

# Learning English Idioms: Etymological Elaboration versus Rote Memorization among Foreign Language Seniors

Truong Tuan Khang & Ly Quoc Thanh

## Introduction

Idioms are an essential part of English, enriching communication and signaling fluency. Learners use different strategies to understand idioms, with rote memorization and etymological elaboration being two common approaches. Rote memorization relies on repetition for recall, while etymological elaboration connects idioms to their historical and cultural roots for deeper understanding. This study compares the effectiveness of these methods in helping foreign language seniors acquire idioms. The findings aim to identify the more effective strategy, provide insights for learners and teachers, and contribute to improving idiom learning practices in language education.

## Literature Review

- Idioms and fluency: formulaic language, natural fluency, effective communication, cohesive chunks, ease of processing (Nattinger & De Carrico, 1992; Fernando, 1996; Tajali & Tehrani, 2009)
- Rote memorization: repetition, storage & recall, short-term retention, surface learning, inefficient, stressful, limits creativity (Nation, 2001; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Li, 2004; Chen & Lai, 2013; Guo, 2008)
- Etymological elaboration: origins & cultural context, deeper understanding, mental lexicon, associations, long-term retention, meaningful learning (Boers et al., 2004; Haghshenas & Hashemian, 2016; Vasiljevic, 2015; Boers, 2001)
- Comparative view: Rote memorization = surface recall vs. Etymological elaboration = deeper cognitive processing ➔ richer links, better idiom acquisition (Grant, 2004; Noroozi & Salehi, 2013)

## Research Questions

- How effective is rote memorization as a method for learning English idioms among foreign language seniors?
- How effective is etymological elaboration as a method for learning English idioms among foreign language seniors?
- Between rote memorization and etymological elaboration, which method is more effective in helping foreign language seniors learn English idioms?

## Implications

- Learners:** Use etymological elaboration to build vivid images and retain idioms longer
- Teachers:** Employ idiom origins to make lessons more engaging and effective
- Curriculum/Materials:** Integrate idiom origins into textbooks and syllabi for better outcomes
- Pedagogy:** Treat idioms as both language and culture to enrich fluency and knowledge

## Methodology

- Participants:** 100 random senior students (Intermediate English proficiency)
- Instruments:**
  - 30 idioms with two instructional methods: definitions + examples (control group) vs. definitions + etymological background + examples (experimental group)
  - 20-question post-test to assess learning of 30 idioms
- Data collection procedure:**
  - 2 weeks of instruction with different methods
  - Data analyzed quantitatively to compare results

## Findings

- Rote memorization:** Effective for short-term recall but results in superficial learning and limited retention
- Etymological elaboration:** Promotes deeper comprehension, stronger long-term retention, and overall higher achievement  
➔ Etymological elaboration is more effective than rote memorization, offering superior outcomes in both understanding and retention of idioms.

## References

Bagheri, M. S., & Fazel, I. (2010). Effects of etymological elaboration on the EFL learners' comprehension and retention of idioms. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*.

Boers, F., Demecheleer, M., & Eyckmans, J. (2004). Etymological elaboration as a strategy for learning idioms. *Language learning and language teaching Newspaper*.

Guo, S. F. (2008). Differential effects of etymological elaboration and rote memorization on idiom acquisition in college EFL learners. *The Asian EFL Journal*.

Noroozi, I., & Salehi, H. (2013). The effect of the etymological elaboration and rote memorization on learning idioms by Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*.