A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO IMPROVING PHRASEOLOGICAL COMPETENCE OF PHILOLOGY STUDENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Ro'ziboyev Kuvonchbek Ergash o'g'li
PhD researcher,
Department of English Functional Lexicon,
Uzbekistan State World Languages University,
Tashkent, Uzbekistan
E-mail: quvonchbekroziboyev91@gmail.com
Lutpillayeva Sarvinoz Toxirjon qizi
1st-year student, English Philology Faculty,
Uzbekistan State World Languages University,
Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Scientific supervisor: Kushiyeva Nodira Xabibjonovna,
DSc, Associate Professor

Abstract. *This paper presents a cognitive approach to improving the phraseological competence of philology students learning English. Phraseological competence is treated as a three-component construct (lexical, semantic and pragmatic) and is diagnosed through four PCDI (Phraseological Competence Diagnostic Indicators): semantic accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, contextual clarity and stylistic sensitivity. The proposed methodology integrates a three-stage "Self-check – Context-check – Meaning-check" metacognitive monitoring model, a cognitive-cultural map of English and Uzbek phraseological units built on five metaphor codes ("journey", "animal", "war", "body", "food"), and an AI-assisted reflective learning platform (idioms-academy.uz). A pedagogical experiment with 370 students at three universities in the 2024–2025 academic year confirmed the effectiveness of the methodology ($\chi^2 = 14.55 > 7.81$; Kef = 1.12).*

Keywords: *phraseological competence, cognitive approach, conceptual metaphor, metacognitive monitoring, PCDI, cognitive-cultural map, AI-assisted reflective learning, philology students.*

Introduction

Phraseological units are among the most culturally loaded and cognitively demanding elements of a language. Their meaning is figurative, their form is relatively stable, and their use depends on situation, register and interlocutor. For this reason, the confident and appropriate use of idioms is widely regarded as a marker of advanced

proficiency. For philology students, who will work as teachers, translators and researchers, phraseological competence is not an optional extra but a professional requirement.

The importance of this problem in Uzbekistan is reinforced by state policy in foreign language education. Presidential Resolution No. PQ-1875 of 10 December 2012 “On measures to further improve the system of learning foreign languages” and Resolution No. PQ-5117 of 19 May 2021 on bringing the popularisation of foreign language learning to a qualitatively new level set the goal of training specialists with communicative competence close to international standards. At the same time, the Common European Framework of Reference describes idiomatic control only in general terms within its vocabulary range and sociolinguistic descriptors and does not specify how phraseological competence should be developed or measured [4].

In university practice, idioms are still often taught as lists to be memorised together with their translation equivalents, and they are assessed on a simple “right/wrong” basis. As a result, students can recognise many units but struggle to explain their meaning, transfer literal Uzbek images into English, and use idioms inappropriately in context. The aim of this study is therefore to theoretically ground and experimentally validate a methodology for improving philology students’ phraseological competence in English on the basis of the cognitive approach.

Theoretical framework

The study rests on the position of cognitive linguistics that idioms are not arbitrary strings but are motivated by conceptual metaphors and image schemas. Conceptual metaphor theory [9; 7] and research on figurative thought [6] show that expressions such as *to be at a crossroads* or *to lose one’s head* are grounded in everyday experience of movement and the human body. Experimental studies by F. Boers and his colleagues demonstrated that raising learners’ awareness of the source domain behind an idiom improves both its comprehension and its retention [1; 2].

The study also draws on the Russian school of phraseology. A. V. Kunin’s structural-semantic approach describes the stability and variability of English phraseological units [8], while V. N. Teliya’s linguocultural approach highlights the cultural connotation that a unit carries for native speakers [10]. Together they explain why the same image may be universal in one case and culture-specific in another.

Finally, the study relies on the concept of metacognition, understood as monitoring and regulating one’s own cognitive processes [5]. T. C. Cooper found that guessing from context is the strategy L2 learners use most often when they meet an unfamiliar idiom [3]. This strategy, however, is effective only when it is applied consciously and checked against the context, which justifies a dedicated monitoring model.

On this basis, phraseological competence is defined as the ability to recognise, interpret and appropriately use phraseological units in communication, taking into account their figurative meaning, cultural connotation and situational constraints. It includes three components:

1. **Lexical** – knowledge of the form, composition, stability and variants of phraseological units.
2. **Semantic** – understanding of figurative meaning and of the image or metaphor that motivates it.
3. **Pragmatic** – the choice of a unit that fits the situation, register and communicative intention.

The cognitive approach is treated as cognitive-integrative: it does not replace communicative and contextual teaching but organises them around meaning-making, so that idioms are learned through understanding rather than rote memorisation.

Methodology

The methodology consists of four interrelated elements, each corresponding to one scientific novelty of the research.

1. The PCDI diagnostic model. Unlike traditional "right/wrong" assessment, the model measures phraseological competence through the unity of four indicators (Table 1). Each indicator is scored separately, which shows not only whether a student knows an idiom but also which aspect of its use needs further work.

Table 1

Phraseological Competence Diagnostic Indicators (PCDI)

Indicator	What is assessed
Semantic accuracy	Correct interpretation of the figurative meaning of the unit
Pragmatic appropriateness	Use of the unit in a suitable situation and with a suitable communicative intention
Contextual clarity	Ability to integrate the unit into a coherent context so that its meaning is clear to the listener or reader
Stylistic sensitivity	Awareness of the register, connotation and stylistic colouring of the unit

2. The "Self-check – Context-check – Meaning-check" model. This three-stage metacognitive monitoring model guides the learner when meeting or using an idiom. At the *Self-check* stage, the student recognises that the expression is a phraseological unit and asks what he or she already knows about it. At the *Context-check* stage, the student analyses the situation of use: who is speaking, to whom, in what register and with what purpose. At the *Meaning-check* stage, the student derives the figurative meaning from the context and the underlying image and verifies it.

Unlike general metacognitive monitoring, the model is focused specifically on phraseological units.

3. The cognitive-cultural map. English and Uzbek phraseological units are systematised according to five metaphor codes – "journey", "animal", "war", "body" and "food" – and three zones of correspondence. In the *universal* zone, the image and meaning coincide (*a heart of stone – tosh yurak*). In the *partially equivalent* zone, the meaning coincides but the image differs (*to kill two birds with one stone – bir o'q bilan ikki quyonni urmoq*). In the *culture-specific* zone, the image has no counterpart and the meaning must be rendered differently (*a piece of cake – suv ichgandek oson*). The map helps students predict where literal transfer from Uzbek is safe and where it leads to errors.

4. AI-assisted reflective learning. The platform idioms-academy.uz (state registration certificate DGU No. 67957) supports independent work through flashcards, quizzes, matching games, progress statistics and an AI tutor. Instead of simply correcting a mistake, the AI tutor prompts the student to go through the Self-check, Context-check and Meaning-check stages, which develops autonomous reflection.

These elements are implemented through a five-stage didactic mechanism: semantic comprehension → cognitive analysis → mental modelling → interactive practice → reflective assessment. Classroom work is organised as a system of six exercise types: diagnostic-motivational, cognitive-semantic, linguocultural-comparative, contextual-pragmatic, creative-communicative and reflective-evaluative. Teaching materials are presented in the study guide "Improving Speaking by English Idioms".

Experimental results

The effectiveness of the methodology was tested in a pedagogical experiment conducted in the 2024–2025 academic year at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Gulistan State University and the Jizzakh branch of the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek. A total of 370 philology students took part: 187 in the experimental group and 183 in the control group. The experimental group was taught according to the proposed methodology, while the control group followed the traditional programme.

Students' phraseological competence was assessed with PCDI-based tasks, and the results were distributed across four levels: excellent, good, satisfactory and low. After the formative stage, the mean score of the experimental group (3.80) exceeded that of the control group (3.39).

The statistical significance of the difference was verified with Pearson's chi-square test. The empirical value $\chi^2 = 14.55$ exceeded the critical value of 7.81 ($df = 3$,

α = 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis of no difference between the groups was rejected, and the advantage of the experimental group cannot be attributed to chance. The efficiency coefficient, calculated as the ratio of the experimental group's mean score to that of the control group, was Kef = 1.12 (> 1), which confirms the positive effect of the methodology.

The research results have also been put into practice. The PCDI conclusions were used in an Erasmus+ KA107 mobility project at Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature; the Self-check – Context-check – Meaning-check model was integrated into the English Access Microscholarship Program at Karshi State University; the cognitive-cultural map underlies the study guide "Improving Speaking by English Idioms"; and the AI-assisted reflective learning system was realised in the officially registered idioms-academy.uz platform.

Conclusion

The study leads to the following conclusions:

1. Phraseological competence of philology students is a three-component construct (lexical, semantic, pragmatic) that can be reliably diagnosed through the four PCDI indicators rather than a single "right/wrong" score.
2. Teaching idioms through their underlying metaphors and images, combined with conscious monitoring by the "Self-check – Context-check – Meaning-check" model, allows students to interpret unfamiliar units instead of merely memorising them.
3. The cognitive-cultural map based on five metaphor codes and three zones of correspondence reduces negative transfer from Uzbek and develops intercultural awareness.
4. AI-assisted reflective learning extends classroom work into independent practice and makes reflection a regular habit.

The experimental data ($\chi^2 = 14.55 > 7.81$; Kef = 1.12) confirm that the integrated methodology is effective. Further research may focus on a delayed post-test to measure long-term retention, a separate analysis of each PCDI indicator, and the wider use of translation tasks within the semantic component of phraseological competence.

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