counterpart for “*absence makes the heart grow fonder*” (Habibian, 2002). Consequently, when translated literally, the aforementioned proverbs do not sound natural to the speakers of English.

A thorough study and usage of proverbs will further improve and refine the understanding of translators.

Interestingly enough, Nippold, Allen, and Kirsch (2001) examined 42 preadolescents with the mean age of 12:2 on proverb comprehension to learn about individual differences with respect to reading, word knowledge, and analogical reasoning skills. They assigned participants to proficient and less proficient readers based on an achievement test. Reading tasks were presented to the participants to examine their comprehension of unfamiliar concrete (e.g., “Every bird must hatch its own eggs”) and abstract (e.g., “Gratitude is a heavy burden”) proverbs, and their knowledge of nouns contained in the expressions. A nonverbal analogical reasoning task was also administered. The researchers found that proverb comprehension was associated with reading proficiency, word knowledge, and analogical reasoning. Although all participants were considered by their school to be typical achievers, they demonstrated wide individual differences in their ability to interpret unfamiliar concrete and abstract proverbs. Proficient readers outperformed less proficient readers on comprehension of both types of proverbs, knowledge of abstract nouns contained in proverbs, and analogical reasoning. They did not differ, however, on knowledge of concrete nouns, with both subgroups having mastered those words.

Sample Activities for Teaching Proverbs

The following sample activities are not Iran-specific and could be conducted with learners from various linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds. The author practices the activities with Iranian EFL learners, and has noticed that they can be extended, modified, or altered by other foreign language teachers to fit the situation depending on the learners’ mother tongue, proficiency level, context of study, and needs. Proverbs cited in this paper were taken from Bessmertnyi (1994), 101 American English Proverbs (Collins, 1992), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Simpson, 1992), and *NTC’s Dictionary of Proverbs and Clichés* (Bertram &

Richard, 1993). The activities are as follows:

Activity 1: Finding Equivalent(s) for English Proverbs

As the first activity, language teachers might ask students to find the equivalent(s) of the following exemplar proverbs in their mother tongue. To avoid boredom and discouragement, the number of the proverbs required for this activity is advised to be kept to a minimum:

- 1) Better late than never.
- 2) When in Rome do as the Romans do.
- 3) Least said, soonest mended....

Finding equivalent(s) for proverbs keeps the language learners active and in contact with the languages. Proverbs carry a lot in terms of worldview, culture, and wisdom of a nation. Sometimes, the contents of proverbs are universal whereas in other cases they are culture-specific or region-specific. To the best of the experience of the author, language learners enjoy discovering the proverbial equivalent(s) of a witty English saying or proverb in their mother tongue. Where an equivalent for an English proverb does not exist, the searching language learner benefits in other ways, such as accumulating the cultural and linguistic intricacies of the two languages involved. Indeed, as Mac Dougall (2004) observes, students “better understand their own language and culture” when they comparatively analyze proverbs. Activity 1 can be done in pairs or individually.

Activity 2: Detecting Cross-Cultural Similarities and Differences in Proverbs

Language teachers can provide a group of English proverbs and ask ESL/EFL learners to see which one is identical, partially similar to their own, or culture- or region-specific. Apparently, there is not a one-to-one correspondence across proverbs in the two languages involved.

Some proverbs in two given languages are almost identical from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives. Consider “*Do not look a gift horse in*

the mouth.” Farsi and Turkish share the same features such as referring to *horse* and the practice of checking the age of the animal by looking at its teeth. Some proverbs are partially similar, sharing the context of use, but not syntactically similar. “*Horses for courses*” is an example. In Farsi there is no reference to a horse as the English one, but to the fact that every person has been created for a specific job. The meaning is shared in the two languages, but not the syntactic or lexical aspects. There are still other culture-specific proverbs such as “*lucky at cards, unlucky in love,*” for which there is no equivalent in an Iranian student’s mother tongue. It seems that the content is only specific to certain countries, but not to the Muslim societies wherein the game of cards is prohibited for religious reasons. This activity might effectively be done in small groups.

Activity 3: Compiling Proverbs around Themes

Learners are required to compile proverbs around subjects and themes suggested by the teacher. It is more fun for students to select their own subjects and area of interests ranging from *love, money, courage, absence, to death, devil,* and many others. For instance, the topic of *love* includes the following:

- 1) All’s fair in love and war. 2) One cannot love and be wise. 3) Love begets love. 4) Love is blind. 5) Love conquers all....

There are subtle meaning differences among proverbs. The grouping of proverbs around themes will enable the learners to distinguish the semantic boundaries between or among the proverbs and to use them in the right context as a result. Activity 3 can best be done individually or in pairs.

Activity 4: Categorizing Proverbs as Abstract, Specific, or Folklore

Teachers can ask learners to pay attention to a group of proverbs and decide which type or category (as classified below into abstract statement,

specific life observations, and traditional wisdom) they fall into.

From a different perspective, proverbs can readily be grouped under three other main categories: First, they take the form of abstract statements expressing general truths: “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”. Second, proverbs utilize specific observations from everyday experience to make a general point: “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink”. The third category is made up of sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and folklore, for example, health proverbs: “After dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile,” or “Feed a cold and starve a fever.” The present activity will be more helpful if it is conducted in pairs or small groups.

Activity 5: Tracking down the Origin of Proverbs

Teachers can ask students to track down the origin of a group of selected proverbs, such as the following:

- 1) What is in a name? Originating from Shakespeare’s play, Romeo and Juliet, it means that the quality of a thing matters.
- 2) Morning dreams come true. It comes from a superstition.
- 3) Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. This is a saying of the American inventor Thomas Edison.

Searching for the origins of the proverbs will involve language learners in extensive reading in sources such as the Internet, novels, or theme-based dictionaries among others. Leung (2002) claims that if learners are given the opportunity to read extensively, they can become more eager to learn the necessary reading skills and vocabulary they need in order to enjoy what they read. In addition, extensive reading gives learners more control over and confidence in their own learning, and provides them with special cultural knowledge. It can help learners to acquire vocabulary, grammatical, and communicative competence. Language learners might successfully carry out the fifth activity individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

Activity 6: Grouping Proverbs around the Elements in Nature

Proverbs can also be grouped by some key elements in the environment or nature, for example, animals and birds. The learners can, therefore, be required to collect a number of proverbs containing the name of an animal or a bird:

- 1) A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- 2) Don't count your chickens before they hatch/are hatched.
- 3) Fine feathers make fine birds.
- 4) Let sleeping dogs lie....

This activity is distinct from the third one, "Compiling proverbs around themes," in the sense that it might contribute to the cultural awareness of the learners in preserving the environment in addition to teaching the delicacies of the foreign language. Certainly, different nations in the world respect nature, which is indicated by their proverbs. In spite of this, in developing countries, environment and nature are not protected so carefully at a desired level. Therefore, some Iranian EFL students observed in the class that this activity reminded them of their duty to preserve and respect the environment, as indicated in many proverbs in their mother tongue. (This activity was in line with a research project in Green Research Center, University of Qom.) Small groups might conduct this activity more successfully.

Activity 7: Mapping Proverbs onto Situations

Teachers can give learners a situation and ask them whether they can recollect a proverb to comment on the situation like the ones below:

- 1) People are attracted to others who are like themselves. (*Birds of a feather flock together.*)
- 2) Large undertakings take time. (*Rome was not built in a day.*)
- 3) Take advantage of favorable circumstances while they last. (*Strike while the iron is hot.*)

People tend to use proverbs to comment on a situation. They usually use proverbs to give a piece of advice or a suggestion on a specific situation or to emphasize the content of their statements that they might not be able to do otherwise. The current activity will make language learners aware of this ability. It may be more beneficial if Activity 7 is conducted individually or in pairs.

Activity 8: Doing Scavenger Hunts for Proverbs in the Media

In an ESL setting, one could also have students do “scavenger hunts” for proverbs on the Internet and in the surrounding print media, for example in advertisements, or by talk show hosts or other television figures and so forth.

This activity might contribute to brightening the language learners’ insight with regard to the use of proverbs in such situations. It might also familiarize learners with how proverbs help in getting the messages across. The present activity can well engage small groups.

Activity 9: Comparing Proverbs in the Foreign Language

Language teachers can ask learners to compare conflicting or opposing proverbs with one another. For example, compare “Eat, drink, and be merry” with “save for a rainy day”.

It would be important to help readers understand, in the event that some of them do not, that some cultures hold apparently conflicting proverbs. Such comparisons might lead to language awareness and discussion of the sources for proverbs. Activity 9 might lead to class participation and raise discussion in the class. Therefore, it is more fruitful to be done *in the classroom* in pairs or in small groups to raise discussion.

Activity 10: Completing the Incomplete Proverbs

Native speakers often use proverbs in an abbreviated or shortened form.

For example, “A bird in the hand” refers to the proverb “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”. As the last but not the least activity, language teachers can ask the learners: “Who knows more English proverbs?” Taking the points below into consideration, teachers can ask them to complete the incomplete proverbs, such as:

- 1) a tooth for a tooth. 2) Actions speak louder.....
- 3) You can't have your cake and.....

“Cultural literacy,” according to Hirsch (1988, p. 2), is “the network of information” or “the background information” that enables competent readers to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, and grasping the implications. With the help of cultural literacy, on “many occasions when English speakers invoke proverbs in speech and writing, they simply allude to them rather than complete them” (p. 46). Therefore, if someone offers another a fruit and says, “An apple a day,” the communication will fail if they do not know the relevant proverb “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”; they will be an outsider.

This division of English-speaking people into outsiders and insiders helps us understand the importance of cultural literacy for successful communication. The “outsiders” (people lacking target-culture literacy) who are not aware of English proverbs and sayings often feel confused when they come across fairly common humorous versions like:

- 1) If at first you do not succeed, think how many people you've made happy. 2) A new groom sweeps clean and also washes dishes....

There are several more graceful alterations of the proverbs that we (language learners) are supposed to know so well:

- 1) Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may diet. 2) People who live in glass houses should breathe on the windows before taking a bath. 3) Familiarity breeds contempt (and children)....

The list of activities and exercises does not end here. Creative language teachers can set up other activities to add to the novelty and creativity of their own endeavors in teaching, depending on their context of teaching and the facilities available.

Learners' Response to the Use of Proverb Activities

In the fall semester of the academic year 2005, at the University of Qom, the author talked to his students about the issue of being an outsider and an insider. Then he asked them to see if such a thing could be evidence-based. The students could search on the Internet, refer to the books available, or they could themselves set up some tests, even with Farsi proverbs. One of the students returned with a list one day in which one English teacher had done something interesting with young English learners. On April Fool's day, the teacher collected well-known proverbs. He gave each first-grader in the class the first half of the proverb, and asked them to come up with the rest. Here are five of what the young learners came up with:

- 1) No news is ... impossible.
- 2) A miss is as good as a ... Mrs.
- 3) A penny saved is ... not much.
- 4) Where there is smoke, there's ... pollution.
- 5) Children should be seen and not ... spanked or grounded....

Comparing the first-graders' answers with the original proverbs, the students enjoyed the fun in finding out that the first-grader did not have any background information about "A miss is as good as a mile," for instance. The first-graders had thus confused "*miss*" with "*Miss*," which explains why the young learner completed the proverb with "*Mrs.*"

Some Considerations in Using Proverb Activities

We have to consider the needs of language learners for being able to comprehend and produce proverbs before embarking on teaching proverbs. The activities need not take up the whole class time. They can be part of the

syllabus for the course and may well be done alongside the other activities. The author recommends 10-15 minutes of class time for proverb activities in a two-credit course on teaching expressions each week. A two-credit course on fixed expressions is offered in the EFL context of Iran. Second or foreign language teachers can give a proportionate amount of their class time to such activities. The reason for not going beyond this amount of time is that we should maintain the interest of learners. The interest for doing such activities may evaporate. The learners may get bored if we start overloading them and do only one activity for too long.

Given the needs of language learners, their proficiency level, the context of study, and the purpose for language learning, it is recommended that language teachers introduce proverbs in conjunction with other activities around the topic. The author does not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach for using the activities with all the proficiency levels. For this reason, in selecting the activities, it is suggested the level of the learners be taken into account and the activities adapted accordingly. Also, teachers will find it more effective if they try to use situations when people actually use the expressions. It is useful to require students to create dialogues or role-plays and to use a few of the proverbs to reinforce the meaning. In addition, it is important for language teachers not to overload students with too many proverbs at a time. Five is probably a good number for one class.

Some researchers do not advocate the teaching of proverbs to be postponed to advanced levels, rather to be tackled at any level. They argue that figurative knowledge including the knowledge of idioms, proverbs, metaphor, and other such expressions, contributes to the socio-pragmatic competence of language learners. For Çakir (2006, p. 142), all aspects of “figurativeness (metaphor, idiomaticity, proverbs, and semantic extension) seem to present difficulties for learners. It is wrongly believed that to grasp such kind of expressions should be achieved at the advanced level”.

In language teaching, it is not pedagogically acceptable that some concepts like proverbs, idioms, and metaphors should be skirted. However, a good foreign language teacher might strive to teach them in a communicative and

meaningful way along with the culture of that target language so as to assist the learners in getting the message of the related language (Çakir, 2006; Mac Dougall, 2004).

Useful Resources for Language Teachers

To embark on teaching proverbs, there are many useful resources to resort to. However, teachers may benefit from the following exemplar resources. The sample sites below have a huge collection of proverbs from around the globe: “Interesting Things for ESL Students: A fun study site for learners of English as a Second Language”², “Creative Proverbs From Around the World”³, and “De Proverbio”⁴. In addition, a sample of the available books and references includes: 101 American English Proverbs (Collins, 1992), Proverbs: A Handbook (Mieder, 2004), NTC’s Dictionary of Proverbs and Clichés (Bertram & Richard, 1993), and The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs (Simpson, 1992).

CONCLUSION

This study is mostly suggestive of some activities for incorporating proverbs in EFL classes. However, it highlights further support for a number of studies indicating the significance of proverbs. Some studies indicate the contributory role of proverbs in cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988) and in successful communication: “knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom (Introduction to the Standards, 1996, p. 11, as recited in Mac Dougall, 2004)”. The knowledge of idioms, proverbs, metaphor, and the like, contributes to the socio-pragmatic competence of language learners (Çakir, 2006). Proverb comprehension is associated with reading proficiency, word

² <http://www.manythings.org/>

³ <http://creativeproverbs.com/>

⁴ <http://www.deproverbio.com/>

knowledge, and analogical reasoning (Nippold et al., 2001). Therefore, being able to comprehend and use proverbs is an important component for the second or foreign language skills. Therefore, the language teachers need to be aware of how to include these expressions properly in the reading curriculum or vocabulary teaching materials.

One obstacle to increasing the use of exercises on proverbs is the lack of variety. It is hoped that the form of activities illustrated here will raise language teachers' awareness of options available to them, encourage them to experiment with alternative approaches, and take an active role in their own teaching of proverbial expressions. Once equipped with options, teachers can confidently take steps towards raising the consciousness of the learners in this respect. However, studies of experimental nature in different languages are needed to provide empirical data to shed more light on the area.

It is not practical to use all or most of the activities above in one session, but they are only meant to increase the options available for teachers, to increase the interest among the learners, and to add to the variety. Metaphorically speaking, I close the discussion here with the proverb I cited at the outset: *Variety is the spice of life.*

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