



## The synergistic effect of funny pictures and etymological elaboration on promoting EFL learners' idiom retention and recall

Mohammad Reza Ghorbani<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of Bojnord, North Khorasan, Bojnord, Postcode 9453155111, Iran*

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### Abstract

In an attempt to facilitate and foster idiom retention and recall, this study investigated the effect of pictorial and etymological treatments on Iranian undergraduate students' idiom learning. The paired-samples experimental design was used to study 26 students who had registered for the Use of Idioms course at the University of Bojnord (UB). One hundred target idioms were selected from 50 programs of the VOA's Special English (Words and their Stories). Half of them were taught accompanied by funny pictures and etymological elaboration and the other half were taught without any pictures. After the treatment, the subjects were given an immediate posttest and a delayed posttest one month later. The reliability of the 40-item posttest was estimated at 0.83 through the KR-21 formula. The data obtained was analyzed using paired-samples t-test. The results of data analysis indicated that the differences between the two conditions were statistically significant in both immediate and delayed posttests. The findings imply that the pictorial-etymological treatment was more effective than etymological treatment only.

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*Keywords:* Funny Pictures; Etymological Elaboration; Idiom Teaching and Learning; Retention and Recall

## 1. Introduction

Although there is no unanimous agreement among experts on a specific definition for idioms, they are viewed by Irujo (1986) as "expressions whose meaning cannot be derived from their constituent parts" (p.199). Grant and Bauer (2004) define them as "a fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage". Hornby (2006, p. 770) defines idioms as "a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words" and idiomatic as "expressions that are natural to a native speaker of a language." According to Baker (2011), since the sum of idiom parts are smaller than their whole, it is difficult to learn and interpret their meaning by understanding the words composing them. Considering idioms as multiple word units with both literal and figurative meanings, Zhang (2009 p. 6) states that, "in most cases, the figurative meaning of an idiom cannot be readily derived from the literal meaning of the individual constituent in the unit." Cooper (1999, p. 86) believes that "avoiding the use of idioms gives language a bookish, stilted, unimaginative tone".

According to Carter and Bowing (2001), idioms are difficult to recognize and translate into non-idiomatic English. Zafarpour and Tabatabaei (2015), Noroozi and Salehi (2013), Zarei and Rahimi (2012), Charteris-black (2002), and Cooper (1999) also confirm that English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learners face problems learning idiomatic expressions. However, they should be taught because they provide learners with unique opportunities and enable them to understand the target language more effectively (Liontas, 1999).

As pointed out by Zafarpour and Tabatabaei (2015), in Iranian high schools, teachers and textbooks almost ignore to teach and present idioms and students still have difficulty in understanding and using them. They believe that since the presentation of idioms in Iranian textbooks and contexts is ignored, teachers have to use supplementary materials if they want to teach them. The other problem, they mention, is that teachers are not aware of an efficient approach to teach idioms. Even if they are able to find and use a suitable supplementary book, they still may not know how to teach them. Therefore, applying proper approaches to teaching and learning idioms seems to be necessary and of high importance.

According to Zarei and Rahimi (2012), many studies have dealt with different aspects of the first language (L1) idiom acquisition, but the second language (L2) idiom learning is still a serious challenge for learners. They state that since many idioms are culturally specific and vary from one language to another, many Iranian EFL learners, who are less familiar with the culture of the English people, face problems in learning them. This study attempts to fill part of the existing gap.

Based on Aeineh, Moeeni, and Merati (2014) and Boers, Demecheleer, and Eyckmans (2004), the significance of learning idioms has now been discovered but earlier idiomatic expressions were neglected due to three reasons. First, language was considered as a set of individual words and grammar rules. Second, idioms were supposed to be restricted to rhetoric and poetry. Third, since their meaning was unpredictable, they were not supposed to be teachable. Therefore, blind memorization was the only way of learning them. According to Golaghaei and Kakolian (2015), since the instruction of figurative language has been neglected in EFL contexts because of cultural issues, learners have to memorize idioms. However, memorization is too demanding and memorized idioms are soon forgotten (Boers, 2000).

Retention and recall of what has already been learned is an important aspect of language learning. According to Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992), retention is defined “as the ability of the learners to recall or remember things after an interval of time” (p. 457). According to Saffarian, Gorjian, and Bavizadeh (2013), mnemonic devices can help to create mental linkage by stimulating learners’ interest and curiosity about idioms. For example, knowing the logic and stories behind idioms reveals that they are interesting and fun. If learners find pleasure in what they learn, they will probably want to remember it. A teacher can make an item meaning more memorable by using funny pictures. They argue that various techniques on idioms comprehension have already been studied but the effect of using funny pictures on EFL learners’ retention of idiom has not directly been covered.

Based on Thompson (2000), memory performance can be boosted by humor. As pointed out by Jonas (2012), people like humor because it makes learning more interesting. It is a simple, natural, and easy tool to be used in teaching. The use of fun has a direct effect on memory and meta-memory, especially on delayed recall testing. It enables learners to remember information longer and better; however, as more time passes, details are forgotten. Therefore, finding strategies, like adding funny pictures to texts, which engage students and help them connect the material to previous knowledge is in order.

Baleghizadeh and Mohammad Bagheri (2010) used etymological elaboration to facilitate Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' idiom learning. The results revealed that the group who received idioms with the etymological elaborations in short texts significantly outperformed the group who didn't. That is, etymological elaboration had a significant effect on the learners' comprehension and retention. Zhang (2009) also reports that verbal information accompanied by the mental image built up by etymological elaboration of an idiom facilitates learners' comprehension and recall.

According to Boers (2001), raising EFL learners' awareness of the metaphoric nature of an idiom through associating it with its etymology, in which they learn the background origin of the idiom, will lead to enhanced retention and comprehension. The effect of etymological elaboration on EFL learners' comprehension and retention has also been reported by other researchers (Coryell, 2012; Zarei and Rahimi, 2012; Zolfagharkhani&GhorbaniMoghadam (2011); Bagheri&Fazel, 2010).

According to Zafarpour and Tabatabaei (2015) and Zhang, Wu, Wei, and Wang (2011), if idioms are visualized by pictures, their retention and recall will be facilitated. Aeineh, Moeeni, and Merati (2014) investigated the effect of learner-generated illustrations on the immediate and delayed idiom recall of Iranian EFL learners. Their findings showed that the difference between the performance of the experimental group and control group on the immediate posttest was not statistically significant but there was a significant difference between the two groups on delayed recall ability.

Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) investigated the effect of using pictures, Persian translation equivalents, and English definitions on the decomposable and non-decomposable idiom learning of Iranian EFL undergraduates. The results indicated that the picture group had a better performance than the other groups.

As can be seen, most of the studies either use visual strategies (Saffarian, Gorjian, &Bavizadeh, 2013; Fotovatnia& Khaki, 2012; Baker, 2011; Zhang, Wu, Wei, and Wang; 2011) or non-visual strategies (Coryell, 2012; Zolfagharkhani&GhorbaniMoghadam, 2011; Bagheri&Fazel, 2010; Boers, 2001).

While most of the previous studies focus on a single modality, Paivio (2006) tries to give equal importance to verbal and nonverbal processing by mentioning two separate subsystems of Dual Coding Theory (DCT) including the verbal aspect (language) and the nonverbal aspect (imagery). The internal representations of the two subsystems are supposed to be activated when the learner manipulates a word in his mind. On the basis of DCT, Bagheri and Fazel (2010) investigated and found the positive effect of etymological elaboration on Iranian learners' comprehension and retention of idioms.

As the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Therefore, the present study applies a dual approach by combining two different modes of presentation and tries to illuminate the synergistic effect of visual-etymological treatment on promoting Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' retention of idiomatic expressions.

### *1.1. Research questions*

This study addressed the following research questions:

- 1- Does the synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' short-term idiom retention?
- 2- Does the synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' long-term idiom retention?

## 1.2. *Research hypotheses*

In keeping with the above-mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

- 1- The synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration does not promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' short-term idiom retention.
- 2- The synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration does not promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' long-term idiom retention.

## 2. **Method**

### 2.1. *Subjects and Research Design*

The participants of the study included 26 (18 females and 8 male) Iranian undergraduate EFL learners at UB. The Use of Idioms Course was compulsory for the students and they naturally had to attend the class regularly. There was only one class. Therefore, due to the existing limitations, there was no randomization. The experimental paired-samples design was used in this study. This design is a powerful method that allows each sample to act as its own control. The means of data from the two related samples with and without the intervention (teaching idioms by using funny pictures) on the same subjects were compared.

### 2.2. *Materials and Instruments*

The materials and instruments used in this study are as follows:

Fifty programs, including MP3 audio clips and their transcripts, from the VOA's Special English (Words and their Stories) were downloaded and used as the material. The selected texts provided learners with some explanations about the historical background associated with each individual idiom. The researcher selected a group of idioms that could be taught through funny pictures and etymological elaboration so that he would be able to expatiate upon the meaning of the target idioms.

Prior to the study, a test of 100 target idioms was administered to the subjects to make sure that they were not aware of the idioms at the outset. Then, the test was revised and a 40-item piloted test of idioms was developed. The reliability of the test was established and estimated at 0.83 through the KR-21 formula. After the treatment, the 40-item test (odd items from the idioms taught with funny pictures and even items from the idioms taught without pictures) was administered to the learners to examine the synergistic effect of using pictures and etymological elaboration on immediate and delayed recall of idioms. Half of the items (20) had already been taught by using funny pictures and etymological elaboration while the other half (20) lacked any pictures.

### 2.3. *Procedures*

Initially, the subjects were provided with some introductory information about the objectives of the course and the importance of learning idioms. After downloading 50 programs, including MP3 audio clips and their transcripts, from the VOA's Special English (Words and their Stories), the researcher surfed the Net and found as many funny pictures as he could for 100 target idioms which had already been selected. A pretest including the 100 selected target idioms was administered to the subjects to assess their degree of familiarity with the target items in the second session.

After adding pictures to the target idioms, they were randomly divided into two equal halves. The pictures were removed from the second half. Ten idioms (5 idioms from each half) were taught each session. The target idioms were taught in 10 sessions and each session lasted one and a half hour once in a week. Due to the Persian New Year and some other official holidays, the whole process took seven months beginning from November 14, 2014 to June 15, 2015. The same method of instruction was used during the term including examples, elaboration, demonstration, and translation if necessary. The only difference was that half of the idioms taught were accompanied by funny pictures. For example, the following two pictures were attached to the two following paragraphs to represent the idioms *to kick the bucket* and *on a short leash*.



The expression *to kick the bucket* is almost two hundred years old. One belief is that it started when an English stableman committed suicide by hanging himself while standing on a pail or bucket. He put a rope around his neck and tied it to a beam in the ceiling, and then kicked the bucket away from under him. After a while, to die in any way was called kicking the bucket.

Mr. Cleveland had been a strong leader. But Susan permitted many employees to make their own decisions. One employee said: "Old Mister Cleveland always told us what to do. He kept people *on a short leash*. But the company did well." What does a short leash mean? A leash is a kind of rope. We use a leash to walk our pet dogs. The leash keeps the dog from running away or getting into trouble. Keeping a person *on a short leash* means keeping him or her under close control. The person cannot make many decisions for himself or herself.

In each session, the learners were provided with handouts including 10 target idioms. Five idioms were introduced to the subjects by using etymological elaboration and funny pictures and five idioms were taught by using etymological elaboration only. The texts included the etymology of the target idioms, that is, the etymological history of the idioms (with or without pictures) was given to the learners. The subjects were asked to collaboratively listen to the audio clips twice and read the related texts, which included etymological elaboration and definitions. Additional explanations were given by the researcher where necessary. The same procedure was followed to teach 100 idioms in ten sessions. It should be mentioned that the teaching treatments for the two sets of five idioms were similar regarding the length of the instruction, the number of the target idioms taught, and the feedback provided by the researcher on the questions raised during the treatment period.

The 40-item test was given to the learners to check their short and long term retention of idioms. The first time, it was administered immediately after the treatment. The second time, it was given one month later. Each correct answer received one point and there was no penalty for the wrong answers. The points related to odd items (taught with funny pictures) and even items (taught without any pictures) were separately calculated. In fact, the 40-item test was used as two 20-item tests without the

learners' awareness. The learners didn't know anything about the research. So, there were two means for the first test administered immediately after the treatment which helped the researcher examine the learners' immediate recall or short-term retention and two means for the second test administered one month after the treatment which helped the researcher examine the learners' delayed recall or long-term retention.

The subjects were required to fill in the blanks with their own knowledge. Idioms were used in sentences with one key word missing in both the immediate and delayed tests. However, the items of the immediate test were rearranged for the delayed test to reduce the test familiarity effect as much as possible. The collected data was organized and submitted to statistical analysis.

### 3. Statistical Analysis and Results

To test the research hypotheses and answer the research questions, two separate paired samples t-test procedures were used in this study. The purpose was to investigate the synergistic effect of using pictures with etymological elaboration on Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' short and long-term retention. After gathering the data, the results were subjected to a series of statistical analysis to compare the mean scores of the two conditions on the posttests of idioms. As soon as the treatment was over, the researcher conducted the immediate posttest and carried out the delayed posttest one month later. The version 22 of Social Package for Statistical Analysis (SPSS) was used to analyze the data through paired-samples t-test to check whether there existed any statistically meaningful and significant difference between the two means of immediate as well as delayed tests because of the treatment. The results indicated that the new technique (using funny pictures) was better than the other. That is, the differences between the two conditions were statistically significant in both immediate and delayed posttests. Therefore, it can be concluded that the pictorial-etymological treatment was more effective than etymological treatment. The following tables indicate the summary of the paired samples t-tests for immediate and delayed posttests.

**Table 1.** The paired samples t-test for the immediate posttest

Conditions	N	Mean	StdDevdf	t	Sig.	
Pictures	26	15.80	1.95	25	31.09	0.000*
No pictures	26	11.76	1.63			

\*Sig.  $p < .05$

The first paired samples t-test was conducted immediately after the treatment to compare the effect of teaching idioms with funny pictures (condition 1) and without funny pictures (condition 2) on Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' retention and recall. As indicated in Table 1, there was a significant difference in the scores for condition 1 ( $M= 15.80, SD= 1.95$ ) and no picture condition 2 [ $M= 11.76, SD= 1.63$ ];  $t(25) = 31.09, p < 0.5$ ].

Since the p-value is less than .05, the null hypothesis (the synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration does not promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' short-term idiom retention) is rejected. It can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the two condition means. That is, the differences between the two condition means are probably due to the funny picture manipulation. Accordingly, the visual-etymological treatment employed in this study was found to be more effective than the etymological treatment. These results suggest that funny pictures have a positive effect on the learners' short term retention and recall.

**Table2.** The paired samples t-test for the delayed posttest

Conditions	N	Mean	StdDevdf	t	Sig.	
Pictures	26	14.19	2.02	25	19.62	0.000*
No pictures	26	11.53	1.72			

\*Sig.  $p < .05$

The second paired samples t-test was conducted one month after the treatment to compare the gained scores of condition 1 (with pictures) and condition 2 (without pictures) in the delayed posttest. As indicated in Table 2, there was a significant difference between the gain scores for condition1 ( $M = 14.19$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) and the gain scores for condition 2 [ $M = 11.53$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ;  $t(25) = 19.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

Since the p-value is less than .05, the null hypothesis (the synergy of funny pictures with etymological elaboration does not promote Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' long-term idiom retention) is rejected. It can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the two condition means. That is, the differences between the two condition means are probably due to the funny picture manipulation. Accordingly, the visual-etymological treatment employed in this study was found to be more effective than the etymological treatment. These results suggest that funny pictures have a positive effect on the learners' long term retention and recall.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate the synergistic effect of a dual mode of instruction (visual-etymological treatment) on Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' retention of idioms. The results of the study suggest that the synergy of using funny pictures and etymological elaboration is more effective than etymological treatment only. This implies that in teaching idioms, the etymological elaboration can be useful; however, if it is accompanied by the funny pictures depicting the target idioms, the learners will have greater degree of achievement.

The findings of the current study are in line with what was reported by Golaghaei and Kakolian (2015). Their findings indicated that the combination of visual and etymological treatment had a significant effect on learning idioms. They believe that such findings "could be theoretically attributed to the facilitative effect of the dual-coding of the input" (p. 79), consequently, they consider the combination of etymology and visualization as the most effective way of understanding idioms. The results of this study could also be interpreted in terms of the dual-coding theory (Paivio, 2006). As an improvement over the presentation of the information through a single modality, this theory suggests that if the information is presented through dual modes (e.g. verbally and visually), it will be stored and retrieved more easily.

The findings of this study have some important implications. Instead of resorting to rote memorization, EFL learners and teachers can use funny pictures in dealing with idioms. Pedagogically speaking, the findings of this study urge EFL teachers, rather than applying a single method in teaching idioms, to use such effective strategies to enhance their students' idiom learning. They also persuade EFL learners to somehow overcome the problems they may encounter in understanding, retention, and recall of English idioms by using materials that are accompanied by funny pictures. EFL syllabus designers and textbook developers can effectively use idioms accompanied by amazing pictures to facilitate and foster learners' comprehension and retention of idioms. Finally, since only 26 subjects were included in this study, the findings must be more cautiously interpreted and generalized.

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## Komikresimlerinvekökenbilimsel ayrıntılarınınİngilizceyiyabancıdilolaraköğrenen öğrencilerindeyimleriakıldatutmavehatırlamalarınındesteklemesineetkisi

### Öz

Bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin resimli ve köken bilimsel ayrıntıların deyimleri akılda tutma ve hatırlama düzeylerine etki edip etmediğini ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla yapılmıştır. Çalışma Bojnord Üniversitesi'nde Deyim Kullanımı dersine katılan 26 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışmada Amerika'nın Sesi/ İngilizce öğreniyorum sitesindeki "kelimeler ve onların hikâyeleri" programlarından seçilen 100 tane deyim kullanılmıştır. Kelimelerin yarısı resimler ve köken bilimsel açıklamalar kullanılarak, diğer yarısı ise resim kullanılmadan öğretilmiştir. Öğrencilere kelimeler öğretildikten hemen sonra bir test uygulanmıştır ve bir ay geçtikten sonra ikinci bir son test uygulanmıştır. Sonuçlar bağımlı örneklem t- testi

kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın bulguları resimli ve köken bilimsel açıklamaların, yalnızca köken bilimsel açıklamalara göre deyimlerin akılda tutulmasında ve hatırlanmasında daha etkili olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Komik resimler; kökenbilimsel ayrıntı; Deyim öğetimi ve öğrenimi, akılda tutma ve hatırlama

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#### **AUTHOR BIODATA**

Dr. Mohammad Reza Ghorbani is Assistant Professor of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at the University of Bojnord, Bojnord, Iran. He has worked as an EFL teacher and researcher in Iran, Japan, and Malaysia since 1990. He has published four books on educational issues in Iran and three in Germany as well as twenty articles in specialized international journals. He has also presented seven papers in international conferences. His interests are English Teaching, Learning, Testing, and Evaluation