Teaching English Idioms through Mnemonic Devices at SSC Level in Pakistan

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Abstract
This research dealt with teaching English idioms through mnemonic devices at SSC level in a school in Pakistan. As the students in Pakistan, especially at SSC level, have a habit to learn idioms by rote and face many problems due the technique, the problem was selected for the investigation. Needs Analysis Questionnaire was used to determine the needs and problems faced by the students and their expectations for solution to the problem. Understanding the problems faced by the students in English idioms, an alternative methodology was selected in the form of mnemonic devices and the selected students were taught using the methodology to test its effectiveness in not only teaching English idioms but also making learning motivating, interesting and learner-involving. A post-test was given to understand the effect (if any) of the selected alternative method of mnemonics and it was observed that teaching English idioms through mnemonic devices not only helped the learners but also helped in sharpening their memory.

Keywords: Mnemonic devices, Problems in idiom learning, memory, SSC level students, Needs Analysis
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1 Introduction

English is a language widely spoken all over the world and functions as lingua franca for many. Owing to the international importance of English, in Pakistan it is used in all the higher educational institutions and is a compulsory subject for all the competitive exams such as- CSS, PMS etc. It is taught in most of the schools and colleges across Pakistan as compulsory subject. The learners beyond the school level study English mainly for two reasons: to acquire a higher education and to get better jobs. As primary reason, for most of the learners of English in pakistan, behind learning it, is to establish and maintain successful communication, every attempt is done to teach required nuances and intricacies of the language. Idioms and their appropriate use also forms a part of such nuances and intricacies. As it is acknowledged that mastery over idioms and the ability to use them in communication is considered as a sign towards proficiency, the teaching and learning of idioms needs to be taken seriously.

However, in Pakistani schools, students at SSC level do not have sound knowledge of idioms to use for expressing their thoughts. One of the reasons given for this failure is the use of inappropriate methodology by the subject teachers. It is complained that students fail to remember idioms as their teachers do not use interesting and latest methods and techniques to teach which will not only ease their learning of idioms but will also sustain their attention and interest in the class. It is also reported that teachers’ attitudes towards the learners are passive and they do not make any serious effort to adopt motivating techniques which will capture the attention of learners. Teachers usually adopt the Grammar Translation method. All these factors contribute and lead to difficulties in establishing communication in general and learning and using idioms in particular for the learners. Nor do the learners put efforts by themselves to consult their teachers for the meaning or consult an idiomatic dictionary regularly. On the contrary, they have the habit of cramming before test and forget idioms quickly. The result is that they get confused when they attempt translation of simple idioms such as bone of contention, apple of one’s eye, an apple pie order etc. Nor are they encouraged to extensive reading. Even the writing skill is not much practiced where the learners feel the need of utilizing idioms. Regular practice of cramming before tests also results in forgetting the spellings as well as the meanings. Rote learning is an old and rough method of teaching which has become outdated and has minimum percentage to yield the intended/required results. This background formed the basis of this research study which aims at investigating the problems faced by the Pakistani learners, studying in 10th Class / SSC, in Idioms. It also aims at testing the use of mnemonics devices as a possible method to teach idioms. It is assumed that mnemonics render the teaching of idioms easier and make retention of the meaning of idioms possible and help motivate the students. This method also helps increase the vocabulary reservoir of the students and enables them to remember idioms in an easy and effective way.

2. Idioms and Memonics

The term idiom is derived from the Greek idios, meaning own, and is used to describe the forms of expression peculiar to a language. Moon (2006) defined idiom as a fixed sequence of words which has a meaning beyond that of the constituent parts. It is an expression whose overall figurative meaning one cannot derive from the meaning of its parts. There is no set pattern behind the formation of idioms. They are developed as the language does. They have figurative meanings. They occur frequently in all languages and are numerous. In English language, there are almost 25,000 idiomatic expressions. For instance, "The devil is in the details", one is not expressing a belief in demons, but rather one means that things may look good on the surface, but upon scrutiny, problems are revealed. English is a language particularly loaded with idioms and the starter is sure to be confused by the
unusual characteristics of some of them. Thus, you may be awesome as *cucumber* but not as a *pumpkin* (Shah, 2009). Idioms are as different as life itself. They have different resources. English like all residing 'languages' has usually attracted upon nationwide and worldwide sources (Shah, 2009).

In vocabulary building, the issue is not much discovering new terms or even figuring out what they mean, the issue is to keep and fix them completely in your thoughts (Nurnberg & Rosenblum, 1988). Therefore, it is the job of a good teacher to make idioms comprehensible to the learners. In this respect, the method of mnemonics is often debated. The word ‘Mnemonics’ has its origins in the Ancient term ‘Mine’ which indicates “to remember” (Nurnberg & Rosenblum, 1988). The Dictionary of psychology defines it as, the art of helping the storage with the aid of synthetic systems (Atkinson et al. 1988). Mnemonics are memory checks, aids or memory providing helps, typically used to remember a list of items or components. This method is concered to be effective for teaching idioms as it is learner-centered. In learner-centered approach the fundamental principle is that the learning revolves around and is totally determined by the learner. The teachers can influence the process through their teaching; but what the learner should learn is determined by them alone. Mnemonics are formal techniques used for organizing information in a way that makes it more likely to be remembered. Most people are unaware that memory strategies have had a long and rich history, going back to antiquity, and that a large number of distinguished writers and philosophers have benefited from their use. Modern linguist Noam Chomsky, founder of Transformational Generative Grammar, has given the concept of Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that is purely based upon the use of mnemonics through the law of association. Mnemonic is a system of artificial aids for assisting the memory. The use of mnemonic techniques have assisted learners with problems to considerably improve their educational accomplishment (Forness, Kavale, Blum, Lloyd, 1997).

In the last 20-30 years mnemonic strategies have been systematically applied to educational content and evaluated in educational contexts. There are many different types of mnemonic devices and these techniques/devices can be used for the enhancement of the learner’s ability. These include- **keyword method/link word techniques;** it creates a phrase or scene of the L2 and L1 equal in some form of wordplay. **Nouns in the Town:** word for bread should be associated with an image of loaf in baker’s shop. **Acronyms:** these are the most common daily use of mnemonics. One can take the first letter from each word and use them to spell out a simple word or phrase. **Visual Associations:** these usually involve linking two ideas using images. They allow you to remember orders of unrelated items. **Rhymes:** in this technique the facts to be memorized are incorporated into a rhyme or poetry form. **Acrostic:** this is an invented sentence where the first letter of each word is a cue to an idea you need to remember. **Method of Loci** is placing the items you want to remember in a visualized room or route that is familiar and items get “picked up” as you mentally walk through the room or route. **Physical Mnemonics:** physically passing the info in a word or sentences results in better recall then simple repetition.

The psychologists are also enthusiastic about the study of mnemonic devices for maintaining large sections of information in the mind (Hoffman & Senter, 1978). The formation of a strong association between words and ideas is albeit the basis of effective memory techniques. Association should be exclusive and original though they are weird or absurd. They will work because of the process of making associations and visualizations. It is a device that allows classification, organization, storage and recollection of information into and out of long-term memory. Since the items in one’s long term memory are maintained longer, the better they are organized. In this respect, mnemonic devices insure that the memorizer is paying attention to the material. There are three basic principles of mnemonic
devices. Association, Imagination and Location. Working together, these principles can be used to make an influential mnemonic system. Learning idioms by reading is an old method. It is reported that our brain processes 80% visual information. In this respect, visual mnemonics are the easiest to memorize new idioms. Therefore, this paper attempts at testing this effectiveness of mnemonic devices in teaching idioms.

3 Research Methodology

The study employed both paradigms of research methodology- i.e. qualitative and quantitative. It was an experimental research which focused upon analyzing the effectiveness of objectives through the measurement of outcomes. For employing the selected method and for collecting the data, F.G Sir Syed Boys Secondary School in Rawalpindi was selected. All the required formalities to conduct the intended research in the selected school were completed. The participants of the study included 20 male students with age group of 15-16 years. Most of them belonged to middle class families. They were given a pre-test to check their knowledge of English idioms. And their knowledge of English idioms was found quite insufficient. Five sample lesson plans were designed by the researcher to improve the efficiency level of learning English idioms. The selected group of students were taught, using mnemonic devices and methodology designed by the researcher. In the end of teaching, a post-test was conducted to check the improvement level between the experimental and controlled groups. Need analysis Questionnaire, a Pre-Test and a Post-Test formed the important techniques of collecting the required research data.

4 Data Collection, Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Data Analysis of Needs Analysis Questionnaire and Pre-Test

A needs analysis questionnaire (Appendix A) was conducted. This need analysis identified the gap between what students were able to do and what they need to be able to do. Of the students of F.G Sir Syed Boys Secondary School in Rawalpindi, class 10th or SSC students attended this need analysis session. The collected data was classified and analyzed. From the results of this analysis data, it was clearly evident that the students of 10th class of F.G Sir Syed School Rawalpindi had problems in learning idioms. The analyzed data also revealed that most of the students were not happy with the technique of teaching and learning idioms by rote. They indicated their need for alternative interesting method and useful devices to make their lesson more motivating. Thus, the need for some alternative appealing devices to make learning interesting, motivating, involving and but attention-grabbing was expressed.

To understand the knowledge of idioms of the selected students, A pre-test (appendix B) was given to the selected students. This was aimed at getting insight into the existing knowledge of idioms of students in English language. The test consisted of 5 questions in all. Total marks allotted for the test were 50. The results obtained from the test are presented in the following graph.

*Figure:1 Marks obtained in the pre-test by the Experimental Group*
From the figures in the graph, one can conclude that the marks obtained by the students were not so good. Most of the students got less than 45 percent marks. This was helpful in understanding the knowledge of idioms of the students.

The case of the controlled group was also not different. Even their marks were less than 45%. This can be seen in the following graph.

*Figure: 2 Marks obtained in the pre-test by Controlled Group*

![Graph](image)

Names of the students

4.2 Researchers’ Experiment using mnemonic methodology

After understanding the needs of the students and their knowledge of idioms of English, the researcher designed her lesson plans to teach idioms using her technique to test its effectiveness in teaching idioms to SSC level students in Pakistani schools. It was observed that the learners were quite hesitant and confused. The researcher started the lessons with brain storming activities and then gave the general introduction of the lesson. The story was read out for the class emphasizing the use of idioms. During the practice stage, the students deliberate attempt was done to involve to students in the lesson activities. They were shown pictures, related to the idioms used in the story, and were asked which idiom it implied. The students answered guessing the content in the picture. Then, students were asked to draw a picture related to any idiom and other students were asked to identify the idiom it implied. The researcher guided the activities and encouraged all students to participate in the activities giving way for their maximum interaction. As learners’ involvement is essential for effective learning, this was essential and was encouraged. The students, timid at the beginning, became encouraged and participated fully in the lesson activities discarding their fear and shyness.

These experimental lessons continued for six consecutive weeks with the experimental group. The guiding aim was to check the effectiveness of the techniques used by the researcher on teaching and learning English idioms. While doing so, various teaching aids were systematically used, following the principles of mnemonic methodology, for imparting effective teaching of idioms. After this phase, the students, taught by the researcher using the technique designed by her, were tested again. The aim of this Post-Test was to check if the researcher’s experimental method had any effect on their learning of idioms. Total marks allotted for the test were 50, equal to the Pre-Test. The performance of the students in experimental group in Post-Test showed visible improvement in all the areas. However, that was not the case with other group which was not taught by the researcher. The results of the post-tests of both the groups are presented in the following graphs.

*Figure: 3 Marks obtained in the post-test by the experimental Group*

![Graph](image)
As it can be noticed clearly, comparing the results with figure:1, that the students’ performance improved dramatically after the experimental lessons by the researcher. The graph indicates the encouraging results. It can be noticed that most of the students obtained more than 70 percent marks. These were the students who had obtained around 45% marks in the Pre-Test. This increase in their marks proved the effectiveness of the technique used by the researcher to teach idioms. However, the marks of the post-test of the students who were not taught remained the same as in the Pre-Test. The following graph shows the marks obtained by the other group who were not the part of the researcher’s experimental lessons.

Figure:4 Marks obtained in the post-test by the other group

Names of the students

It is clear from the results in the graph that there was no change in their marks if one compares these marks with marks in Pre-Test presented above in Figure: 2.

After analyzing the results, obtained from the collected data, it can be said that the SSC level students in the schools in Pakistan face many difficulties in learning idioms. Their knowledge of idioms is quite weak as it was confirmed from the results of the Pre-Test. It was also learned that the main reason for their poor knowledge of idioms was the inappropriate methodology used by the teachers. This is because after teaching with experimental methodology, designed by the researcher using various mnemonic devices, the students performance improved. This implies the need for finding alternative methodology for teaching idioms in the schools in Pakistan. As the researcher’s methodology worked and proved effective, the methodology using mnemonic devices and techniques should be tried and practiced. This would help learners not only in getting rid of traditionally used rote learning but also in learning idioms in something meaningful and long-remembering technique. Therefore, attempt needs to be done to focus on the technique which helps learners in learning, and memorizing what they have learned for long, in meaningful way. The students involvement in various meaningful activities in the class can be one such practical technique which should be incorporated by the teachers. Using various other mnemonic aids also should be encouraged.

5 Conclusions

Teaching and learning idioms is not easy both for the teachers and learners. However, knowledge of idioms is very crucial for demonstrating adequate mastery over the language like English. Idioms make language use subtle and impressive. However, SSC level learners in the schools in Pakistan do not have adequate knowledge of idioms and face many problems while using them. They use traditional technique of rote learning for mastering idioms which often results in their failure to use idioms in their spoken and written discourses. Nor is the serious attempt done by the course teachers to teach and use idioms effectively in the class. As Saleh, N. W. & Zakaria, M. (2013), aptly report that “Idioms are not taught in L2 classroom due to the fact that teachers either do not know many idioms in L2 or they do not know their origin” (P. 52). The methodology used by the teachers to teach is also not appropriate as it does not focus on the learner. In this respect, the present study aimed at finding out an alternative technique which will focus on the learner involvement and help them in mastering idioms in meaningful, interesting way. By implementing the intended designed technique, it was observed that methodology using mnemonic devices and
techniques can be effective in helping students learn idioms not only in meaningful way but also in interesting way. Therefore, alternative methodology to teach idioms to the students in Pakistani schools needs to be investigated and implemented to achieve the real aim of introducing English language to them.

About the Author:
Sidra Mahmood is currently serving as an instructor in English Department at Virtual University of Pakistan. She has done M.A English (Linguistics and Literature) from National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan. She also holds M.A. degree in TEFL from AIOU, Pakistan. She has also completed B.ED degree from Federal College of Education, Islamabad and has taught in different institutions. Her major areas of research interest include- TEFL and Teacher training and education.
Works Cited:

Appendix A
Questionnaire for Research in Teaching English Idioms
Needs Analysis of Students of 10th
Name: .................. Class: ................. Gender: ..................
Medium of instruction in which you have studied previously: ............ English/ Urdu
The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine the teaching needs of Teaching English Idioms for 10th class students. Your brief and honest response will help me in carrying out the research.
NOTE: Tick the best answer with reference to your personal requirements of English Language.
Q1 Do you face any difficulty in memorizing idioms?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 2 Do you often use any technique to learn English idioms?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 3 Can you identify the idioms in your text book?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 4 Are you familiar with idioms that are part of your course?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 5 How much information and knowledge you get about idioms from your teacher?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 6 Can you use idioms to communicate your ideas?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 7 You learn and memorize idioms by just seeing them in books or when your teacher explains those logic to you?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 8 Getting knowledge about idioms interests you or not?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q9 Do you feel any need for devices which can assist your learning of idioms and make it more interesting?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No
Q 10 Do you think that if idioms were taught with activity based teaching then you could improve your understanding and use of idioms?
Yes b) Usually c) Sometimes d) No

APPENDIX B
Pre-TestLevel: 10th class Time allotted: 40 minutes Total marks: 40
Attempt all questions. All questions are compulsory.
Q1. Read the following story and underline the idioms that are being used. Marks 10

Joey Plays Games at School

Some times when getting referrals Joey was entertained at the different types of animal idioms that can be used when referring to a sports occasion or activity. Joey realized that in all activities you don’t ever want to be charged of being a slug and that sometimes you had to bear down on your time and effort or your goose is cooked. Another way of saying this is if you don’t try your best, you will probably reduce. He realized that horseplay is excellent fun on the play area, but not a best part to do when enjoying a activity title. He also realized that if you are enjoying avoid football and you are the last gamer remaining on your group, that you are a sitting duck and that it might be a wise decision to rabbit.

Q2. Write a short paragraph of 80-100 words on the following statement in which an idiomatic expression is being used. Marks 10

“Life is not a bed of roses” Or “Actions speak louder than words”

Q3. Fill in the blanks by using appropriate idioms at the end.

These questions are _____________.
The Head Clerk is ______________ in this office.
Kashmir is ____________ between India and Pakistan.
The controversy should be ____________ once for all.
I wonder if the old man is ever going to ________________.

Idioms: All in all, Fought out, A bone of contention, Kick the bucket, In the air

Q4. Search the blanks of the following idioms and write them in their assigned column. Marks 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Mind</th>
<th>Eye</th>
<th>Hand</th>
<th>Dog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

To have one’s ______ full
Evil ______
A barking_______ never bites
Be out of one’s ______
____ of discord
From _______ to mouth ______ of one’s eye
Eye for ______
Change one’s ______
Let sleeping____ lie
____ pie order
Slip one’s ______
A bird in the ______ is worth two in the bush
Raining cats and ______
In one’s _______

APPENDIX C

Post-TestLevel: 10th Class Time: 50 minutes Marks allotted: 40

Attempt all questions. All questions are compulsory.

Q1. Read the following story and underline the idioms that are being used. Marks 10

In the Middle of a Test

In the middle of a test Alex asked his teacher Ms. W. if he could go to the washroom. She said to Alex, "I think you are just trying to buy time!" Lisett was about to say something to Ms. W. but Alex looked at her and whispered, "Clam up." Carlos and Alexis shouted out, "Ms. W. I think Alex is about to throw up!" Alex was mad at this and told them to zip their lips, but Sofia said, "Why should they zip their lips, they are trying to help you out. Alexis and Carlos said, "Ms. W. we think he is falling in love with that new girl in the next classroom, and he just wants to get another look at her." By this time Diana had to give her opinion. She said, "Ms. W. Alex is just going bananas, because he thinks this test is too much work." Miguel piped up and said, "Yaaa Alex is just a couch potato he doesn’t want to finish the test." Cierra wanted to speak, but instead of just calling out, she put up her hand. Ms. W. said, "Yes Cierra." Cierra said, "Ms. W. this isn’t nice, everyone is saying things that are making Alex upset and all these put downs are leaving a bad taste in my mouth." Thank you for putting your hand up and for supporting Alex that was very nice of you," said Ms. W. Theresa said, "Ms. W., Cierra is just fishing for a compliment.” Paola shouted out (without putting her hand up), "Why do you want to go to the washroom Alex, speak up, has a cat got your tongue?"
By this time, Ms. W. just wanted everyone to get back to the test and said, "Yes Alex, you can go to the washroom."

Q2. Write a short paragraph of 80-100 words on the following statement in which an idiomatic expression is being used. Marks 10
   “Blood is thicker than water”

Q3. Fill in the blanks by using appropriate idioms at the end.
   Qasim was _____________ when his best friend moved away.
   Sadia is feeling _________________.
   I am ____________ when I have only ten minutes to finish cleaning the store.
   I think you will be eating ____________ when I prove you wrong.
   Ayesha is a very _____________ person.

   Idioms: Feeling blue. Under the weather. Under the gun. Eating words. Down to earth

Q5. Recall and re-write at least ten keywords of idioms that you have done in the pre-test.

APPENDIX D

Lesson Plan  Level:  10th

Objectives: To enable the students to know the meaning of idioms and to comprehend given text and find out the meaning with the help of picture. To facilitate them to learn idioms through mnemonic devices. Language skills including reading, speaking, writing to be taught as additional item. To enable them to recall idioms quickly when they feel the need to use them. Memorization of idioms with the help of this technique.

To enable them to eliminate confusion between idioms and their meaning.

Audio Visual aids:
   White board, handouts and picture

Anticipated problems:
   The students may face a problem in identifying idioms correctly. The students may not be able to know the meaning of idioms correctly.

Procedure:
   Preparation Stage
   Warm up. (5 minutes) (Brain storming)
   Need analysis to know about the students’ interest and likings.
   Lesson involves warm up for some of the mnemonic devices and teacher asks the students to tell different idioms related to words ‘hand’ and ‘bark’
   Hand = from hand to mouth
   Bark = barking dog never bites
   Distributes the handouts and picture.

Presentation Stage: Teacher explains the meaning of ‘idioms’ that idioms are phrases that mean something different than what the words say. She distributes the handouts to the class and also presents story ‘classroom’ by reading it aloud. She gives stress on the idioms that are being used and explains them in the target language.

Classroom:
   Text: It was the end of a school year and the class was all nail biting over what their report cards would look like. They were all a bundle of nerves. Their teacher came in and the students asked her if they could have their report cards right away instead of at the end of the day. She said, “you are all barking up the wrong tree if you think I can give you your report cards now. The principal was very clear that they were not to be handed out until the last minute. I would like you all to quietly clean out your desks”. The students didn’t want to quietly clean out their desks! Some of the students in the class, (Aisha, Soniya, Umra, Amna and Sobia) said that they had prepared a collage of pictures as a year-end present and all the class had signed it. When they brought it out they all needed to lend a helping hand because it was so large.
   Their teacher was in tears, she was so touched. All the class were a nail biting, bundle of nerves and said they just wanted to know if they had passed and didn’t want to clean out their desks just yet. She said, “Oh, you were barking up the wrong tree asking me to give you your report cards early, but telling you if you have passed is a horse of a different color, I can lend you a helping hand and tell you that you all passed and will be going on to the next grade”. With that the class burst into a loud roar. Now their teacher was a bundle of nerves, worrying if she had done the right thing and wondering if the principal would find out. She said to the class, “You all have to lend me a helping hand now, your nail biting is over so please quietly clean out your desks before the principal finds out what I have done because I am now a poor nail biting teacher”. The students found that cleaning out their desks now was a horse of a different color.
   Practice Stage: Following activities are prepared and conducted in the class by the teacher.
   Activity 1: After reading the text teacher will show a picture to the students and ask them to relate the idioms that are used in the story. Teacher helps out reading the lines from the text and point out different images in the picture.
nail biting
bundle of nerves
barking up the wrong tree
helping hand
horse of a different color
Activity: 2: Teacher asks two students from the class that one read the story aloud and the other write the idioms on the white board that is being used in the story.
Activity: 3: In this activity teacher asks one student to draw a picture explaining that particular idiom and the other tell the idiom.
Production Stage: Activity no 1
Now teacher reads each sentence from the story where idiom has been used and calls one student to make another sentence by using the idiom keeping in mind the meaning of it.
For instance,
It was the end of a school year and the class was all nail biting over what their report cards would look like.
They were all a bundle of nerves.
She said, “You are all barking up the wrong tree if you think I can give you your report cards now.
When they brought it out they all needed to lend a helping hand because it was so large.
The students found that cleaning out their desks now was a horse of a different color.
She said, “Oh, you were barking up the wrong tree asking me to give you your report cards early, but telling you if you have passed is a horse of a different color, I can lend you a helping hand and tell you that you all passed and will be going on to the next grade”.
Homework: Make a simple story by using at least five idioms.
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>03</td>
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<td>-Mustafa Mubarak Pathan, Libya</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>A Model for Cognitive Process of Neologisms Translation</td>
<td>04-19</td>
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<td>-Seyed Mohammad Moghadas and Masoud Sharififar, Iran</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Abel’s Identity Crisis and his Journey to his Native Self in ‘House Made of Dawn’: A Critical Analysis Perspective</td>
<td>20-30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Irem Seklem, Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Diversity vs. Difference: A Critical Analysis of Hybridity and Cultural Identity Crisis in the Novels of Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Chinua Achebe</td>
<td>31-44</td>
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<td>-Alassane Abdoulaye DIA, Senegal</td>
<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Exploring the Struggle for Survival and Clashes of Generation Gap and Racial Pride in Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘Raisin in the Sun’</td>
<td>45-53</td>
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<td>-Dr. C. N. Baby Maheswari and Dr. Katayani Sangam, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Face Value: The Effect of Ethnicity and Gender on Student Expectations of English Language Instructors in the UAE</td>
<td>54-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Nausheen Pasha Zaidi, Amy Holtby, Ernest Afari and David Thomson, UAE</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Guidelines for Effective TAP (Translation for Academic Purposes) Tutorial Courses</td>
<td>69-78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Elham Yazdanmehr and Sara Shoghi, Iran</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Learn and Unlearn: Drama as an Effective Tool in Teaching English Language and Communication</td>
<td>79-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Shibani Banerjee, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reading Stories to Enhance English Grammar Intake: Correlational Analysis</td>
<td>92-105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-Yoseph Gebrehiwot Tedla and Mekwanent Tilahun Desta, Ethiopia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>School-Aged Children and Adult Language Production in an Indonesian TV Show</td>
<td>106-119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Kisno and Dr. Sanggam Siahaan, M.Hum, Indonesia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Situated Motivation: A Framework for how EFL Learners are Motivated in the Classroom</td>
<td>120-129</td>
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<td>-Truong Sa Nguyen, Vietnam</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Teaching English Idioms through Mnemonic Devices at SSC Level in Pakistan Sidra Mahmood, Pakistan</td>
<td>130-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Teaching Unplugged: Applications of Dogme ELT in India</td>
<td>141-152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Sadeqa Ghazal and Dr. Smriti Singh, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Usefulness of Translation in Foreign Language Learning: Students’ Attitudes</td>
<td>153-170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Ana B. Fernández-Guerra, Spain</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Uses of ‘bai’ as a Discourse Marker in Daily Libyan Arabic Conversations</td>
<td>171-181</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>-Khadeja Mjtaba Ahmed, USA</td>
<td></td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Trauma of War as a Paradigmatic Discourse in Doris Lessing’s Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage</td>
<td>182-189</td>
</tr>
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<td>-Dr. Deepi Dharmani and Anu Sheokand, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Trevor Griffiths’s Comedians from Marxist Perspective</td>
<td>190-197</td>
</tr>
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<td>-Jayalakshmi B., India</td>
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