

**LINGUO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF IDIOM
ACQUISITION IN YOUNG LEARNERS**

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Abstract : *This study explores the linguo-psychological foundations of idiom acquisition among young learners of English. Idioms, as figurative expressions, are deeply rooted in cognition, culture, and communication. Drawing on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Lakoff, and Johnson, this paper examines how cognitive development, emotional engagement, and sociocultural context influence idiom comprehension. Real-life classroom practices demonstrate that visualization, storytelling, dramatization, and game-based learning can significantly enhance idiom retention. The paper concludes that teaching idioms through linguo-psychological approaches helps children develop metaphorical thinking, linguistic creativity, and intercultural awareness.*

Keywords: *idioms, linguo-psychology, young learners, metaphorical thinking, teaching strategies, figurative language, cognitive development*

Introduction

Idioms are an essential component of any language, reflecting its cultural worldview, emotional color, and communicative creativity. For young learners of English, mastering idiomatic expressions is one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. Unlike adults, children think more concretely, which limits their ability to grasp figurative or metaphorical meanings. Consequently, idiom acquisition requires not only linguistic competence but also cognitive and psychological readiness. Idioms are among the most culturally rich and cognitively demanding elements of any language. For young learners, idioms represent an intersection of linguistic form, conceptual metaphor, and emotional experience. As noted by Fernando (1996), idioms are “conventionalized expressions whose



meanings cannot be predicted from their parts” [1]. Understanding idioms, therefore, requires more than vocabulary knowledge — it requires metaphorical and cultural awareness. The linguo-psychological approach to idiom learning investigates how language mechanisms interact with cognitive development, emotional engagement, and memory processes in young learners. Understanding these interactions can help educators develop more effective teaching strategies suited to children’s developmental stages.

Psycholinguistic research shows that idiom comprehension involves multiple levels of processing — literal, figurative, and emotional (Gibbs, 1994) [2]. For children, this complexity often leads to literal misinterpretations (*e.g.*, “spill the beans” → imagining beans falling). This paper discusses how cognitive maturity, emotional engagement, and teaching methodology influence idiom acquisition among young learners.

Cognitive Development and Idiom Comprehension

Linguistically, idioms are fixed multi-word expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their components. For instance, “*kick the bucket*” means “*to die*,” not “*to strike a bucket*.” This non-compositionality requires learners to store idioms as single lexical items in long-term memory.

Idioms often embody cultural symbols, humor, and emotion. Therefore, successful idiom acquisition implies understanding the target culture’s conceptual system. For young learners, this process must be guided and supported through meaningful contexts.

According to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (1954), children in the concrete operational stage (7–11 years old) tend to think literally [3]. Abstract reasoning, necessary for understanding metaphors and idioms, emerges only in the formal operational stage. Thus, teachers must scaffold idiom learning according to learners’ cognitive readiness.

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social interaction and the “zone of proximal development,” suggesting that learning occurs most effectively when children receive guided support [4]. Through peer collaboration and teacher



mediation, students can internalize idiomatic meanings even before full cognitive maturity is reached.

From a psycholinguistic standpoint, idiom comprehension depends on conceptual mapping, metaphorical thinking, and associative memory. According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, children under 11 are in the stage of concrete operational thinking and have limited ability to interpret figurative language. Only with the development of abstract reasoning do they begin to grasp metaphorical meanings.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that idioms reflect metaphorical concepts deeply rooted in human cognition. Therefore, developing metaphorical competence is a gradual psychological process intertwined with language and experience.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed that human thought is largely metaphorical [5]. Idioms reflect conceptual metaphors that shape how people perceive the world. For example, the idiom *"time is money"* stems from the metaphor *TIME = RESOURCE*. Helping learners uncover such underlying metaphors fosters deeper comprehension.

Emotional and Memory Aspects

Emotionally charged expressions are more easily remembered (Boers, 2011) [6]. Activities that evoke humor, surprise, or empathy activate both hemispheres of the brain, enhancing long-term retention. Therefore, idiom teaching should engage both cognitive and affective domains.

Practical Examples and Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Visualizing Idioms

Objective: To develop associative and metaphorical thinking.
Procedure: The teacher provides idioms such as *"break the ice"*, *"hit the books"*, *"under the weather"*. Students draw literal and figurative meanings in two panels.
Psychological Basis: Visual imagery helps transfer abstract meaning into concrete form, enhancing dual coding (Paivio, 1991) [7].

Activity 2: Storytelling with Idiom



Objective: To contextualize idioms through narrative.

Procedure: Students work in groups to write short stories using 3–5 idioms.

Example:

“Tom was under the weather, but he decided to hit the books before exams.

His mother said, ‘Don’t burn the midnight oil!’”

Outcome: This technique develops linguistic creativity and situational use of idioms.

Reference: According to Ellis (2003), meaningful input and narrative context significantly aid memory consolidation [8].

Activity 3: Dramatization (Role-Play)

Objective: To enhance emotional engagement and embodied learning.

Procedure: Learners act out idioms like “*pull someone’s leg*” or “*piece of cake*.”

Psychological Insight: Physical action stimulates kinesthetic memory, which reinforces language retention (Gardner, 1983) [9].

Activity 4: Idiom Matching Game

Objective: To reinforce associative learning through play.

Procedure: Cards are divided into idioms and their meanings. Students match them in pairs or groups.

Pedagogical Impact: Game-based learning lowers anxiety and promotes intrinsic motivation (Krashen, 1982) [10].

Activity 5: Cultural Comparison Task

Objective: To develop intercultural competence.

Procedure: Learners compare English idioms with equivalents in their native language (e.g., “*Let the cat out of the bag*” ↔ “*Sirni ochmoq*”).

Result: Recognizing cultural parallels deepens cross-cultural understanding.

Discussion

The linguo-psychological approach shows that idiom learning is not purely linguistic but an integrated cognitive-emotional process. Boers & Lindstromberg (2008) note that students retain idioms better when teaching involves imagery, movement, and humor [11].

Furthermore, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory underscores the necessity of guided



interaction: students internalize idiomatic meaning through cooperative dialogue. Modern classrooms should thus shift from rote memorization toward experiential learning—where idioms are lived, acted, and felt.

Conclusion

The acquisition of idioms by young learners is influenced by linguistic, cognitive, and psychological factors. Teaching idioms effectively requires understanding children's mental development, emotional needs, and sociocultural context. By integrating visualization, storytelling, dramatization, and game-based activities, educators can make idioms accessible and memorable.

Linguo-psychological teaching not only expands children's vocabulary but also develops their metaphorical thinking and intercultural awareness—key components of communicative competence in the 21st century.

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