CONCEPTUAL STRATEGIES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH *NOSE* IDIOMS

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Abstract: *The cognitive linguistic approach to idioms, unlike the traditional one, attempts to prove that there are three important cognitive mechanisms (conventional knowledge, metaphor and metonymy) which link their literal meanings with the figurative ones. Conventional knowledge refers to the amount of information about a conceptual domain which is shared by people with the same cultural background. Metaphor is used to understand the target conceptual domain by means of the source one, being a relationship of the type "A is B". Metonymy establishes a connection between two conceptual entities within only one conceptual domain, which can be represented as "A stands for B".*

In order to improve EFL students' general communication skills, teachers turn to idiomatic expressions, but they usually provide them only with the explanation and the translation of the respective idioms. Most students find it difficult to memorise idioms as such, and that is why teachers should find a pleasant alternative which can enable students to understand idiomatic expressions better and use them creatively.

Our paper aims at demonstrating the effectiveness of teaching idioms from the cognitive linguistic perspective. We thus carried out an experimental study which consisted of teaching several English nose idioms to two classes of Romanian students, namely the experimental group and the control group, by means of the traditional approach and the cognitive linguistic one. By comparing the students' responsiveness to each teaching method, as well as by assessing the results they obtained for the same test paper, we were able to explain the advantages of activating the aforementioned cognitive strategies in the process of nose idiom acquisition.

Keywords: *cross-cultural conceptual motivation; conventional knowledge; metaphor; metonymy; nose idioms*

1. A theoretical outline

We consider it necessary to begin our paper with several theoretical aspects of idioms which represent one of the most challenging and interesting parts of language.

1.1. Idioms from the traditional perspective

According to the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (vii), an idiom is "a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would

have if you understood each word separately". This definition is also reflected by the second criterion that Makkai (2010: 122) considers relevant for characterizing idioms, namely that the meaning of an idiom cannot be inferred from its component parts since they are devoid of their usual senses. In addition, the linguist mentions three other features proper to idioms: they are formed by at least two words, they contain polysemous parts that can be misinterpreted by the listener and thus they present a high degree of disinformation potential and they are conventionalized expressions which originate from ad hoc expressions.

Likewise, Weinreich (1969) considers that an idiom is "a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements" (qtd. in Sayers 13). In his view, only multiword expressions having literal counterparts can be regarded as idioms.

Nunberg et al. (1994: 492) suggest a list of properties that includes *conventionality*, which refers to the fact that the overall meaning of an idiom is not indicated by the meanings of the words they contain, and *inflexibility* given that an idiom can be found in a restricted number of "syntactic frames or constructions".

1.2. Idioms from the cognitive linguistic perspective

Unlike the traditional approach, the cognitive linguistic one is based on the idea that most idioms can be conceptually motivated, which means that there are cognitive mechanisms (metaphors, metonymy and conventional knowledge) which link literal meanings with figurative ones. As Gibbs explains, "idioms do not exist as separate semantic units within the lexicon, but actually reflect coherent systems of metaphorical concepts" (qtd. in Trantescu 2016: 194).

Lakoff (1987: 446) states that people possess large sets of conventional images of the world around them, depending upon their culture. Thus, as a cognitive mechanism, *conventional knowledge* refers to what is shared about a conceptual domain by those who have the same cultural background.

Moreover, the concrete and abstract areas of knowledge are believed to be connected by conceptual *metonymies* and *metaphors*. According to Taylor (2002: 491), the source domain is the concrete one as it can be directly experienced, whereas the target domain is the abstract one because it reflects subjective experience. Metaphors represent a means of understanding the target domain with the help of the source domain. In the case of metonymy, however, we deal with only one domain. Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 338) consider that metonymy involves a 'stand for' conceptual relationship between two entities of a single domain, while metaphors entail an 'is' or 'is understood as' relationship between two conceptual domains.

As regards body parts idioms, most of them reveal the existence of more than one cognitive mechanism accounting for their idiomatic meanings. This may be due to the fact that we are more familiar with the shape, size and functions of our own body parts by using them every day (Trantescu 2014: 100).

2. Cognitive motivation of English and Romanian *nose* idioms

In what follows we will present several English and Romanian idioms belonging to the conceptual domain of *nose* from a cognitive perspective.

2.1. Conventional knowledge

We will first discuss the conventional knowledge which conceptually motivates the meaning of idioms containing the word *nose*.

EN: give somebody/ be given a bloody nose/ get a bloody nose ('to be defeated or made to fail in a way that you did not expect and that makes you seem weak or stupid', LID / 'to suffer an unpleasant rebuff', DEI)

RO: a-i ieşi/ a-i da cuiva ceva pe nas ('to meet/ to come to a stiff end', DELR)

(1) The next elections will offer voters the chance *to give* this party *a bloody nose*.
(2) El nu vrea să renunţe la acest obicei prost, dar o să vadă că *o să-i iasă pe nas* într-o bună zi.

EN: turn your nose up at something (informal) ('to refuse to accept something because you do not think it is good enough for you', LDCE / 'to despise', DEI)

RO: a strâmba din nas ('to show disapproval, contempt, disgust'; 'to be dissatisfied with something', DELR)

(3) You shouldn't *turn your nose up at* such a good deal.
(4) El *strâmbă din nas* de fiecare dată când menţionez numele ei.

In both languages *nose* is conceptualized as a tool to express *contempt*. According to Bílková (qtd. in Trantescu 2014: 101-102), the English idiom captures that specific movement of the nose which is performed by means of the facial muscles, looking as if it were turned up. The literal meaning is thus linked to the idiomatic one through the speakers' general conventional knowledge.

EN: thumb your nose at ('to show contempt for a person or institution', DEI)

RO: a da cu tifla ('to despise, to disregard, to defy someone or something', DEX)

In Romanian, "tiflă" refers to a mocking gesture made by holding one's thumb close to the tip of the nose while outstretching the other fingers. By making such a gesture, one expresses his/her disregard for another person or situation. The same gesture having the same figurative meaning is indicated by the English idiom, too.

(5) Tom always *thumbs his nose at* all kinds of rules.
(6) Protestatarii *dau cu tifla* autorităților.

2.2. Conceptual metonymies

Conceptual metonymies represent another cognitive mechanism which provides a link between the literal and idiomatic meanings of certain English and Romanian *nose* idioms.

a) *THE NOSE STANDS FOR THE PERSON*

EN: somebody can't see beyond (the end) of his/her nose ('someone is too interested in themselves and their own lives to understand or deal with other situations or other people's problems', LID)

RO: a nu vedea mai departe decât lungul nasului. ('to be narrow-minded', 'to be in blinkers', DEX)

(7) He is so focused on his work that he *can't see beyond the end of his nose*.
(8) Ca să lucrezi într-un domeniu creativ, trebuie să *vezi mai departe decât lungul nasului*.

In Romanian, one's inappropriate behaviour can be rendered by another idiom containing the lexeme *nose*: **a nu-și cunoaște/ vedea lungul nasului** ('to be self-sufficient/ insolent', DEX)

EN: have/ keep your nose to the grindstone ('to work very hard for a long time without thinking about anything else', LID)

RO: There is only one idiomatic equivalent that does not contain the lexeme *nose*: **a lucra/ munci pe brânci/ pe rupte** ('to work until you are exhausted', DEX)

Another possible cognitive source for the English idiom could be conventional knowledge since knife grinders used to bend over the stone when sharpening blades (according to www.phrases.org.uk)

(9) If you *keep your nose to the grindstone* this year, you might get a promotion.

(10) Ea *a muncit pe brânci* în ultimele luni și acum se simte foarte obosită.

EN: *be right (there) under somebody's nose* ('very close to somebody, even though they cannot see it', OID)
RO: *sub (*or, rarely *în) nasul cuiva* ('in front of someone, before someone's eyes', DEX)
Conventional knowledge can be noticed in this case, too.

(11) The key *was right under your nose* all the time.
(12) Vinovatul *era* chiar *sub nasul lor*, dar nu și-au dat seama.

EN: *rub somebody's nose in it/ something* ('to draw someone's attention repeatedly to a past blunder', DEI)
RO: *a-i freca ridichea la nas* ('to criticize, to scold someone', DEX)
**   *a-i trage un ibrișin pe la nas*** ('to remind someone of something unpleasant in an ironic way', DLRLC)

(13) Tom has made a terrible mistake and his colleagues keep *rubbing his nose in it*.
(14) Ea îi tot *freacă ridichea la nas* pentru ce s-a întâmplat.

EN: *have (got) your nose in a book/ magazine* etc. ('be reading something and giving it all your attention', OID)
RO: *a sta cu nasul în cărți*
Both idioms are also motivated by conventional knowledge.

(15) She *has had her nose in a book* for the last two weeks.
(16) Maria preferă să *stea cu nasul în cărți* decât să se distreze cu prietenii în oraș.

EN: *to poke one's nose out (of doors)* ('to go out')
RO: *a-și arăta* or *a scoate, a-și scoate nasul la iveală* ('to appear/ to show oneself', DELR)

(17) When the weather improves, I expect you *to poke her nose out of doors* more often.
(18) Nu mai apăruse de mult pe-acolo, dar aseară *și-a scos nasul la iveală*.

EN: *get/ put somebody's nose out of joint* ('to upset or annoy somebody by not giving them enough attention', OID)

RO: a-i da cuiva peste nas ('to punish, humiliate someone; to put someone on his/her best behaviour', DEX)

(19) Tom's nose was *put out of joint* when Sue got the promotion he wanted.

(20) Ea mereu îi *dă peste nas* colegului ei când acesta vrea să întrerupă o discuție.

b) THE NOSE STANDS FOR INSTINCT

EN: to have a (good) nose for something ('to be naturally good at finding and recognizing something', LDCE)

This idiom is also motivated by conventional knowledge since the *nose* symbolizes *instinct* and it might refer to the time when people used to smell the air in order to find out various information, such as whether it was going to rain or not (Bílková qtd. in Trantescu 2014: 105).

RO: there is no Romanian equivalent idiom containing the lexeme *nose*. Yet, there are two idiomatic expressions that render the same meaning, namely **a avea fler pentru ceva; a simți/a prinde ceva** (Nicolescu et al. 95).

(21) This broker *has a good nose for* profitable business.

(22) El *are fler* la afaceri.

Moreover, in the Romanian idioms **a avea nas** *and* **a-i da nasul să** ('to dare', DEX), *nose* is negatively associated with insolence, impertinence or rudeness (Trantescu 2014: 105).

(23) Cred că acum nu mai *are nas* să-ți ceară bani cu împrumut.

EN: to follow one's nose ('to behave in a way that you think is best or right, often in a situation in which there are no rules', LID; 'to go straight ahead or by instinct', DEI)

(24) Jane always makes good decisions when she *follows her nose*.

(25) *Follow your nose* to the end of the street and then turn right.

This idiom is conceptually motivated by both metonymy and conventional knowledge.

RO: There is no Romanian equivalent containing the lexeme *nose*. Yet, the English idiom can be translated by the expression "a-și urma instinctul".

3.1.3. Conceptual metaphors

Next we will present four conceptual metaphors which motivate several English idioms and their Romanian equivalent idioms.

a) SMELLING IS SUSPECTING

As regards metaphorical connections with mental faculties, the source domain corresponding to the sense of smell is weaker in comparison with the other senses (Sweetser 1990: 43). According to Neagu (2005: 86), two metaphorical extensions can be noticed: *bad smell indicating bad character* and *the detection of such characteristics*.

EN: to smell (something) fishy ('to seem dishonest or untrue', LDCE)/ **smell a rat** ('think or suspect that something is wrong or that somebody is trying to deceive you', OID)

something smells fishy ('used in order to say that you do not believe a story or think that a situation is what it seems to be, and that you think something wrong or illegal is happening', LID)

RO: a nu-i mirosi ceva bine/ a nu-i mirosi a bine ('to foresee the harmful consequences of something', MDA2), **a avea nas de prepelicar** ('to sense, intuit a fact/ situation', DLRLC)

The metonymy **SMELL STANDS FOR INTUITION** also motivates the idiomatic meaning.

(26) He *smelled something fishy* about that offer and turned it down.
(27) Ai grijă, afacerea asta *nu-mi miroase a bine*!

b) TO BE PROUD IS TO HOLD THE NOSE UP

EN: do something/ go/ walk with your nose in the air ('behaving as if you are more important than other people and not talking to them', LDCE)

RO: a umbla/ a fi/ a merge/ a se ţine cu nasul pe sus ('to be self-conceited', MDA2)

a nu-i ajunge cu prăjina la nas (it refers to 'a very supercilious person', DEX)

(28) Since he got that well-paid job, Mark *has been walking with his nose in the air*.
(29) Ea *umblă cu nasul pe sus* de când a fost numită directoare.

As Trantescu (2014: 106) explains, there is also a Romanian idiom having the opposite meaning: **a-i cădea/ pica nasul** ('to lose one's pride or boldness; to get humiliated', DELR).

c) TO BE INTRUSIVE IS TO STICK THE NOSE INTO SOMETHING

EN: stick/ poke your nose into something ('to become involved in something that does not concern you, in a way that annoys people' = *to be nosy*, LDCE)

RO: a-și băga/ vârî nasul unde nu-i fierbe oala ('to involve oneself in matters that do not concern him/her', DELR)

(30) Jane always *sticks her nose into* matters that do not concern her.
(31) Ea mereu *își bagă nasul unde nu-i fierbe oala*. Probabil din lipsă de ocupație!

Besides conceptual metaphor, conventional knowledge is also noticed to be a cognitive source of these idioms.

d) TO LEAD SOMEBODY BY THE NOSE IS TO CONTROL HIM/ HER

EN: lead somebody (around) by the nose ('to control somebody completely so that they do everything you want them to do, especially in a way that makes the person seem stupid', LID).

RO: a duce (pe cineva) de nas (this idiom is known to have two meanings: 'to influence someone, to make someone act in a certain way' and 'to put somebody off with fine words, to delude somebody with something', DELR)

(32) Jack has no personality. Everybody *leads him by the nose*.
(33) Ea *l-a dus de nas* ca pe un copil.

3. Approaching *nose* idioms in teaching-learning process
3.1. Statement of the problem

Traditional methods based on translation and explanation/ description are used solely when teaching idioms to students. Taking into account the fact that such idiomatic expressions are often hard to memorise, activating cognitive strategies in the teaching-learning process can enable students to make logical connections in order to remember them for a long time.

Irujo (1993: 217) considers that students will be able to make use of the "semantic transparency of some idioms" if they are taught strategies for dealing with figurative language. Furthermore, Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 346-352) performed an informal experimental study on several English phrasal verbs having idiomatic meanings and they showed that the cognitive approach to teaching idioms facilitated their learning by non-native speakers.

Drawing on Kövecses and Szabó's paper, we also managed to prove, in a previous study, the effectiveness of approaching cognitive mechanisms (conventional knowledge, metaphor and metonymy) in teaching English *heart* idioms to Romanian students (Trantescu and Reiss 2020). However, we

consider that it is important to perform more experimental studies involving various idioms in order to reach a more eloquent conclusion regarding the usefulness of applying conceptual strategies when teaching idioms to EFL students.

3.2. Research questions and aims

Based on the assumption that many *nose* idioms are conceptually motivated, our study starts from the following questions:

- How well do Romanian students deal with English *nose* idioms when they are made aware of the cognitive mechanisms? Can such mechanisms enhance students' understanding of figurative language?
- Do students enjoy applying conceptual strategies and feel more encouraged to learn *nose* idioms?
- Do students manage to remember the meanings of the idioms they have been taught from the cognitive perspective? Are they able to work out on their own the meanings of other *nose* idioms that they see for the first time?
- Will conceptual strategies prove once again that they lead to better outcomes than the traditional ones?

Accordingly, our experimental study aims at:

- teaching several English *nose* idioms to two classes of students in two different ways: using the traditional method and applying conceptual strategies;
- assessing students' attitude and responsiveness to each method;
- giving students in both classes the same final test paper involving previously taught *nose* idioms, as well as new ones;
- comparing the results and determining the effectiveness of integrating conceptual strategies in the process of teaching-learning *nose* idioms.

3.3. Methodology and procedure

For the purposes of this study, we made use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods: observation, the pedagogical experiment, and the statistical method. We preserved the same procedure as in our previous study (Trantescu and Reiss 2020) so that the results could be easily compared. Yet, due to distance learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study was exclusively carried out using the video conferencing service Google Meet and the learning platform Google Classroom.

By means of observation during online classes we noticed that students often found it hard to understand and learn idioms in general. We used the same method throughout teaching body parts idioms to the two

classes of students in order to observe the way in which they reacted to the two teaching approaches subject to our research.

In the case of the pedagogical experiment we followed three stages: *the pre-experimental stage (the pre-test)* in which we determined the students' knowledge about body parts idioms in order to make a general profile of the two groups, *the experimental stage* that involved applying two different methods (the traditional translation method and the cognitive linguistic approach) for teaching idioms containing words that designate body parts and *the post-experimental stage* in which the two groups took the final test and the data were collected and interpreted.

The statistical method provided us with a general picture and a quantitative evaluation of the students' results. After gathering the necessary data, we made comparisons and processed them statistically.

The experiment
46 first-year Romanian students having an upper-intermediate level of English were divided into two classes (the *control* group and the *experimental* group) made up of 23 students each. Following the pre-test, we noticed that the students in both groups had little knowledge about body parts idioms.

Over the course of three weeks (a 100-minute class held on Google Meet each week), during the experimental stage, the students in the experimental group were taught various body parts idioms by means of cognitive strategies, thus becoming able to form links between literal and figurative meanings, whereas the students in the control group were taught the same idioms using the traditional translation method.

In the fourth week we organized the final test. We met our students on Google Meet and explained to them what they had to do next. We posted 13 selected *nose* idioms along with their Romanian equivalents on Google Classroom for the students in the control group and asked them to read the idioms for several minutes and try to memorise them. Then we removed the idioms from the stream and we posted the final test paper as assignment. Likewise, for the students in the experimental group we posted on their Classroom a presentation of the same idioms, but from the cognitive perspective they had been practising for the past three weeks. Then the presentation was removed from the stream and they received the same test paper, being also required to identify the cognitive mechanisms that could motivate each idiom.

The test paper was made up of two tasks: a gap-filling exercise containing the 13 *nose* idioms that had previously been posted on the stream of each Google Classroom and a more creative exercise for which students had to make sentences using other 7 English *nose* idioms for which they had

not received any kind of explanation beforehand. Consequently, they needed to decipher their meanings on their own. The students had 60 minutes to complete both tasks and submit their answers.

Below we provide the final test paper assigned to both groups of students.

(34)

Final Test Paper

Task 1: Fill in the gaps with the appropriate idiom from the list.

lead somebody by the nose; smell something fishy; rub somebody's nose in it; thumb one's nose at; give somebody a bloody nose; stick one's nose into something; have one's nose in a book; turn one's nose up at something; put somebody's nose out of joint; walk with your nose in the air; have a good nose for something; somebody can't see beyond the end of his/her nose; be right there under somebody's nose.

1. Because of its misgovernment, voters will definitely……this party………in the following election.
2. She was offered a very good job but she……………it and went to another interview.
3. Jane is so busy running the office that she…………… .
4. Grandma thought she had lost her glasses but they…………… .
5. He knows that he has made a big mistake. Stop……………all the time!
6. Ann always…………… . She rarely spends her free time with her friends.
7. Martha……………when she turned down his marriage proposal.
8. Sam is a successful businessman. He……………investments.
9. I……………about his explanation. I believe he's lying.
10. Ever since my colleague got promoted, he……………. .
11. You're always…………….other people's business.
12. Be careful! Advertisements can …………….. .
13. Mum scolded little John for his impertinence but he just……………her.

Task 2: Use the following idioms in sentences of your own so that their meaning can be easily grasped:
(1) follow one's nose; (2) keep one's nose to the grindstone; (3) keep one's nose clean; (4) have a nose round; (5) win something by a nose; (6) look down one's nose at; (7) poke one's nose out of doors;

3.4. Findings
In order to assess the effectiveness of each teaching method, we considered the number of correct answers given by the students in the two groups. As was the case in our previous study (Trantescu and Reiss 2020), the students in the experimental group scored higher than their colleagues in the control group.

As regards the total number of answers (460) covering both tasks of the final test paper, the students in the control group scored a total of 309 correct answers, namely 67.17%, while the students in the experimental group turned in a total of 386 correct answers corresponding to 83.91%. Thus, the percentage difference between the two groups with respect to the total number of correct answers was 16.74%, which reflects the fact that, overall, the students who were aware of the cognitive mechanisms underlying *nose* idioms did better than the other students.

(35)

Total number of correct answers
(20 sentences x 23 students = 460 answers)

Control group	Experimental group
309	386

For the first task, the 23 students in the control group gave 218 correct answers out of 299, namely 72.90%, whereas the 23 students in the experimental group provided 260 correct answers out of 299, representing 86.95%. The percentage difference between the two groups as regards the total number of correct answers for Task 1 was 14.05%. As shown in the first table, the idioms *give somebody a bloody nose*, *rub somebody's nose in it*, *put somebody's nose out of joint* and *thumb one's nose at* corresponding to sentences number 1, 5, 7, and 13 turned out to be quite difficult for the students in the control group, whereas those in the experimental group seemed to have remembered their meanings better.

(36)

Number of correct answers for Task 1
(13 sentences x 23 students = 299 answers)

Sentence number	Control group	Experimental group
1	14	19
2	18	20
3	17	21
4	18	21
5	14	17
6	20	23
7	13	16
8	18	22
9	20	22
10	16	20
11	19	20
12	17	21
13	14	18
Total Task 1	218	260

As to the second task, there were 91 correct answers out of 161, namely 56.52% in the case of the control group, and 126 correct answers out of 161, that is 78.26%, for the experimental group. The percentage difference between the two groups as regards the total number of correct answers for Task 2 was 21.74%. The second table indicates that more students in the experimental group were able to figure out the meanings of the idioms that were slightly harder to detect (*keep one's nose to the grindstone, keep one's nose clean, have a nose round, win something by a nose; look down one's nose at*) and use them in correct sentences.
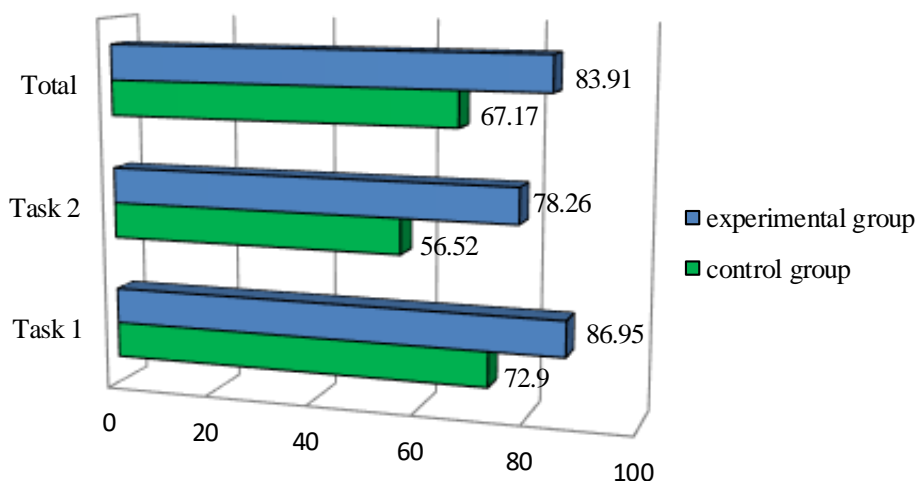
(37)

Number of correct answers for Task 2
(7 sentences x 23 students = 161 answers)

Idiom number	Control group	Experimental group
1	16	22
2	12	17
3	13	18
4	12	16
5	11	15
6	10	17
7	17	21
Total Task 2	91	126

The chart below presents a graphical representation of the collected data.

(38)

Percentage representation of correct answers

Furthermore, in the case of the experimental group, 18 students out of 23 (78.26%) succeeded in identifying the right cognitive mechanisms for all

20 idioms encountered in the test paper. This fact proved that these students became able to establish useful links between the literal and conceptual meanings of idioms, thus achieving good results.

Conclusion

The cognitive linguistic approach is applicable to many body parts idioms. In the case of most *nose* idioms, the three cognitive mechanisms (conventional knowledge, conceptual metaphor and metonymy) were found to motivate their meanings both in English and Romanian. Such "cross-language similarity in metaphorical expression" (Taylor 41) could be addressed when teaching body parts idioms to EFL students in order to optimize the teaching and learning process.

The outcomes of our present and previous research studies stress the worthiness of integrating conceptual strategies in the activities of teaching and learning idioms, especially those that contain words denoting body parts.

Teachers should make students aware of the cognitive mechanisms lying behind the meanings of a large number of idioms in order to stimulate their logical/ critical thinking and creativity by establishing links between literal and figurative meanings. Apart from the usefulness of cognitive strategies in the teaching-learning process, during the experimental stage we noticed that the students in the experimental group were more mentally engaged, more communicative and seemed to enjoy themselves while decoding the meanings of idioms.

We believe that teachers should not stick only to traditional methods but be open to the cognitive linguistic approach as well, combining and adjusting them to their students' needs and interests.

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