Learning English language and culture through idioms: a case study at Kabardino-Balkarian State University

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Abstract
The research seems to be urgent as idioms are always hard to be acquired by English language learners and require new methods and techniques to achieve effective results. Lack of background information does not allow English students to refer a proper name – an idiom component – to a specific object or an event, thus preventing their connection in the language consciousness. The paper suggests a special approach to learning this type of English idioms. The authors offer to start with students' project work aimed at etymological analysis of idioms and disclosure of their motivational basis and only then proceed to the idioms training in certain creative exercises. This approach allows getting an idea of the mechanism of the idiom meaning formation and, as the research showed, considerably enhances the idioms acquisition and retention. Thus, it provides both the students' English language competence development and culture deep knowledge. These methods have been consistently implemented at the English language lessons at Kabardino-Balkarian State University and gave positive results. The statistical significance t-test was applied to the experimental data and confirmed their reliability.
Key words: English language, idioms, teaching idioms, semantics, motivational basis, culture, proper name, project work, creative exercises

Introduction
Common European framework of reference developed by the Council of Europe promotes the ideas of foreign language acquisition resulting in the effective professional and everyday communication with people from other countries and cultures. It removes the emphasis from what the students know about the language to what they can do with the language (Common European Framework, 2017). The claim goes in conformity with a modern competence-based approach to foreign language teaching which has been realizing in this country in the last decades. Much work has been done in this sphere by Russian scholars (Khutorskoy, 2003; Zimnaja, 2004; Shadrikov, 2006; Efremova, 2010).
The competency-based method aims at developing the students' abilities to solve professional tasks in accordance with the requirements for personal, professional qualities, e. i. the ability to search for information, analyze, select, process the information received, and transmit it. Of no less importance is the ability to interact efficiently, and self-assess and work out the strategy for further learning (Milrud, 2004).
Lexical competencies make up an important part of the overall language competences. Teaching them involves teaching idioms as well. The present paper is dedicated to the questions of teaching English idioms, containing proper names as their constituent element. We are interested in culture manifestation in the idioms' semantics and in the ways to reveal and transfer it to the students. For the latter purpose, some tested in the students' audience methods, and techniques are offered.
Learning idioms are both challenging and beneficial. The challenge is stipulated by the idioms' semantics complexity. Being units of secondary nomination, they involve the fixed in the linguistic language signs, arrange them in a specific way largely not to nominate the objects of reality, but to evaluate them, describe and characterize,

express the emotional attitude to them. Hence, connotations of different types prevail over the denotative component of idiom's meaning. The evaluative effect is achieved as a result of the complicated interaction of a prototypical situation underlying the idiom's meaning, and the people's knowledge and attitude to it. And this particular knowledge and understanding of the underlying situation impart cultural significance and national specificity to the idioms of any language. It is here that the benefits of idioms learning are brought out. If you want to perceive the depths of foreign language culture, then begin studying idioms. There is hardly any other linguistic item, which has absorbed and retained in its inner form and numerous connotations the wealth and richness of a nation's culture (Gak, 1988; Dobrovolsky, 1996). No doubt, it presents the most valuable linguistic heritage, giving an insight into a nation's worldview, its customs and way of life and communication (Cherdantseva, 1996). A famous Russian scholar V.N. Telija (2004) emphasizes that phraseology is the most culturally relevant part of the language, which serves as a kind of culture translator, a kind of «epistemic model» for studying the interaction of language and culture.

It is a difficult task to formalize the way all the above-mentioned entities interact within an idiom yielding the resulting effect – a colorful expression with rich imagery, performing a nominative function. But an efficient teacher firstly has to make students understand the way idioms are created in the language. And only then he's supposed to proceed to a very complicated task of tracing cultural effects in the idioms' semantics. It will definitely enhance and facilitate the accomplishment of tasks and assignments aimed at idioms learning.

An approach like this corresponds to the cognitive linguistics method in foreign language teaching since we try to draw the students' attention to the way the figurative, or symbolic meaning has been construed. The scholars (Chen, Lai, 2013; Rodriguez, Moreno, 2009; Berendi, Csabi, Kovecses, 2008) claim that the learners' awareness of the idioms' motivational basis helps with better remembering the idioms, as compared to the traditional method of memorizing the words through translations. We in no way deny memorization and rote learning methods in idioms retention. They still remain effective because vocabulary items must not only be understood, they must be known well so that they can be fluently accessed. «Repetition thus adds to the quality of knowledge and also to the quantity or strength of this knowledge» (Nation, 2001). We stand for a reasonable combination of both methods with cognitive linguistics method coming first.

Research Methodology
The primary objectives that guided the study were the following:
• To reveal the way cultural value in idioms' semantics is displayed.
• To work out and implement a system of tasks and assignments for idioms' teaching in the student's class.
• To check idioms 'acquisition by having students write an essay using 7 idioms of those studied and assess the results by five criteria (usage of idioms, correct usage of idioms, coherence, language literacy, spelling, and punctuation).
• To test the reliability of the obtained results by statistical significance t-test.
The language material – idioms containing proper names (94 units) - were selected by random choice from different sources (Oxford Dictionary of Idioms; Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English Idioms, 1997; Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1994; The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms, 1994). We resorted to the methods of idiom identification, dictionary entry analysis, observation and comparison in working out the most effective ways of learning idioms through better awareness of their

cultural origin and background. A system of tasks and assignments has been worked out on the basis of a competency-based approach to language teaching.

The population of the research comprising 48 the students of the 3 course of the English department at Kabardino-Balkarian State University was made up by the experimental group - 20 students and the control group – 28 students. The experiment was held during the first term of the academic year 2016-2017. It involved the consistent implementation of the worked out methods and techniques in the experimental group with the subsequent comparison of its academic achievements with that of a control group, where traditional methods of idioms' teaching were practiced. An essay writing using idioms was offered as a final assignment to the students of both groups. Assessed by 10 point scale using five criteria we got the data of idiom acquisition and retention by the students Φ can result in educating a true professional. The assumption fully recognized and frequently pointed to by all engaged in a teaching process requires some explanation and elaboration due to the complexity and ambiguity of the term «culture» and the way it interacts with language.

Culture can be defined as comprising: 1. civilizational (results of practical activity on different stages of a nation's development); 2.socio-psychological (national character and mentality, moral prescriptions and regulations); 3. activity (reality cognition, perception, and transmission of information) components. The complexity and the diversity of the cultural phenomena considerably impedes the study of language and culture interaction, the search for culture traces in the language. (Bitokova, 2009).

All the elements included in these three parts acquire the linguistic forms of expression and start to be used in speech for designating new ideas, thoughts, and objects of reality. Eventually, they may become symbols, enlarge their semantic structure, develop transferred meanings, and participate in new words and idioms formation, i.e., they get involved in the continuous process of cognition. So, language is imbued and filled up by culture and starts to influence the culture, the part of it being represented by human reasoning. Therefore, we can say that M. Heidegger (1993) is in many ways right when he claims that we do not speak the language, but the language speaks us. The man is in the power of the language, as the language imposes on him his picture of the world. The language as such is the result of the cultural evolution of a nation. Its lexicon and grammar manifest the worldview of a nation, its crystallized experience.

Needless to say that culture traces are more obvious and explicit in the lexicon of the language were idioms are recognized to be the most culturally marked units. But at the same time linguists emphasize the complexity of its objectification and differentiation. Thus, an outstanding scholar V.N. Telija (1996) considers the cultural specificity in terms of cultural connotation, which is the result of the interaction of the associative-figurative basis of idioms and national stereotypes and standards that exist in this culture. Forms of expression of cultural information are divided into those that are represented by the words denoting elements of material and spiritual culture, fixed in the denotative content of the idiom, and those that are manifested in the figuratively-motivated basis of the idiom. Indeed, idioms make wide use of non-equivalent words, reflecting the unique objects and phenomena of a nation's life. They also represent the transference of the typical situations of everyday life to other spheres of reality with the aim of creating a connotational component of meaning to characterize and evaluate what has been designated by the denotative part of the idiom's meaning.

Proper names generate the cultural value of the idioms containing them. It does not present great difficulty in identifying and systematizing them. The teacher just needs to inform the students what proper names are, illustrate their variety, and provide them with reliable reference sources. The task of having the students learn the idioms with their subsequent inclusion into the cognitive base that will foster free handling of

the idiomatic expressions is much more difficult. Primarily, the lack of background knowledge interferes with students' comprehension of an idiom. Secondly, the specificity of proper names semantics prevents the assimilation of the English idioms considerably by the foreign learners.

The matter is that proper names which are common and quite familiar to the native speakers are alien phenomena for foreign learners. They are just abstract sets of sounds and letters for them, which they fail to refer to a definite, specific object of reality, except for those who have worldwide circulation (E.g., Queen Elisabeth, the House of Commons, Big Ben, Trafalgar Square, etc.).

One more important thing: human's language is mostly concrete, i.e., abstract notions are expressed through concrete objects which a man is fully aware of (Humboldt, 1985). Just compare the concrete meanings of the idioms' constituent elements and their general meanings: *to sit on the fence* – to assume a waiting attitude; *to show the white feather* - to act, behave cowardly; *to be cut of the same cloth* - very similar people, alike. No doubt, the reference to concrete things gives definiteness and distinctness to the abstract notions.

Thus, the idiom *to dine with a Duke Humphrey* (to go without dinner) can hardly be expected to be assimilated without resorting to the personality of that particular Duke. It should be clarified that Duke Humphrey was a well-known benefactor and art patron of poets and artists who enjoyed great respect among the poor. After his death, the poor, who had no money for lunch, passed the lunchtime walking near his grave in the St. Paul's Cathedral.

Idioms with proper names represent short stories about the real persons and accounts of real events that once had happened in the country. Getting the students acquainted with them provides them with a benchmark, a reference point, obligatory for the cognitive processes of categorization and conceptualization. Alongside, the teacher gets the raise of students' awareness of the foreign language culture. As a result, a confident speaker capable of realizing a successful intercultural communication is ensured.

Below we give a short survey of the wide range of socio-cultural information concentrated in the idioms' semantics.

Uncle Sam – The USA, the USA government. The idiom originates from the time of the war of 1812 between the USA and Canada (the English colony at that time). Uncle Sam, or Samuel Wilson, was an inspector, whose task was to check the quality of provision sent to the front. Everything approved by him had a stamp with letters US – an abbreviation of the United States. The soldiers who used to know Samuel Wilson personally, for the sake of fun, started to call the provision approved by the government Commission gifts of Uncle Sam by association with the initials (U.S. = Uncle Sam). Gradually the name started to substitute the US government.

Smart Alec - nerdy self-confident; arrogant; presumptuous man. It is believed that the prototype of this expression was the pickpocket thief Alec, who lived in New York in 1840. He and his wife Melinda were «ripping off» people and hiding from the law by bribing the police. Once, Alec tried to deceive one of the police officers but failed. Since then, the expression Smart Alec has become police slang, denoting anyone who has tried to deceive them. Now, Smart Alec is applied to a person who believes that he knows everything better than others, thus irritating everybody.

As happy as Larry –happy, very happy. There are two versions of the idiom's origin. One is connected with a famous Australian boxer Larry Foley who is known to be the first to use Boxing gloves and who got a huge fee for the last fight. Another goes back to the collective noun «larrikin.» The word was used in the 1860s to name young dandies who were dress conscious always tried to look stylish and fashionable.

Tin Lizzie - any old, cheap car. The origin of the idiom dates back to the very first model of the Ford car (T Model). People transferred from the live horse to the 'iron.'

The old habit of calling all the mares «Lisa» preserved and started to be applied to the cars.

John Bull- a mocking nickname of the British. A symbol of the typical Englishman is often drawn in cartoons or pictures about England as a big man with a large stomach and a round face. He wears high boots, an open jacket, and a Union Jack waistcoat and has a bulldog with him. The character was invented in 1712 by a court doctor J. Arbuthnot and used in the satirical pamphlet «The Litigation without end, or the History of John Bull.»

John Hancock – a signature. John Hancock-American statesman of the 18th century was the first to sign the Declaration of independence. And he did it in a big and sweeping way.

Great Scott! - is an interjection of surprise, amazement, or dismay. It originates as a minced oath, historically associated with two specific "Scotts," notably Scottish author Sir Walter Scott and somewhat later in the United States, US general and the unsuccessful presidential candidate of the Whig Party in 1852. Winfield Scott.

Before one could say, Jack Robinson – a very short period of time, very quickly. The meaning is said to originate from a very volatile gentleman of that appellation, who would call on his neighbors, and be gone before his name could be announced. Another version claims that there was an actual John Robinson, the Constable of the Tower of London for several years from 1660 onward. The man was unusually quick in dispatching the Tower's inmates.

To grin (smile) like a Cheshire cat - smirk, smile widely. The idiom's meaning goes back to the history of Cheshire County. One influential family of this County hired an artist to paint a Lion (the image on their family coat of arms) on the signs of some hotels. The result of the work, according to locals, reminded more of a smiling cat, than of a lion.

To send somebody to Coventry - to boycott smb; to stop communicating with smb; to ignore smb. The idiom goes back to the real facts of the English history. During the bourgeois revolution in the city of Coventry, there was a prison, where all the rebellious royalists were sent to. Now the punishment associated with ignoring or isolating a member of a team, or any group, is indicated by this idiom.

All Ship-shape and Bristol-fashion – in perfect order. The idiom refers us to the shipyards of Bristol, where once perfect ships used to be constructed. They have become the standard of the shipbuilding industry.

So the given idiom examples illustrate rich and diverse information about the motivational basis of their meanings. The knowledge of their etymological ground allows foreign language learners to preserve idioms of this kind in the long-term memory and use them correctly in various communication situations.

The first step in idioms' teaching was to provide students with a motivational basis of the idioms' meaning, making them refer the proper name to a concrete fragment of the reality. The next step was idioms' meaning training aimed at retaining them in the students' mind and memory. For these purposes, we practiced the following tasks, assignments and exercises.

Firstly, students had to independently look for every piece of information clarifying proper names contained in the idiom. Being engaged in the process of getting knowledge, the student is sure to remember the sought information much better than in the case he is just given that information, say, a list of idioms and their translations in our case. We faced with students' different interpretations of proper names' origin. In cases like that, we got the students involved in the discussion subsequently formulating the well-reasoned interpretation.

Taking into consideration the wide variety of proper names used in idioms, we practiced the systemic approach to them. Since only the structured and categorized information is most likely to be retained in the memory of man. To achieve this goal, the students were assigned with project work: selection of idioms with a definite type

of proper name from different sources and thorough analysis of their motivational basis. The principle of thematic organization is essential for idioms' successful acquisition. Below we give a list of sample idiom groups offered for project work:

• Idioms of religious origin (e.g., A Judas kiss; David and Jonathan; Doubting Thomas; Raise Cain; Not know somebody from Adam, etc.);

• Idioms of mythological origin(e.g., the sword of Damocles; cut the Gordian knot; Pandora's box; a Banquet of Lucullus; Buridan's ass; the Augean stables; as rich as Croesus, Sisyphean labor, etc.);

• Idioms containing the names of real persons (e.g., *to have Van Gogh's ear for music; Hobson's choice; Look a right Charlie; Real McCoy*, etc.);

• Idioms containing men's names (e.g., Average Joe; Billy – no mates; Jack of all trades; Even Steven; Nosey Parker; Willy Nilly, etc.);

• Idioms containing women's names (e.g., Big Bertha; Lazy Susan; Positive Polly; Suzy Homemaker, etc.);

• Idioms are containing the names from fiction, films, and cartoons. (e.g., An Aladdin's cave; A man Friday; John Bull; Keep up with the Joneses; Cordelia gift;Rip van Winkle; A Jekyll and Hyde; Mickey Mouse, etc.);

• Idioms are containing geographical names (e.g., to set the Thames on fire, to carry coal to Newcastle, to send somebody to Coventry, the black hole of Calcutta; not for all tea in China; New York minute, etc.).

An exemplary analysis of an idiom from the group was given beforehand; the possible universal character of its meaning was pointed out, and the plausible reasons for it were elicited. The project method usage develops the students' independent thinking, their creative, intellectual, communicative skills. They learn to search for information, analyze it, and make generalizations. The prepared presentations provoked discussions, which teach the students to conduct a conversation, be critical while listening to others.

Once the motivational basis of idioms has been clarified, we proceeded to different assignments aimed at the idioms' consolidation. We started with identification and differentiation exercises, exercises on substitution, transformation, and translation. At this stage of idioms' acquisition, the quantitative principle has been observed. Our teaching practice proved that 6-8 totally new idioms training at a lesson yields the best results.

Below we give sample exercises practiced at the lessons:

Table 1: Match the idioms in the right column with their definitions in the left

Joe Blow	a typical Englishman; the English people
John Bull	a typical, average citizen
John Hancock	a pirate flag
the Jolly Roger	a person's signature

Table 2: Choose the correct Russian translation of the idioms in the right column

To be Greek to someone	Коктейль из кофейного ликера и водки
Black Russian	Совершенно непонятный язык (о технических текстах)
French leave	Платить за себя в ресторане, в кино
To go Dutch	Уйти, не попрощавшись

Table 3: Match the beginning of the idioms with their endings

Doubting	Croesus
As rich as	Thomas
Peeping	Polly

Positive	Peter

Table 4: Complete the sentences by filling the gaps. Use the idioms given in the box

smart Aleck	as happy as Larry	every Tom, Dick and Harry
John Bull	John Hancock	Jack of all trades	to go Dutch	to be Greek

Hey, don't give me that _____ look!
Tommy will be _____ if you let him sit in the front seat and buy him an ice cream.
If you tell this to your sister, soon _____ will be talking about it too.
And who's the _____ at the corner on our side?
We are almost there. Now I need a _____.
There's a chap in the office who can do almost anything; he's _____ .
How about dinner in a French restaurant? – Good idea. I like French food. Let's _____ tonight, OK?
I don't understand it at all. It _____ to me.

5. Multiple-choice tests:
Jack is no judge of Jill's beauty. (Correct)

○ Jane's   ○ Jenny's   ⊙ Jill's   ○ Julie's

2. My next-door neighbor is a doubting Thomas. He never believes anything without proof. (Correct)

○ George   ○ Nicholas   ○ Samuel   ○ Thomas

3. He rushed in, grabbed her bag from the table, and disappeared before you could say Jack Robinson. (Correct)

○ Jack Robinson   ○ James Hopkins   ○ Jerry Williams   ○ John Doe

4. She bought a more expensive car just to keep up with the Joneses. (Correct)

○ the Browns   ○ the Joneses   ○ the Smiths   ⊙ the Taylors

5. Rome was not built in a day. (Correct)

○ London   ○ Moscow   ○ NewYork   ○ Rome

6. Trying to sell TVs in this town seems like carrying coals to Newcastle. Every family here already has two or three TV sets. (Correct)

○ Birmingham   ○ Liverpool   ○ Manchester   ○ Newcastle

7. I don't understand it at all. It's all Greek to me. (Correct)

○ Arabic   ○ Chinese   ○ Greek   ○ Latin

8. As far as I remember, Indian summer came at the end of October last year. (Correct)

○ French   ○ Indian   ○ Italian   ○ Spanish

At the next stage of idioms' consolidation the students practiced different exercises aimed at idioms' correct reproduction and usage in typical speech situations. Further the students were trained to highlight and describe the pragmatic component of idioms' meaning according to their dictionary definitions. They were introduced to the notes: *pejorative, derogatory, ironic, colloquial, bookish, archaic, slang* and suchlike, and asked to interpret the idioms studied in these terms.
After accomplishing the project work activities, practicing various exercises, and doing assignments on the idioms' dictionary definition analysis, the students of the

experimental group were finally asked to write a creative essay using any 7 idioms from those studied. They had to produce a cohesive and logical text, lexically and grammatically correct, observing the rules of spelling and punctuation. The same task was given to the control group of students of 28, taught by the traditional methods of idioms' learning – translation and memorization, without project work activities and creative exercises. The effectiveness of the completed task was measured by 10 point scale using the criteria:1.usage of idioms; 2.correct usage of idioms; 3.coherence; 4. language literacy; 5.Spelling and punctuation. The research limitation – the small size of the groups – prevented performing statistical significance t-test to the data obtained on each criterion. Therefore, the arithmetic average was calculated for each student in the groups compared and checked for statistical significance.

The averaged data were placed in a table of tabular processor MS Excel, and statistical significance *t*-criterion has been calculated.

$$ t = \frac{|M_1 - M_2|}{\sqrt{\dfrac{\sigma_1^2}{n_1} + \dfrac{\sigma_2^2}{n_2}}} $$

M_1=6, 89 – the control group average;
M_2=8, 45 – the experimental group average;

$$ \sigma_1 = 1.82 $$ - the standard deviation of the control group;

$$ \sigma_2 = 1.16 $$ - the standard deviation of the experimental group;

n_1=28 – the population of the control group;
n_2=20 – the population of the control group;

We got the magnitude *t*=3.6145 that exceeds the critical value (*t*=3, 55).It allows making the conclusion of the reliability of the results obtained. Hence, the effectiveness of the described method of studying idioms involving their motivational basis, and cultural implications is confirmed.

Conclusion
The research showed that students' introduction to the specificity of idioms semantics as units of secondary nomination, the diversity and heterogeneity of the underlying cultural information, should precede the immediate idioms training. The efficiency of project work activities and creative exercises has been confirmed by better results of essays writing of experimental group students. Statistical significance *t*-test has proved the reliability of the data obtained. However, some limitations of the research should be specified. The population of students is restricted because of the small size of the academic groups. Of the same reason, the probability sampling method could not be applied. We could not extend the experiment since KBSU is the only University in the Republic which trains English language specialists.

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