DO DIGITAL CORPUS-BASED ENVIRONMENTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS?

Yana Chankova, Natalia Bassisa
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Abstract. This paper aims to investigate how digital corpus-based environments can facilitate students' comprehension and acquisition of English idioms, which illustrate a learner's fluency but are admittedly hard to obtain. The challenge of contributing to the learners' acquisition of these specific, important and simultaneously intricate, lexical items through an innovative and state-of-the-art teaching approaches and strategies has stimulated the writing of this paper. What is mainly to be examined here are the digital environments and learning systems and the innovatory ways through which idioms can be taught, as well as the advantages of COCA as a learning aid in teaching idioms. Particular reference will be made to the function of idiomatic expressions and the criteria of selecting specific idioms to be taught.

Keywords: English idioms; digital technologies; digital learning environments; Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA); innovative approaches to teaching idioms

As early as the 2020s, Vesselinov states that: "Information and communication technologies turned out to be pivotal to educational changes and logically became the ever sought-after panacea for solving critical problems in all aspects of education … upon the recommendations for their mass implementation in the learning process, the intensive introduction of new technologies into the educational institutions was successfully completed and the futuristic idea of the predicted replacement of natural intelligence with artificial intelligence gained new impetus" (Vesselinov 2021, p.7). Vesselinov is, however, to a certain degree skeptical about the potential of the high-tech organization of the educational system to achieve the long-dreamed results. The authors of this paper seek to explore how digital learning environments and digitalized corpora can facilitate learners' comprehension and acquisition of English idioms and fixed lexical items and whether such tools can indeed be the panacea for solving issues related to the teaching of idioms to EFL learners.

Idioms and collocations are an intriguing source of investigation due to the fact that they illustrate a learner's fluency, but at the same time they are admittedly quite hard to obtain. Remarkably, "No translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity, if a natural use of the target language is an aim" (Fernando 1996, p. 234). Schmitt (2000, p. 48) supports that "Formulaic language occupies a crucial role in facilitating language; it is the key to fluency and motivates the learner". Specifically, idioms are mainly fixed expressions, comprehended by the native speakers of a language and their meaning cannot always be guessed from the meaning of the idioms' component words, and as a consequence, they can get tricky for the learners to acquire (Berman 2000). Idiomatic expressions are often an indication and reflection of social norms, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. As a result, learning idioms is closely related to acquiring cultural knowledge.

What should be highlighted here is the fact that attempts to examine the function and distribution in real language data of such lexical items are often lacking in the relevant literature (Coulmas 1979; Schiffrin 1987). More often than not, it is assumed that idiomatic expressions are merely rather informal or colloquial alternatives to their nearest synonyms, which is mostly true since the types of linguistic data where idioms are attested with prevailing frequency entail a high degree of informality at the interpersonal level between speaker/writer and hearer/reader. However, this cannot account for the speaker's/writer's motivation in opting for an idiom instead of its literal counterpart at some point in a discourse. It would be quite useful, if we could stipulate some kind of correlation between holding between the occurrence of idioms and idiomatic expressions and certain features of the studied discourse. Unfortunately, idioms do not play a significant role in EFL syllabi and in the vocabulary learning process, as they either constitute a 'fun' element of the syllabus, or else learners who use them in the wrong way get warned that they are extremely hard to acquire and are suggested to use the receptive vocabulary instead, while in most cases they are swept under the rug of supplementary materials by publishers.

Among the very few scholars to discuss idiomatic use in naturally-occurring spoken English, can be mentioned Strassler (1982) who diverts out of the traditional way of analyzing idioms as a semantic problem and focuses on the pragmatics of idiomatic use. Under Strassler's proposal (1982), such lexical forms are quite possible to occur when the speaker refers to a third person or talks about an object or another non-human entity, rather than when the speaker refers to him/herself or to the hearer(s). On the one hand, such contextual preferences can be explained as an ensuing consequence of the evaluative function of idioms, on the other – these can be motivated by the desire to avoid risks to face and interpersonal relations which could stem from the self- or other- abasement which idioms often imply or allude to.

When the function of idioms is to be considered, of essential importance is the fact that they are attested with predominating frequency within certain discourse-types and genres. Characteristically, oral narrative is a clearly defined genre with an identifiable discourse structure, and idioms seem to occur at significant junctures in orally performed stories, not just at random (as is explicitly demonstrated in Labov 1972), e.g. such lexical structures in narrative data often appear in sections where the story-teller is evaluating certain events from the narrative. Labov (1972) convincingly argues that evaluation is necessary for story-tellers to make the events they are reporting worth listening to, otherwise the story will turn into a bland report; and then idioms also occur in codas, again in Labov's (1972) sense, the coda at the end of the story provides a kind of 'bridge' between the story world and the real world of the teller and listeners). In other words, during oral narrative, the story-teller assesses situations and/or abases themself (for the sake of achieving humorous effects and laughter, or to create social solidarity, to increase informality or intimacy, etc.), and much in the same vein McCarthy (1991) argues that story-telling is naturally carried through as a collaborative enterprise, whereby listeners are allowed to appraise and evaluate events too.

Remarkably, idioms are linked to the cultural competence of foreign language learners, and the fact that idioms and other types of fixed expressions are often alluded to rather than used in full is also related to culture. Specifically, allusion could take the form of simple ellipsis of fixed elements (e.g. saying *Oh well, every cloud,* instead of the full proverb *Every cloud has a silver lining*), or a more oblique kind of reference to a fixed expression can be implied by the speaker. It is assumed by many everyday text types and narratives that the reader will be able to comprehend such allusions and implications and perceive the cultural references these entail. Such references are cultural in the sense that they bear upon the everyday cultural life of the mass media, proverbs, sayings, idioms, collocations and other fixed linguistic forms they inherently encode. There are numerous examples of various kinds of oblique cultural reference used in advertising texts, book and song titles, headlines and other sources, such as: *Twinkle, twinkle, little tsar* (Headline to an article about Russia, *The Observer Review,* 10.3.1991, p. 56) with reference to the children's nursery rhyme *Twinkle, twinkle, little star;* or *Dry skin. Irritation. Razor Bum. No wonder shaving's a pain in the neck.* (Razor advertisement. *The Observer Magazine,* 10.3.1991, p.53) with reference to the idiomatic phrase *a pain in the neck* = 'an annoyance, a problem'. Regarding news headlines, we could say that idioms are extensively used in the journalistic register, as they can be manipulated to achieve certain effects, such as the use of irony or humor to intrigue prospective readers. Summing it up, any reader/listener who lacks in the necessary linguistic competence to realize such references and allusions will not only miss the intended connotations and/or the implied humor/irony but will also fail to experience the sense of cultural solidarity, of belonging to a community with shared linguistic and

cultural values that such references project. All of the above lends support to the claim that foreign language teaching should not neglect idioms or consider them as some sort of icing on the cake, on the contrary, idioms and set expressions should be treated with due care and attention in foreign language learning textbooks, materials, resources and aids.

The past quarter of a century has witnessed a fascinating range of innovations regarding computer-assisted language learning (or CALL), which is not only due to immense research and practice activities in the field, but is also related to the rapid and continuing shifts in technology itself. Nowadays, it is vital that EFL teachers should have full knowledge and awareness of the state-of-the-art applications and of the various digital environments and integrated learning systems, as this will enable them to become more flexible and transmit the knowledge of a language in a more entertaining and effective way. The use of web 2.0 tools in the classroom provides interactive platforms that according to Kuit and Fell (2010, p. 317) are based on "the building of a community in which social networking is the crucial element". With the help of the learning platforms, EFL learners can avail of the opportunity to share information, knowledge and projects through media, to develop, organize and construct collective knowledge, to communicate through instant messaging, as well as to work in multi-user virtual environments. Because of these unique features of web 2.0 tools students become more engaged in the learning process since they "accommodate support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (Park 2013, p.48). Still, we have to bear in mind that the incorporation and extensive use of virtual environments and integrated learning systems does not necessarily guarantee learning, if educators do not employ suited on-target pedagogical methods in order for these technological tools to be used effectively and proficiently to upskill students' linguistic competence, since innovation is required in teaching methods as well (Campell & Monk 2015).

When it comes to teaching idioms and set phrases in a comprehensive and efficient way, numerous digital tools can be used in the EFL classroom but some of them are more advantageous, productive and student-friendly. A case in point comes from BookWidgets, which is a Belgium-based platform for creating interactive learning materials. This specific app includes the following categories: Test and Review, Games, Pictures, Math, Embed Third Party, and Miscellaneous, and it offers a sharing link to Google Classroom, therefore EFL teachers could share activities or other materials with their students. Teachers have the chance to choose from more than 40 different widgets to engage their students and create their own adapted crosswords, riddles, videos, jigsaw puzzles, web quests, quizzes, timelines - all of them related to and focusing on the type of material they want to teach, including idioms and idiomatic expressions. Tutors are also able to integrate third parties' elements like a YouTube video, a Google map, or a PDF. Another helpful advantage of BookWidgets is that the platform does the grading, which makes it

less time-consuming for teachers as they can get their students' results instantly via the Grades and Reporting tab in BookWidgets. Some drawbacks can also be mentioned: though it is accessible via the Apple Store and can be downloaded as an app and installed on iphones and ipads or Android mobiles, BookWidgets is available only by way of web browsers; a subscription is required too which has to be paid by the teacher. To sum up, BookWidgets provides strong editable digital templates and tools for all kinds of interactive exercises but is not universally accessible.

Another innovative tool that can be used to facilitate the teaching of idioms is TEDed. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design and it is a non-profit organization that has successfully gathered together inspiring and influential world-renowned figures that make presentations or give talks through TED Talks conveying various ideas from miscellaneous fields or backgrounds. TED Talks can help students practice on all skills, i.e. Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing, as a complementary resource. It is acknowledged that EFL learners find this way of learning quite intriguing and stimulating, since TED Talks refer to various subjects, so students absorb appealing ideas and diverse pieces of information, while at the same time they learn the language. TED is an educational media organization that hosts conferences and events around the world and TED Talks are provided in video formats on the TED website so that they can be watched anytime and anywhere (Amalia,2020). They also provide presentations that are inspiring, creative and engaging, and according to Ziebell (2019), TED Talks offer great resources for teachers in teaching ESL, as they cover every conceivable topic possible – technology, science, the Arts, design, health, humanities, nature and the environment, personal growth, interpersonal communication, etc. and consequently, they are likely to provide an inspiring and captivating talk for every individual student in the class. As claimed by Kumar and Mohanasundaram (2020), the TED short talks will affect extensively English language learners, along with the subject matter, to interactively develop vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Through TED Talks class conversations, discussions and debates get sparked, while simultaneously the interpretation of course content by the students gets promoted. Depending on what content tutors would like to teach each time, they could use videos and presentations in a different way. For instance, in case they would like to introduce new vocabulary (e.g. idioms and set phrases) or a new grammatical phenomenon, they could use the transcript provided to explain these in detail after the students have watched the video, since a talk is more effective in a written form than anything (Anderson 2016). At the same time, students would practice their Listening skills while listening to authentic talks. No doubt, as Ziebell argues (2019), learning English with TED Talks proves to be entertaining and effortless, for easy-to-use classroom materials and free engaging content are offered for anyone teaching or learning English, while learners are encouraged to find their voices in English.

A digital learning environment that combines the advantages of both of the above and of many well-known online learning systems is Padlet, which can be described as a 'free' web 2.0 tool, wherein virtual walls can be created. In particular, a virtual wall operates like a white board where one can 'pin' multiple and different types of files on, such as word documents, images, audio files and videos. Users have the chance to upload files from their computers, input pictures or videos from their phones, or paste links from the web. Additionally, both tutors and learners can embed content from anywhere on the web, including YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Vimeo, The New York Times, and 400 other apps. The creator of a wall decides about the content (type of content and content strategy), layout, design, formatting, functionality and privacy of the wall, e.g. s/he can choose from the different wallpapers given to design the background, and when there are multiple postings on the wall, s/he can arrange them in different layouts, which facilitates the process of customizing and organizing the platform and makes it more well-structured and coherent as well as more explicit and comprehensible. The links/addresses to the walls can be personalized, which means that each learner can be offered different materials according to their level or the challenges they face. The creator can also monitor and control what learners can do on the wall, e.g., they can be given the permission to only read what has been posted on the wall, or to write and post on the wall and edit their own posts but not interfere with others' posts. Importantly, Padlet allows any number of writers to post comments or upload files at the same time (Goh & Sandars 2016), while posts can be viewed at real time, which provides teachers with a way to have students not only review and reflect on the suggested content, but also collaborate with their peers via community features. Since the lack of time is often the reason why teachers do not create lessons based on digital environments, another major advantage of Padlet is that they are able to search for padlets on specific topics and start from a gallery of pre-made templates or even remake any padlet that suits their teaching goals. It has been demonstrated that teachers can use the Padlet during their lessons in a great variety of ways, and in the special case of teaching idioms they could use a contextual preview for the attached links and files of specific idioms and set expressions to give viewers a hint of what they will be shown. In view of the mentioned advantages, and possible digital extensions and enhancements of the Padlet, we believe that it is a versatile, adaptable, highly applicable and engaging, user-friendly digital tool for teaching idioms and fixed lexical items and we intend to use it for the sake of future research.

It is widely supported that the use of linguistic corpora can develop students' critical attitude to foreign language structure and use as well as facilitate the deeper understanding of the function of some linguistic phenomena, including idioms' comprehension. Several research studies have been conducted concerning the use of digital linguistic corpora as an effective tool in teaching a foreign language. Consider for instance Osipova's study (2020) which was aimed at researching

the process of teaching idioms' interpretation to EFL students using Corpus Linguistics technology as a digital tool. Specifically, this research sought to assess the students' proficiency in translation techniques and strategies and through the discussion of the students' variants of idioms interpretation to outline some of the difficulties they experience. Among the focus areas of this research can be mentioned: comprehending the main, peripheral, and polysemous meanings of a word; understanding the communicative intention of the text; choosing a suitable functional equivalent for an idiom; finding out the relationship between the literal meaning and the figurative meanings of words and phrases. The obtained results lend empirical support to the claim that it is vital to introduce Corpus Linguistic technology as a tool helping to interpret and translate idioms, as despite the fact that the majority of students had a sufficient level of English proficiency to work with idiomatic language, not knowing how to use Corpus Linguistic technology led to their difficulty in interpreting adequately idioms. Another important result of this research is that after the educational experiment was over most of the students achieved the communicative-sufficient level, as the average level of their proficiency increased by 16.5%, which testifies to the effectiveness of Corpus Linguistic technology as a tool in teaching idioms' interpretation to EFL students. What is more, linguistic corpora were recognized by the vast majority (97.3%) as an involving and effective tool, while 92.7% of the students stated that from then on they would use corpus tools in translation activities along with other electronic resources (Osipova 2020, pp. 9 – 11).

Irujo (1986) proposed specific criteria according to which idioms and idiomatic expressions can be deemed worth teaching. The one of crucial importance is related to their frequency of occurrence, meaning that the idioms which should be taught first are those that are most frequently used by native speakers (Irujo 1986). Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that the teaching of idioms is generally based on the mere subjective judgements of FL teachers. Corpora can no doubt provide a non-subjective view on the frequency of occurrence of idioms within a particular time span. Using corpora to find out the attested frequency of occurrence of idioms and set phrases is really essential, since many English teachers use idiom books to assess whether their chosen materials would be appropriate in given teaching contexts or not, and they often tend to rely on their intuitions in taking such important decisions, but even if native speakers have a strong intuition about idioms (Vasiljevic 2015), it is not always the case with non-native teachers. Along the same lines, Varley (2008) convincingly demonstrates that a corpus can help foreign language learners identify certain language uses that are not available and accessible based on the usage of traditional tools. Summing it up, using corpora as a teaching strategy can bring natural language into the classroom to serve as a vehicle to support real language acquisition (for a more detailed account s. Reppen, 2010).

Considerations of frequency are inextricably linked to authenticity and 'realism' in language learning materials and activities, and are becoming more and more exigent and dominant in language teaching and learning (Mishan 2004; Buendgens-Kosten 2014). One of the benefits of using authentic language materials and aids in the FL classroom is that they make the students feel that they are learning 'real language' (Guariento & Morley 2001, p. 347). Additionally, authentic language encourages students to study the language further since it is "intrinsically more interesting and motivating than created materials" (Richards 2001, p. 253). The fact that any corpus provides various examples in authentic contexts facilitates language learners to explore and discover the meaning, form and use of words and phrases, including set and idiomatic expressions, as it offers explicit learning within the specific contexts based on real-life examples. According to Liu (2008), having understood the register and function of the idioms taught, learners are able to reduce the inappropriate and erroneous use of them. Simpson and Mendis (2003) investigated the advantages and drawbacks of using corpora in FLT and their findings indicate that utilizing a corpus containing language similar to that which one intends to teach can yield beneficial results, such as providing students with abundant information about relevant phraseologies and usages.

Except for the exposure to real language and the potentiality for increased motivation, Kilickaja (2004) refers to the opportunity of perceiving authentic information regarding the target language's culture as an advantage too. Cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in learning new idioms and idiomatic phrases. Cultural knowledge thus serves both the interest of authenticity and the incentive of learning idioms. In the field of pedagogical sciences, teaching skills for and providing knowledge on behavioral practices in a multicultural environment is of paramount importance for the application of diversity-driven pedagogical strategies. Using authentic language in language teaching correlates with the students' needs regarding their future language use in culturally diverse or culturally sensitive environments (Richards 2001). Another advantage of authentic language use is the relatively up-to-date information on the language taught, taking into consideration the fact that textbook English becomes sometimes surprisingly quickly outdated (Berardo 2006).

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is the largest and most representative corpus of English so far, and it is the most widely-used as well, provided it offers unparalleled insight into variation in modern English. COCA was created by Mark Davies in 2008, a Corpus Linguistics professor at Brigham Young University. Currently, COCA is the most recent, comprehensive and balanced corpus of the English language that exists. This corpus contains more than one billion words of text and it is divided evenly in eight genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and Movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages, while each genre comes from various authentic sources. All

of the above features paired with the large variety of functionalities and extensions turn COCA into a powerful tool for linguistic analysis that we intend to use in our future research.

Taking into account the large bulk of material, both linguistic and non-linguistic, and the short time language learners often have available for learning a language, it is certainly more vital to pay attention to the most frequently occurring and real-life elements of the language system rather than the less practical ones. Corpus Linguistics, as mentioned above, facilitates us to determine what material is more or less important to focus on in FL classrooms, based on frequency information (Biber & Reppen 2002). Additionally, COCA is valuable for the FL classroom activities, as it informs us on what is actually used in the target language by native speakers, and most importantly on how different elements of the target language are embedded in various contexts.

Regarding idioms, real examples from a corpus instead of made-up contrived sentences created only for the learners' sake can enhance the language learning process. In this connection, consider Boers (2011) who suggested Cognitive Semantics approaches as an effective way of teaching figurative phrases, such as idioms, after testing Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980). Along the above lines, our intended classification of idioms from the COCA corpus based on the type of metaphors, their source domains and origin would not only contribute to the analysis but also ease the learning and retention of these idioms by the students. Employing pictures in order to represent idioms is another effective way to teach them besides verbal explanation. According to Boers, Piquer, Píriz, Stengers, and Eyckman's (2009) findings, pictorial education of idioms can render the retention of idioms easier as well as make them more plausible for the learners. Suited photographs or drawings could contribute to the learning and recollection of idiomatic use but images should be ancillary to the verbal explanations of the specific features and functions of idioms so as to enhance the comprehension of both semantic and syntactic aspects of use. An alternative way of teaching idioms in EFL/ESL contexts is to pair, match or combine them with similar idioms or concepts in the learners' native language, if such exist. Corresponding or matching idioms can be found in different languages and across cultures and this can be an exciting topic for teachers to explore, for emphasizing on the existing similarities can stimulate learners and facilitate them in storing and using the studied idioms more often.

To conclude, idioms and fixed lexical phrases are more frequently used in authentic language than it was imagined in the past, based on the advances in Corpus Linguistics as well as in technological development and digitalization. Lack of knowledge of idioms and fixed lexical items could lead to comprehension obstacles for learners and even to cases of interpretation failure and miscommunication, meaning such linguistic elements should become part and parcel of the EFLT

curricula and educators are recommended to apply the cutting edge approaches, strategies and techniques discussed above in teaching them.

We have convincingly demonstrated that digital learning environments and digitalized corpora can facilitate learners' comprehension and contribute immensely to their acquisition of English idioms and fixed lexical items. At the same time such high-tech tools cannot be a panacea for solving all challenges proceeding from the teaching of idioms to EFL learners and on that point we totally agree with Vesselinov (Vesselinov 2021) that the personal contact among the individual subjects of the educational process enhances the motivation for learning on the part of the students and ultimately that the role of the human factors in this process will always be of paramount importance.

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✉ **Dr. Yana Chankova, Assoc. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8901-3163
✉ **Natalia Basisa, PhD student**
Southwest University "Neofit Rilski"
Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
E-mail: yana_chankova@swu.bg
E-mail: nataliampasisa@gmail.com