Teaching Fixed Expressions through Comics: An Exploratory Study

M.Vijaya Lakshmi
Assistant Professor of English
Gudlavalleru Engineering College
Gudlavalleru
INDIA

Introduction:
A few decades ago, there was a predominant view in the linguistic circles that vocabulary
was subservient to grammar. Linguists at that time strongly supported the dichotomy of
grammar and vocabulary and they preferred to lay emphasis on the structures of language
rather than the words. Also, they were of the view that acquisition of a language is dependent
on the mastery of grammatical rules of the language and vocabulary is of secondary
importance.

But during the 1990’s there was an increased interest in vocabulary teaching and
learning. The book Teaching and Learning Vocabulary (1990) by Paul Nation provided
useful insights into vocabulary acquisition and it extended guidance on classroom pedagogy.
At the same time, the advent of corpus linguistics and the COBUILD project of John Sinclair
(1987) gave new impetus to theories on language acquisition. Sinclair’s book Corpus,
Concordance, Collocation (1991) and other corpus based studies shed new light on how
language works and this led to a new understanding and description of language. Also, these
studies revealed the widespread occurrence of multi-word units or lexical chunks in native
speakers’ language. The studies then put forward a theory that is almost contrary to
Chomskyan theory of language which holds that native speakers have a capacity of creating
and interpreting unique sentences which they have never heard or produced previously.

But with the advent of corpus based analyses, many linguists departed from the Chomskyan
view to uphold the new theory of language.

With the publication of the book The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a
Way Forward in 1993, there was a shift from the traditional approaches to a lexis based
approach.

Lexical Approach:

Lexical Approach to language teaching is based on the principles that language consists
primarily not of grammatical structures/patterns but of lexical units. To quote Lewis, this
approach focusses on developing learner’s proficiency with lexis, or word and word

He holds that native speakers store chunks in their mental lexicon to retrieve and use them in
their language. Also, he states that the ability to chunk language successfully is central to an
understanding of how language works. For this reason, Lewis suggests that language teaching
should include the teaching of lexis or chunks. In fact, he advocates that lexis/ lexical phrases
in any language offer more communicative and expressive power than grammatical
structures.
Lexis:

Though the terms lexis and vocabulary are often stated in the same context and mostly treated as synonyms, there exists a difference in meaning between these two terms and they are not one and the same. The distinction will be made clear by making a note of these definitions put forward by two advocates:

*Lexis is a more general word than common vocabulary. Vocabulary is often used to talk of the individual words of language; lexis covers single words and multi-word objects which have the same status in the language as simple words, the items we store in our mental lexicons ready for use.*

(Lewis1997:217)

*Lexis includes not only the single words but also the word combinations that people store in their mental lexicons.* (Olga 2001:1)

Although the lexical items are of different kinds, Lewis identifies them as falling into four types:

1. Words and Polywords -- Words include all the essential vocabulary for learners to memorize (*book, pen, etc.*) Polywords is a small group of lexical items which fall between words and major multi-word categories. For instance, *bread and butter*.
2. Collocations – Word and word combinations (*take an exam, heavy rain etc.*)
3. Fixed expressions – The chunks which are comparatively rare and short and are mostly used in spoken language (*Have a nice day* and *How do you do?*)
4. Semi-Fixed expressions—The expressions that range from ‘very short to very long’ (*Its/That’s right, Looking forward to hearing from/seeing/meeting you.*)

**Fixed Expressions:**

The Lexical Approach highlights a second major category of lexical item- Expressions (Lewis 1997:7). Language teaching, according to Lewis (1997:9), has always recognized some types of fixed expressions. The most often examples that have featured in teaching materials according to Lewis are:

- Social greetings: *Good morning; It’s lovely morning, isn’t it? Happy New year*
- Politeness phrases: *No thank you, I’m fine; I’ll have to be going.*
- Phrase Book Language: *Can you tell me the way to …., please?*
- Idioms: *Hang on; You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.*

Lewis (1997) suggests that fixed expressions should be taught without internal analysis. Learners should be introduced to the idea that such expressions exist in their own language and on occasions they should find equivalents in their own language.

**Different Nomenclatures of Fixed Expressions:**

Different scholars have referred to fixed expressions by different terms:
Memorized sentences (Pawley and Syder, 1983)
Institutionalised Phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992)
Institutionalised Expressions (Lewis, 1993)
Fixed Phrases (Moon, 1997)

Implications of using fixed expressions:

Many researches acknowledge the importance of the fixed expressions while acquiring a language:

Yumoto (1992) believes “formula-based speed leads to creative speech, based on the idea that creative construction is built on the basis of fixed expressions.

Tajima and Kurosawa (2008) feel “one can avoid miscommunication by using fixed expressions in appropriate situations”.

Ellis (1985) opines “learners memorize a number of ready-made expressions to compensate for lack of sufficient L2 rules to construct creative speech”.

Kanno (1993) writes “formulaic utterances play a crucial role for beginners, more advanced learners and even native speakers of the target language”.

Moreover, learners utter sentences quickly by memorizing them instead of creating new sentences from the scratch. On the other hand, using these expressions frequently enable learners to construct new sentences.

Advantages of teaching fixed expressions through comics:

- Comics are a rich source of the fixed phrases which are a component of the lexis.
- Institutionalized expressions incorporated in the comics can be read quickly with no strenuous effort.
- Also, comics provide us an excellent opportunity to the learners to introduce themselves to authentic language which is abundant with memorised sentences.

Method of Research:

For the present research, initially, 15 Tinkle Magazines and Tinkle Digests have been read. Thereafter, 15 stories have been selected for the study based on the presence of the lexical chunks. A total of 50 fixed expressions were identified in the stories selected for the study. These chunks later have been categorized according to their number. After categorizing them, exercises and activities have been devised to reinforce the chunks in the learners’ mental lexicon.

The main objective of all the exercises and activities included in the paper is to raise the lexical awareness of the learners which is eventually expected to lead to their increased lexical competence.

Fixed Expressions identified in the comics chosen for study:

One worded:

1. Cool
2. Well
3. Great
4. Greetings
Two worded:

Three worded:

Four worded:
1. We now call upon 2. Leave it to me 3. It’s worth a try 4. It’s all my mistake 5. Once upon a time 6. It shall be done 7. This can’t go on 8. You have done it

Five worded:
1. What’s the matter with you? 2. I am proud of you 3. I can’t take this anymore 4. Thank you for the suggestion. 5. I am ashamed of you 6. I’d be more than happy

Six worded:
1. It’s a pleasure to hear you! 2. I beg to differ your highness 3. They’re really out of the world 4. How do I go about it?

Exercises and Activities for the identified expressions

One worded

Exercise 1
Underline the one worded fixed expressions in the sentences given below.

1. Cool Tom. Don’t get panicky.

2. Well, thank you for speaking to me.

3. Great. That’s a good news.

4. Greetings. I am writings to you to let you know that you qualified the exam.

Exercise 2
Read the situations given below and imagine appropriate answers using the fixed expressions above.
1. Your friend is anxious about his exam results. You see him tensed. How do you comfort him?
2. You would like to write a mail to the administrative officer of your college to let him know about your grades in the exam. How do you begin the mail after the salutation?
3. You have been talking to your friend and you want to take leave of him. How do you express it?
4. Your friend stood first in the class. You are excited to learn that. How do you express your happiness?

Activity 1: Instruct a few learners in the class to play the roles in the comic story you have provided them and ask them to read out the dialogues. Let the rest of the learners listen to the story and write down one worded fixed expressions.

Two worded

Choose the right fixed expression from the four options to make a meaningful utterance.

Exercise 3

1. Tom, don’t try to convince me. I won’t give you any extra marks. __________ you may leave now.
   a) Well done b) good idea c) thank you d) that’s it
2. __________ Danny, you can take the exam another time.
   a) Well done b) don’t worry c) enough talking d) good idea
3. A: Will you make presentations this Saturday students?
   B: Why not teacher? That’s a __________.
   a) Enough talking b) good idea c) you know d) well done
4. A: Shall I come with you to the picnic Dhanya?
   B: __________?
   a) I’m sure b) I’m sorry c) All right d) why not?
5. I think I will get only 60 marks in the exam __________.
   a) Sounds exciting b) thank you c) heaven forbid d) sounds dangerous
6. I’d better be going now. I have a class. __________
   a) Bless you b) how strange c) see you d) never mind
7. __________ Sarah. You have made good tea.
   a) Sound dangerous b) good idea c) Bless you d) how strange

Activity 2

Ask the learners to sit in groups and discuss among themselves to write the equivalents of the above fixed expressions in their mother tongue. Nominate one person from each group to read out their versions.

Exercise 4

Complete the conversations given below using expressions from the box.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well done</th>
<th>Come on</th>
<th>what’s up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s okay</td>
<td>That’s why</td>
<td>All right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m sorry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8) A: Hi Ravi
   B: Hi Ramu
   A: _______ buddy?
   B: Not much dear.

9) A: Cathy, you look so lanky in this dress. It’s good if you change it.
   B: __________.

10) He is a bad-tempered man. __________ I don’t go to him often.

11) A: Where have you been to Ravina?
    B: I went to college.
    A: __________. Don’t lie. I saw you at the theatre.

12) A: That is all about robotics. Do you have any queries?
    B: No madam
    A: __________. Then we will move on to the next chapter.

13) A: _______ Tom. I did not mean to hurt you.
    B: Never mind.

14) A: Dad! I came first in maths.
    B: _______sweetheart!

Activity 3
Divide the class into two groups. Give them five fixed expressions each from the table above.
Ask them to create contexts for them. Randomly ask the learners to read out their contexts.

**Three worded**

Exercise 5
Match the words in column A with the words in column B to make correct fixed expressions.
Activity 4

Make the learners sit in pairs to guess the situations where you use these fixed expressions?

For example: I knew it. It is said when you are already aware of a thing or a situation that would happen in future.

Write the situations where these phrases are used. Randomly ask the learners to read out their explanation.

Exercise 6

Underline the three worded fixed expressions in the sentences given below.

1. Shame on me. I couldn’t answer any of the questions in the interview.
2. Don’t quarrel among yourselves for your father’s property. It’s no use. It has already been given away to the charities.
3. You look morose today. What’s the matter?
4. Paul I got to know that you are taking the test once again. That’s the spirit. Keep it up.
5. Today’s my day. I will do whatever I like.
6. I thought you will not help me in carrying out this project. But contrary to my expectation, you helped me. Thanks to you.
7. How dare you enter the class without my permission?

Activity 5

Ask the learners to translate these sentences into their mother tongue. Instruct them to think of equivalents to these expressions in their mother tongue. Pick the leaners randomly to read out their sentences and correct them if they are unacceptable.

Four worded

Exercise 7

Fill in the blanks with suitable words to make acceptable fixed expressions.

1. We now call ______
   a) At   b) in  c) upon   d) down
2. Leave it ___ me.
   a) At b) to c) in d) upon
3. It’s _____ a try.
   a) Better  d) must  c) worth d) necessary
4. It’s all my _______.
   a) Mistake  b) deed  c) things  d) care

5. Once upon _______.
   a) A time   b) a month  c) a year  d) a few years

6. It shall be _______.
   a) Do  b) done  c) go  d) give

7. This can’t _______.
   a) Went  b) given  c) go on  d) written

8. You have _______.
   a) Did  b) do  c) done  d) make it

Activity 6
Ask the students to exchange their books with their bench mates and get their answers corrected as you read out the answers.

Five worded
Exercise 8
Correct the underline part of the fixed expressions to make them meaningful.

1. What’s the matter on you?
2. I am proud for you.
3. I can’t receive this anymore,
4. Thank you of the suggestion.
5. I am ashamed for you.
6. I’d be more then happy

Activity 7
Ask the learners to use these fixed expressions in contexts of their own and ask one of the learners to read out his sentences. Instruct other learners to listen to him and make necessary corrections if any.

Six worded
Exercise 9
Put the words in an order to make acceptable fixed expressions.

1) You hear pleasure to a it’s
2) Highness differ your to beg i
3) The out of really they’re world
4) About go I it do how

Activity 8
Instruct the learners to sit in groups and ask them to write down at least three six-worded fixed expressions they are aware of. Ask each group to read out their expressions. Request the other learners to take a note of all the expressions read out in their note books.

**Conclusions and Suggestions**

In conclusion, the study had observed that one of the best ways to teach fixed expressions is through the lexical approach. The study has also observed that authentic texts like comics are a rich source of fixed expressions. The study recommends that comics be incorporated into the curriculum of the young learners as they are highly effective in breaking the monotony that crops up during the process of teaching/learning a language. The study also underlines the importance of teaching fixed expressions to the learners by introducing them to exercises and activities as it unburdens the pressure of the learning at least a little bit and broadens the communicative ability.

**Key**

**Exercise 2**


**Exercise 3**


**Exercise 4**


**Exercise 5**


**Exercise 6**

1. Shame on me 2. It’s no use 3. What’s the matter 4. That’s the spirit 5. Today’s my day 6. Thanks to you 7. How dare you

**Exercise 7**


**Exercise 8**


**Exercise 9**

1. It’s a pleasure to hear you 2. I beg to differ your highness 3. They’re really out of the world 4. How do I go about it
Works Cited:

Kanno, Y. (1993) *Do formulaic utterances cease to be “chunks” when they are analysed?* MITA working papers in psycholinguistics,3,75-92