

PROBLEMS IN TEACHING PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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Abstract: This article analyzes the main problems in teaching phraseological units to foreign language learners. It highlights semantic opacity, cultural differences, structural peculiarities, and methodological issues with examples. Suggested solutions include contextual teaching, comparative analysis, multimedia use, and task-based learning.

Keywords: phraseological units, idioms, teaching problems, cross-cultural differences, semantic opacity, methodology.

Introduction

Phraseological units are an essential component of every language system. They include idioms, proverbs, collocations, set expressions, and other fixed combinations of words. Unlike free word combinations, phraseological units are characterized by semantic integrity, figurativeness, and stability of structure. They enrich the vocabulary of a language, add expressiveness, and reflect the historical, social, and cultural background of the people who speak that language.

For learners of a foreign language, phraseological units are one of the most attractive yet most challenging aspects of vocabulary acquisition. On the one hand, mastering idioms and proverbs enables students to communicate more naturally, understand authentic texts, and develop cultural awareness. On the other hand, the figurative meaning, cultural specificity, and non-standard grammar of phraseological units often create serious difficulties in teaching and learning processes. For example, while simple words such as “table” or “book” have direct equivalents in most languages, idioms like “to let the cat out of the bag” (to reveal a secret) or proverbs like “The early bird catches the worm” do not always have straightforward translations. Learners may either misunderstand them literally or fail to grasp their pragmatic use. Similarly, Uzbek phraseological units such as “og‘zidan dur sochmoq” (to speak beautifully) or “zuvalasi pishgan” (a person who is careful, mature) carry cultural meanings that cannot be understood without background knowledge.

Therefore, teaching phraseological units requires not only linguistic but also cultural, pragmatic, and methodological competence. This paper explores the main problems in teaching phraseological units, analyzes common sources of difficulty, and provides possible solutions supported with examples. The aim is to show that phraseological competence is not an optional element of language learning, but a fundamental skill that contributes to learners’ communicative fluency and intercultural competence.

Methods

When we speak about phraseological units in foreign language teaching, we cannot ignore the fact that they represent one of the richest and most colorful layers of the lexicon. They not only carry linguistic meaning but also embody cultural codes, national traditions, and social values. This is why phraseological units are both a treasure and a challenge for teachers and learners. Students are eager to learn idioms because they make speech sound more native-like and expressive, yet teachers often struggle to explain their figurative and cultural meanings.

One of the first difficulties is related to semantic opacity. Unlike ordinary words, the meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced from the sum of its components. For instance, the expression

“kick the bucket” will never suggest the idea of “to die” to a learner who tries to interpret it literally. The same happens with “spill the beans” which is mistakenly understood as “to drop food” rather than “to reveal a secret.” Such misunderstanding is also common when Uzbek students encounter native expressions such as “ko‘nglini olmoq” which literally means “to take someone’s heart” but figuratively refers to “making peace with someone.” Without cultural and contextual explanation, these idioms remain inaccessible to learners.

Another source of difficulty lies in cross-cultural differences. Idioms are often products of local history and customs. For example, “carry coals to Newcastle” makes sense only if one knows that Newcastle was historically a coal-mining city in England, therefore “carrying coal there” is meaningless. Similarly, Uzbek idioms like “tog‘day dard” (“a mountain-like grief”) are based on cultural imagery familiar to local speakers but puzzling to foreigners. In Russian, the idiom “вешать лапшу на уши” (“to hang noodles on someone’s ears”) means “to deceive,” but learners without cultural background may imagine it literally. Such examples prove that phraseological units cannot be separated from culture, and their teaching must always involve intercultural comparison.

Structural peculiarities also cause problems. Idioms often break ordinary grammatical rules or contain unusual word combinations. Students may find “by and large” or “odds and ends” grammatically illogical. They sometimes reverse words and say “ends and odds,” which is incorrect. Similarly, Uzbek idioms like “yuragi yorildi” (literally: “his heart fell back,” meaning “he was frightened”) are strange for learners because of their illogical imagery. Memorization alone is not enough; learners need repeated practice to use such expressions correctly.

Stylistic limitations represent another challenge. Not all idioms are equally common or neutral. While some, like “break the ice” or “a piece of cake,” are frequent in everyday speech, others belong to literature or formal contexts. If a student uses Shakespeare’s “shuffle off this mortal coil” in casual talk, it will sound unnatural and pretentious. Similarly, in Uzbek, idioms such as “dumini qisib olish” (to act timidly) are typical of spoken language but should not appear in formal writing. Teachers must therefore guide learners not only in meaning but also in appropriateness, otherwise their speech may sound artificial.

Finally, there are methodological challenges in the way idioms are presented in textbooks and lessons. Often, learners are given lists of idioms to memorize, such as “as busy as a bee,” “as blind as a bat,” or “as free as a bird.” While these can be learned by heart, they are rarely retained in long-term memory if students do not see them in authentic contexts. A better approach is to teach them through dialogues and stories. For example, instead of asking students simply to memorize “piece of cake,” a teacher might stage a conversation:

– A: “How was the exam?”

– B: “Oh, it was a piece of cake!”

This method connects idioms with communicative needs and helps students to use them naturally.

Taken together, these problems show that phraseological units are not only about language form but also about meaning, culture, structure, style, and methodology. To overcome these challenges, teachers need to integrate idioms into meaningful contexts, compare them with learners’ native equivalents, use multimedia and visual materials to make figurative meanings clearer, and introduce idioms gradually from the most common to the less frequent ones. Only in this way can learners develop phraseological competence and enrich their speech with authentic and culturally appropriate expressions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching phraseological units is one of the most challenging yet rewarding aspects of foreign language education. These expressions are not simply words combined together; they are cultural codes, reflections of national mentality, and carriers of historical memory. Their figurative nature, cultural specificity, unusual structure, and stylistic diversity create serious barriers for learners, but at the same time, they provide unique opportunities for developing deeper communicative and intercultural competence.

The problems discussed – semantic opacity, cultural differences, structural irregularities, stylistic restrictions, and methodological shortcomings – clearly demonstrate that teaching idioms cannot be reduced to simple memorization. Learners who try to understand idioms word-for-word are doomed to misinterpret them, and teachers who present idioms as isolated vocabulary items fail to develop students' ability to use them in real communication. Instead, phraseological units should be taught through context, comparison, and practice.

Moreover, phraseological competence must be considered as an essential component of communicative competence. A learner who knows grammar and basic vocabulary but lacks idiomatic knowledge may sound unnatural, too formal, or even incomprehensible to native speakers. On the contrary, a learner who uses idioms appropriately demonstrates not only linguistic mastery but also cultural sensitivity. This is why teaching phraseological units should not be treated as an optional or secondary task, but as an integral part of language teaching.

Teachers can overcome these difficulties by applying innovative approaches: using authentic materials such as films, songs, and literature; employing visual aids to explain figurative meaning; encouraging comparative analysis with the learners' native language; and engaging students in interactive tasks where idioms are used in real communicative situations. Step by step, learners can build up their phraseological competence, starting from the most common and high-frequency idioms and gradually moving to more complex, culture-bound expressions.

Thus, while phraseological units present many problems in teaching, they also enrich the learning process and bring students closer to the soul of the language. Mastering them is not only about learning fixed expressions; it is about gaining access to the worldview, humor, and creativity of another culture. If taught systematically and meaningfully, idioms and proverbs can transform language learning from mechanical acquisition into a living, culturally rich experience.

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