TEACHING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS TO LEARNERS OF EFL THROUGH A CORPUS BASED ON DISNEY MOVIES

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Abstract: This paper attempts to provide a strategy for the teaching of idioms to learners of EFL through a corpus based on Disney movies. Adopting a cognitive approach, idioms are seen as being motivated by conceptual metaphors which tend to be grounded in our embodied experiences and which very often involve mental imagery. This imagistic component, in turn, is brought to the fore by means of Disney movies which very often commingle the pictorial, linguistic and embodied elements associated to an idiom.

Key words: idioms, learners of EFL, conceptual metaphors, linguistic corpus, Disney movies.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main problems which seem to bedevil EFL learners has to do with the acquisition of idioms and figures of speech. Students often complain about the difficulties involved in understanding idiomatic expressions such as to fall in love, to be over the moon or to be under the weather, when the image of a person falling, standing over the moon or being placed under meteorological conditions apparently holds no relation whatsoever with the states of love, happiness and sadness conveyed by these expressions respectively.

On other occasions, EFL teachers frequently encounter original renditions of the English language lying somewhere between Spanish and the target language. Errors ranging from speaking in silver (hablando en plata), to take the hair (tomar el pelo), to have someone in the tin (tener a alguien en el bote) or to have very bad milk (tener muy mala leche) simply dramatize the utter failure of word for word transposition from Spanish to English that students too often attempt (S. IRUJO 1986A, 1986B).1

Idioms, indeed, constitute a notoriously difficult area of foreign language learning and teaching because, by definition, idioms are conventionalized expressions whose overall meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of their constituent parts. Hence, an
idiomatic expression like *let the cat out of the bag* is composed of several words (let/the/cat/out/ of/the/bag) whose individual meanings do not seem to contribute to the meaning of the idiom as a whole (*reveal a secret*). In addition to this apparent incongruity between form and meaning, the scarcity of teaching materials and the lack of a clear methodology make idioms a stumbling block for EFL students (A. DEIGNAN ET AL. 1997, L. CAMERON & G. LOW 1999).

This paper attempts to provide a strategy for the teaching and learning of idioms in the EFL classroom. Adopting a cognitive approach, idioms are seen as being motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors which, in turn, are explained through a linguistic corpus based on children’s movies. The aim is to provide students with the necessary tools to make sense of apparently incongruous expressions, that is, to build up their metaphoric competence, while making the learning experience enjoyable.

2. METAPHORS ARE CONCEPTUAL IN NATURE

Traditionally, the teaching of figurative language has been neglected in the EFL classroom. Teachers and materials alike tend to present idiomatic expressions in isolation, as though they were an oddity, as a quirk of language. More recent materials illustrate figurative usages with cartoons, group them under topics (e.g. weather, food, colors, etc), list them in vocabulary sections, accompany them with their literal paraphrase or insert them in random sentences as to provide contextual clues for their interpretation.

Whichever the case, nevertheless, students are not provided with the necessary tools to come to terms with figurative usages, but rather “they come to think of English idioms as though they were the anomalous creations of a whimsical people” (KIRSNER 1951:87). As a result, students are left to memorize chunks of language that, unless practiced frequently, will soon be forgotten (GIBBS ET AL. 1997, BOERS 2000).

The memorization of figurative expressions which at first sight present a clear mismatch between form and meaning creates a heavy learning burden on the student, which usually leads to a lack of motivation and failure in comprehension, retention and production of idioms (Z. KÖVECSES & P. SZABÓ 1996, R. GIBBS ET AL. 1997, F. BOERS 2000). In this regard, the role of the teacher in reducing the learning burden of the students is essential. Instead of fostering learning idioms by heart, the teacher should draw attention to systematic patterns which underlie such expressions. This can be done by seeing idioms not as independent linguistic metaphors that respond to the arbitrariness of language, but as being motivated by conceptual metaphors (R. GIBBS & G. GONZALES 1985, C. CACCIARI & M. LEVORATTO 1998, Z. KÖVECSES 2002).

The distinction between linguistic and conceptual metaphor, that is, between language and thought, is pivotal for understanding the mechanisms generating many idiomatic expressions. Thus, as cognitive linguists point out, whereas conceptual metaphors belong to the level of thought and constitute a small group of mental schema whereby the human mind understands abstract concepts in terms of more concrete bodily experiences by establishing ontological correspondences across conceptual domains; linguistic metaphors, on the other hand, are the concrete realization in language of conceptual metaphors (G. LAKOFF & M. JOHNSON 1980, 1999, G. LAKOFF & M. TURNER 1989). This dichotomy helps to explain why a series of linguistic expressions such as *to be fuming with anger*, *to be about to explode*, *to let off steam* or *to blow up* are not the product of the whim of language, but constitute a whole network of expressions in which the concept of ANGER is conceptualized by means of a systematic pattern of ontological correspondences pertaining to the concept of HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER (R. GIBBS ET AL. 2004, Z. KÖVECSES 1988, 2005). The fact that
the very same mental pattern operates in other languages like Spanish (e.g. estar a punto de explotar/reventar, hervirle la sangre a uno, está que echa chispas o echar humo) certainly constitutes a great advantage on teaching EFL to Spanish-speaking students (A. Deignan et al. 1997, A. Pamies 2002).

As a matter of fact, cross-linguistic studies have shown that a wide number of conceptual metaphors are of universal nature given that the common source for metaphoric production is grounded in our sensorimotor experiences and our interaction with the physical world (G. Lakoff & M. Johnson 1980, 1999, M. Johnson 1987, R. Gibbs 2003). This embodied nature of figurative thinking certainly accounts for the existence of the previous metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER since people acquire this knowledge through the experience with their own bodies as containers filled with different types of liquids (sweat, blood, urine, semen, tears) that can be heated up and expelled for a number of reasons such as physical exercise, biological functions or sexual arousal (see R. Gibbs et al., 2004).

However, although conceptual metaphors may have a perceptual motivation, certain metaphorical themes are also rooted in cultural experience (Z. Kövecses 2005). So, for example, in both English and Spanish life events are commonly conceptualized in the form of sports (LIFE IS SPORT metaphor), but whereas American English draws from the baseball domain (e.g. to get to first base with someone, touchdown), bullfighting provides a rich source in Spanish (e.g. cortarse la coleta, echar un capote or estar al quite). Hence, the fact that many metaphors are culture-bound and, therefore, not shared by the members of different speech communities poses a problem for the teaching of foreign languages.

In addition to cross-cultural variation, another problem concerning conceptual metaphor theory is that it does not explain why certain mappings from a source to a target are not likely to happen, or why mappings are only partial and selective (see J. Grady, 1997, 1999). That is, a conceptual metaphor such as TIME IS MOTION motivates linguistic expressions such as time flies or time goes by, but other types of activities that involve movement are not mapped (e.g. people do not say time runs or time swims). J. Grady (1997) offers a plausible solution to these problems by suggesting that conceptual metaphors do not provide the foundations for straightforward metaphorical mapping between body experience and thought. Rather, he argues, the relationship established between our body and our mind generates «primary» or «primitive» metaphors which serve as the skeleton on which metaphorical thinking will be built:

> [...] a recurring ‘primary scene’, which can be characterized at a very local and schematic level, involves a tight correlation between two dimensions of experience – typically with one more directly related to sensory input than the other. Typical of these scenes is that they are elements of universal human experience – basic sensorimotor, emotional and cognitive experiences which do not depend on the particulars of culture. (Grady 1999: 85)

These «primitive» metaphors which reflect direct correlations between our perceptions and our thoughts are the building blocks for metaphorical thinking. The combination of primitive metaphors, in turn, results in complex metaphors which do not necessarily map all the possible elements from the source to the target, which, along with cultural mechanisms, appear to explain the blocking of certain mappings.

The relatively unproblematic view of embodiment as motivating much language use is particularly important in understanding the motivation of idioms (R. Gibbs 2003). Obviously, if our body experiences provide the bedrock for many figurative usages, drawing the students’ attention to their physical and emotional interaction with the world around them could aid their comprehension and retention of idioms.
3. OPACITY VERSUS TRANSPARENCY

One major problem with seeing idioms as being motivated and, therefore, decomposable is that not all figurative senses can be retrieved by means of the meaning of their constituent parts (R. GIBBS ET AL. 1989, R. GIBBS 1991, 1992, B. KEYSAR & B. BLY 1995). Such is the case, for example, of kick the bucket or bury the hatchet, where the individual parts do not contribute to the overall meaning die and settle a disagreement respectively, as opposed to the meaning of other apparently unrelated expressions such as let the cat out of the bag or spill the beans in which the act of revealing a secret is conceptualized as letting some closed entity out. So whereas the relation between the constituent parts and the global meaning of the former examples is opaque, transparency characterizes the latter idiomatic expressions.

This does not mean, however, that there does not exist any kind of motivation in the case of semantically opaque idioms, for they tend to be grounded in historical reasons. The link between death and buckets in kick the bucket seems to have originated from the notion that people hanged themselves by standing on a bucket with a rope around their neck and then kicked the bucket away or from the wooden frame called bucket which was used to hang animals up by their feet for slaughter. Likewise, the connections between peace and hatchets come from the American Indian custom of burying their hatchets to show that hostilities were at an end (B. KIRKPATRICK 1996, L DUNKLING 1998). Yet, whereas diachronic evidence is needed to recall the meaning of these expressions, in the case of semantically transparent idioms their figurative senses can be arrived at from a synchronic standpoint via conceptual metaphors.

Therefore, for methodological purposes, it is necessary to establish a division between semantically opaque and semantically transparent idioms for whereas the former need to be accounted for on an individual basis only do the latter respond to systematic conceptual patterns that can be explained in the EFL classroom.

4. FIGURATIVE COMPETENCE

Traditionally, the mastery of a language was practically synonymous with the knowledge of the grammar, lexis and phonetics of that language, in other words, with linguistic knowledge (J. RICHARDS & R. SCHMIDT 1993). Competence, in the broad sense of «ability to do something well», was confined to the linguistic arena. It was believed that by acquiring the linguistic features of a language communication would succeed. However, communication is not merely a matter of language, but a complex phenomenon in which participants take turns, negotiate, resort to non-verbal resources (e.g. gestures, distance, sighs, body language) and all this takes place within a socio-cultural framework. Therefore, linguistic competence is only one aspect within a more general kind of competence that enables people to communicate and which Hymes (1964) called «communicative competence», which apart from the knowledge of rules of grammar, it also included rules of language use.

Based on Hymes’ studies, Canale and Swain developed and refined the notion of «communicative competence». In their 1980 canonical paper, communicative competence is understood as the underlying systems of knowledge and skill required for communication. The theoretical framework for communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain includes four areas of knowledge and skill: 1.- Linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar, lexis and phonetics), 2.-Pragmatic competence: 2.1.- Sociolinguistic competence (socio-cultural norms, rules of appropriateness), 2.2.- Discourse competence (mechanisms used to form a unified discourse; cohesion and coherence) and 2.3.- Strategic competence
(verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication and
to enhance the effectiveness of communication).

Yet, no explicit mention is made to figurative competence (LOW 1998) as another
fundamental sub-competence necessary for successful communication. Doing away with
figurative uses, however, is not only impossible due to the ubiquity of figurative language, but
also detrimental to the student since much language is produced on the basis of figuration. A
working awareness of figurative language, then, is a valuable tool for learners since it can
facilitate comprehension, aid communicative interactions between native and non-native
speakers extend vocabulary and help interpret and store new language items (G. LAZAR 1996,
2003). In other words, as Littlemore’s (2001:466) points out, «metaphoric competence is
important for foreign language learners, as it is likely to contribute to their overall language
ability. »

5. FIGURATIVE COMPETENCE IN LEARNERS OF EFL

The teaching of EFL is being introduced in the Spanish educational system at ever younger
ages. Certainly, as has been widely observed, children acquire a second language with more
ease than adults because their brains are more flexible and have a greater capacity to
assimilate new data as well as to develop a more native-like accent (M. BOWERMAN & S.
LEVINSON 2001). In addition to biological factors, the fact that children are usually more
motivated and disinhibited as compared to adult learners may certainly account for successful
language acquisition at the early stages of life (R. GARDNER 1985, P. LIGHTBOWN & N. SPADA
2003).

Without underestimating the positive effects of early language acquisition, one also
needs to recognize that young age also presents some drawbacks for the teaching of EFL (M.
BOWERMAN & S. LEVINSON 2001, L. CAMERON 2001). Firstly, the materials and
methodologies used need to suit the cognitive and emotional maturation of children as well as
their interests. Secondly, teachers need to be trained in solid programs and, finally, the rigors
of the academic setting as well as the amount of time devoted to EFL instruction call for the
need of a flexible and dynamic approach towards the teaching of EFL.

Research into figurative language in recent years and its application to EFL teaching
have provided insights that merit attention to the development of figurative competence in the
G. LOW 1999, F. BOERS 2000). However, when figurative language in EFL has been studied,
it has almost exclusively been approached from its application to intermediate and advanced
learners (G. LAZAR 1996; Z. KÖVECSES & P. SZABÓ 1996; F. BOERS 2000) and in specialized
discourse (S. LINDSTROMBERG 1991; J. CHARTERIS-BLACK & T. ENNIS 2001). However, scant
attention has been paid to fostering figurative competence at early stages of the learning
process.iv

Contrary to the belief that children do not possess figurative thought, studies have
demonstrated that children are quite capable of interpreting figurative usages (S. VOSNIADOU
1987, B. ZURER 1990, E. WINNER 1998). Indeed, exposure to metaphorical thinking takes
place from early childhood and children often encounter figurative language in many different
forms such as riddles, songs, nursery rhymes or tales (S. PUGH ET AL. 1992). The fact that
children can solve enigmas and make connections between the characters and events
presented in songs and tales with their own lives simply demonstrate the child’s ability to
think figuratively (B. BETTELHEIM 1976, D. RUMELHART 1993). Likewise, textbooks and
teachers alike exploit the heuristic function of metaphor to help children understand complex
concepts in terms of more concrete ones and even children themselves resort to metaphor in
their own linguistic production. Cameron’s (1996:51) research on metaphor use in the primary school classroom, for example, showed how children make sense of new concepts by means of concrete and familiar elements, such as referring to the atmosphere as a *blanket of gases* or lava in terms of sticky *treacle*, *runny butter* or *wax*.

This innate ability children have to think metaphorically seems to stem from the embodied nature of figurative thought. In fact, children’s experiences with their own bodies, the manipulation of objects and their relations with the world around them provide the basis for the construction of metaphorical thought. Basic concepts such as happiness or sadness, for example, are soon associated with upward and downward orientation respectively, for parents and caretakers who provide affection, food and comfort are spatially above the child, and when babies cry they tend to be lifted up and held in the adults’ arms. In like manner, the walking experience of children also reinforces the correlation up-happiness and down-sadness, for children experience success when standing upright and failure and even pain when falling (J. TOLAAS 1991).

Besides, body posture and facial gestures may also be responsible for such metaphorical conceptualizations. Generally, when feeling sad or depressed, we droop, bow our heads and drop our eyes, whereas when we are happy, we usually have an erect posture, raise our heads and our lips spread upwards (G. LAKOFF & M. JOHNSON 1980).

The fact that very similar, not to say identical, experiences are shared by Spanish children is quite useful when teaching idiomatic expressions motivated by orientational metaphors of the type HAPPY IS UP, SADNESS IS DOWN; MORE IS UP, LESS IS DOWN or HEALTHY IS UP, SICK IS DOWN in the EFL classroom. Hence, the figurative competence children have in their L1 can be extrapolated to the L2. Obviously, as said before, the techniques and methodologies used must be appropriate and appealing to the age of the students, which justifies this paper’s proposal for teaching idiomatic expressions through children’s movies.

6. THE VISUAL MANIFESTATION OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Being conceptual in nature, metaphors are realized in other than linguistic ways (Z. KÖVECSES 2002). Literary works are structured in their entirety in terms of conceptual metaphors. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Bunyam’s *The Pilgrim Progress* or Frost’s poem “The road not taken” are articulated around the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. Similarly, individual passages of fairy tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Wizard of Oz* or *Hansel and Gretel* illustrate the same metaphor. Sometimes, the depiction of characters evoke the metaphors HAPPINESS IS BRIGHT/LIGHT COLORS and SADNESS IS DARKNESS/DARK COLORS, for good characters in children’s stories tend to be blond and dressed in light colors whereas evil characters are usually dark-haired and wear black or purple clothes (S. PUGH ET AL. 1992).

Cartoons and comic strips also materialize conceptual metaphors. The state of being angry, for instance, is commonly depicted by steam coming out of the character’s ears or by the explosion of their head, hinting, therefore, at the metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. In like manner, politicians are often mocked by portraying them in the guise of certain animals (PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor) and their financial scandals often presents them as people devouring money (DESIRE IS HUNGER metaphor).

Films may also be based on conceptual metaphors. In Disney’s *Pocahontas* when Captain John Smith falls in love with the native Pocahontas, they are seen as physically falling down a waterfall, recreating the FALLING IN LOVE IS PHYSICAL FALLING metaphor and in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* the passion felt by the judge of Paris towards
the gypsy Esmeralda is represented by a room covered in flames, suggesting the SEXUAL DESIRE IS FIRE metaphor (KÖVECSES 2002).

The representation of conceptual metaphor in children’s movies can be exploited in the EFL classroom. Movies provide a valuable resource for teachers because not only do they appeal to children’s interests, but they also expose children to native pronunciation while presenting real language usages and all this with the visual support (P. M. LIGHTBOWN & N. SPADA 2003).

Pictures can facilitate the comprehension and retention of many idiomatic expressions which are motivated by conceptual metaphors. Certainly, a great number of idioms are based on both knowledge and image (image-schema metaphors) and, therefore, the association of an idiom with a concrete scene seems to involve mental imagery. Imagistic approaches to idioms have shown that pictures constitute an effective mnemonic technique for the comprehension and retention of figurative usages since they resuscitate their original basis (R. GIBBS & O’BRIEN 1990, ABKARIAN 1992, BOERS ET AL. 2004).

Besides, images in movies also provide contextual clues as to the interpretation of idioms. Obviously, the role played by context in the interpretation of language is pivotal and children can rely on global information to understand a concrete string of language. In the case of idiomatic expressions, context makes it possible to discard the literal interpretation of the utterance since the contextual information provided makes the child look for coherence within the text and arrive at the figurative sense. Furthermore, since idiomatic expressions are not normally used in isolation but within a discourse context, they can be stored and related to similar contexts of usage, for, as Cameron (1996:58) states,

> Metaphorical language uses may be stored along with the memory of the context, and thus be available when a similar or related context occurs again [.....] not only do they remember the context, but they have also stored images and words as they were encountered in those contexts.

The use of image and context in children’s movies, thus, might be beneficial for the interpretation and retention of idiomatic expressions as well as for the creation of mental networks of idioms based on shared images and contexts.

### 7. A CASE STUDY: HAPPINESS IS UP/SADNESS IS DOWN. STUDY OF A CORPUS BASED ON DISNEY MOVIES

As has been mentioned, spatial orientation like up-down provides a rich basis for understanding idiomatic expressions in orientational terms such as *to feel up*, *to be over the moon*, *to be floating in the air*, *to cheer up*, *to be in high spirits*, *to give a lift/boost* or *to feel down*, *to fall into a depression*, *to be under the weather* and *to sink one’s spirits* for almost from birth our bodily experiences tend to associate positive and negative emotional states with upward and downward orientation respectively (G. LAKOFF & M. JOHNSON 1980, J.TOLAAS 1991, S. LINDSTROMBERG 1998, A. TYLER & V. EVANS 2003).

The spatial domain is particularly interesting because human experiences with space are held to be similar in different languages, since people are endowed with the same biological features and, therefore, are usually exposed to similar experiences with the environment. Despite cultural differences, in both English and Spanish happiness and sadness correlate physically with up-down orientation. Like the aforementioned English examples, there are also idioms galore in Spanish disclosing the same conceptual metaphors: *poner a alguien por las nubes*, *arriba ese ánimo*, *estar en el cielo*, *estar flotando*, *estar de bajón*, *tener la moral por los suelos*, *está que no levanta cabeza* or *estar hundido*, among many others.
Obviously, such cross-linguistic similarities are quite helpful for teaching English to Spanish-speaking students or the other way round, that is, to teach Spanish to English-speaking students.

In order to facilitate the comprehension of the aforementioned idiomatic expressions, the teacher should lead the students to the discovery of the conceptual metaphors HAPPINESS IS UP/SADNESS IS DOWN vertebrating such figurative usages. This can be done by exposing the students to different types of movies which reflect such usages.

In *Mary Poppins* there is a scene in which the nanny Mary and the two children under her care, Jane and Michael, go to visit her uncle Albert. When they arrive at his house, they find Albert floating in the air, near the ceiling because he is having an attack of mirth. Bert and Mary tell the children to remain serious; otherwise, it will be impossible for Uncle Albert to get down.

Uncle Albert: Oh, I kn--. I know, I...but I tried. Really, I did, my dear. I...but I so enjoy laughing, you know? And, well...when I start, *it’s all up* with the...that’s what happens to me. I love to laugh! Oh, my goodness! I can’t help it. You can see that. I just like laughing, that’s all. //Mary Poppins: Jane, don’t you dare! You’ll only make him worse. It’s really quite serious!//Bert: Yes, whatever you do, keep a straight face. Last time, it took us three days *to get him down*.

The whole situation is hilarious. Uncle Albert keeps on laughing and starts telling jokes. Bert cannot control himself and as soon as he bursts out laughing, he goes up in the air. Uncle Albert greets him and the two of them have a great time.

Uncle Albert: When things strike me as funny I can’t hide it inside. And squeak as the squeakelers do. I’ve got to let go with a ho ho ho ho. And laugh too. How nice. I was hoping you’d turn up!//Bert: Turn up!//Uncle Albert: We always have such a jolly time.//Uncle Albert & Bert: We love to laugh loud and long and clear. We love to laugh so everybody can hear.

Mary is upset and tells them to come down. However, it is too late, for Jane and Michael cannot control their laughter either and start ascending in the air. With this panorama, Mary Poppins decides to join them in the air and have tea there. After having spent an amusing evening, it is high time the children returned home. Uncle Albert tells the children that the only way to get down is to think of something sad. So as he tells a sad story, the children gradually descend. However, the last lines contain a humorous remark that makes the children go up in the air again.

Uncle Albert: Oh, welcome, children! Welcome! Make yourselves comfortable.//Bert: That's right. *Pull up* a chair. //Uncle Albert: *Oh, pull up*--//Mary Poppins: I must say, you're a sight, the lot of you! Whoops, don’t you two start. *Come back down* here.//Uncle Albert: Oh, thank you, my dear. I’m having such a good time. I wish that you could all *stay up* here all the time.//Michael: We’ll jolly have to. There’s no way to *get down*.*//Uncle Albert: Oh, no, there is a way. Frankly, I don’t like to mention it, because you have to think of something sad.//Mary Poppins: Then do get on with it, please.*//Uncle Albert: Let me see. I’ve got the very thing. Yesterday when the lady next door answered the bell, there was a man there. And the man said to the lady, “I’m terribly sorry. I just ran over your cat.”//Jane & Michael: Oh, that’s sad. The poor cat.//Uncle Albert: And then the man said, “I’d like to replace your cat” and the lady said, “That’s all right with me, but how are you catching mice?”
Well, you know I started out sad. I, I try, really I do. But, but everything ends up so hilarious, I can’t...can’t help...

Finally, Mary Poppins reminds the children that they have to go home, which really makes them sad and, consequently, brings them down to the floor.

Mary Poppins: That will be quite enough of that! It’s time to go home. //Jane: Oh, that is sad. //Michael: Oh no! //Uncle Albert: Oh, that’s sad. That’s the saddest thing I ever heard. //Mary Poppins: Come along, children. Spit spot!

This scene proves very fruitful for the introduction of the conceptual metaphors HAPPINESS IS UP/SADNESS IS DOWN. As can be noticed, the different emotional states of the characters are not only represented physically by placing them in an upward or downward position, but are also instantiated in language. The scene, indeed, is rich in word play, and literal and figurative usages of words are exploited to achieve a humorous effect, as observed in the aforementioned uses of turn up and pull up, which can be read as phrasal verbs as well as verbs followed by prepositions.

However, before going into the literal and figurative uses of prepositions, the teacher should pave the way for the establishment of the basis of the conceptual metaphors which would enable the students to make sense of figurative meanings. This can be done by drawing the students’ attention towards the different emotional states of the characters, that is, whether they are happy or sad as well as towards their physical location (up-down). The scene should be watched several times to allow the students to grasp the connection between being happy with being up and being sad with being down. This could be easily done by asking the learners questions such as “Where is Uncle Albert when the children arrive?”, “Is he happy or sad?”, “Is Bert happy when he goes up in the air?”, “Are the children sad when they get down to go home?”, etc. These questions do not require elaborate answers on behalf of the students, for the main purpose is to establish the connection happiness is up/ sadness is down. At this stage, the visual support is more important than the linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphors, for the main goal is for the students to come to terms with the embodied nature of figurative thought.

Once the connection happiness-up/sadness-down has been established, the teacher should gradually introduce figurative uses which stem from this conceptual metaphor. Hence, the scene can be played again to practice expressions of the type to be up/to be down, to feel up/to feel down. Little by little, more complex expressions containing concrete physical locations placed upwards (e.g. moon, heaven, clouds) and downwards (e.g. under the weather, downhill) as well as actions denoting upward and downward movement (e.g. lift, rise, float, descend, fall, sink) could be introduced. In this regard, the instructor could resort to other children’s movies. Aladdin, for example, could be quite useful. There are several sequences in which Aladdin and Princess Jasmine are seen flying happily on the magic carpet over the moon and in the clouds. Obviously, the idioms to be over the moon and to be in the clouds spring to mind here. Likewise, the correlation between downward orientation and sadness could be explained through Dumbo, when the little elephant’s failure to fly is depicted by a great grey cloud under which Dumbo is seen crying (hence the idiom to be under the weather).

7. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, it could be said that the acquisition of idiomatic expressions is one of the most outstanding challenges in TEFL. These idiomatic expressions reveal conceptual metaphors,
which are used in many aspects of our daily lives and our speeches. For instance, if we analyze a corpus based on Disney movies we realize how the metaphoric meaning appears in the language itself, illustrating concepts, creating visual images and improving the figurative competence itself.
Works cited


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End notes

i For a detailed analysis of common mistranslations of idiomatic expressions from English into Spanish see Speaking in Silver (F. LÓPEZ & I. OCHOA 1999), From Lost to the River (F. LÓPEZ & I. OCHOA 2000), Shit Yourself Little Parrot (F. LÓPEZ 2004) or Like Fish in the Water (F. LÓPEZ & I. OCHOA 2006).

ii What different scholars understand by idiom may vary very widely (see, for example, R. MOON 1998 and C. FERNANDO 1996 for discussion). Under the label idiom scholars may include metaphors (let the cat out of the bag), metonymies (give me a hand), pairs of words (cats and dogs), similes (as cunning as a fox), sayings (when there is a will, there is a way), phrasal verbs (come up in the exams are coming up), binomials (spick and span) and grammatical idioms (let alone).

iii Another problem related to the treatment of idioms in the EFL classroom has to do with terminology. In fact, more often than not, teachers and course materials include under the same label, usually “idiom”, a mixture of proverbs, phrasal verbs, collocations and sayings. Such terminology is likely to be a source of confusion for learners (A. PIQUER PIRIZ 2004).

iv For significantly valuable exceptions see Lazar (2003), Pugh et al. (1992) and Piquer Piriz (2004).