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Attitude of Muslim Students towards English Idioms and Proverbs

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the attitude of Muslim students towards the use of certain English idioms and proverbs. Thirty Muslim students were asked to express their reactions and feelings towards two categories of English idioms and proverbs: the first category included idioms and proverbs containing the names of animals that are prohibited in Islam, and the second category contained culturally inappropriate idioms and proverbs. The results of data analysis revealed that idioms and proverbs belonging to the first group were found by the majority of the participants to be rather offensive, while culturally inappropriate idioms and proverbs were less offensive. This indicates that religion is the main influential factor in the reaction of Muslim students towards English idioms. Non-Muslim English teachers may find the results of this study useful in gaining awareness about the attitudes of Muslim students towards the use of religiously and culturally-loaded idioms and proverbs and taking precautions in using such idioms in the classroom environment.

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1. Introduction

Language and culture go hand in hand and contribute to the formation of our worldview. In other words, our cultural heritage and ideology are reflected in the language we speak. In fact, “without language and other symbolic systems, the habits, beliefs, institutions, and monuments that we call culture would be just observable realities, not cultural phenomena” (Kramersch, 2013, p. 62). In the same vein, Sharifian (2005) asserts that “various [linguistic] units—from morphemes to the structure of discourse—often instantiate conceptualizations that are ensconced in cultural systems and worldviews” (p. 339). Unlike language, which is generally claimed to be an innate property of man (Chomsky, 2004), culture is not a genetic endowment; rather, it is acquired through living in a community and interacting with other members of the society. However, language is the manifestation of culture. As Ren and Yu (2013) assert, “language reflects culture, provides access to culture, and in many aspects consists of a model of culture” (p. 78). Culture, on the other hand, comprises a society’s shared values, religious beliefs, customs, lifestyle, and everyday behavior. Within a speech community, culture is adopted by its members and passed down from generation to generation. Cultural norms are, thus, defined as expectations of behavior in a particular society, i.e., what is considered appropriate or inappropriate by members of a community. Therefore, some cultural features might cause misunderstandings and even be considered offensive when people of two different cultures meet, such as using the index finger for calling someone over in countries like the Philippines.

Related to the issues of language and culture are the notions of religion and idioms, which are the main focus of the present study. Religion is, indeed, an indispensable and important aspect of culture. Idioms and proverbs also reflect the cultural values of a community, and play a significant role in teaching English to speakers of other languages. It is perhaps safe to assume that in the majority of cases idioms are culture-specific to the extent that some idioms may not make any sense to members of other cultures and may cause misunderstanding and confusion. As an example, in an informal experiment, during his stay in the US and UK,

the first author used some Persian idiomatic expressions in communication with American and British acquaintances to see if they could figure out the meaning of the idioms. This resulted only in confusion as the idioms were specific to Persian culture with which those individuals were not familiar. The notion of culture-specificity of idioms also causes immense difficulty in translation, as was found by Rakhieh, Al-Saidat, Alshammari, and Rabab’ah (2014) in their study on translation of English color idioms by Jordanian Arabic EFL learners. Furthermore, some idioms and proverbs which are quite appropriate in a given culture may be found offensive by members of another culture, as the data of the present study demonstrate.

Many studies have been conducted on English idioms and their significant role in second/foreign language teaching and learning (see, for example, Cakir, 2011; Chuang, 2013; Cooper, 1999; Elkilic, 2008; Grant, 2007; Hamblin & Gibbs, 1999; Li, 2010). However, the correlation between the two variables of religion and idioms seems to have escaped the attention of researchers in the field. In fact, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no empirical study has yet been conducted on appropriateness of some idioms in certain religions, in particular Islam, especially in the context of English as a foreign language. Therefore, to fill this niche the present researchers decided to investigate the reaction and attitudes of Muslim university students towards the use of certain English idioms and proverbs as used in the classroom situation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Teaching English in Multicultural Settings

In the era of globalization, with English playing a major role in the world arena as the number one Lingua Franca, English classrooms in many parts of the globe can be considered as a microenvironment with students coming from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This makes the job of English teachers in such multicultural classrooms challenging as they need to develop tolerance towards and familiarity with different cultures and religions. In fact, such a need has been acknowledged since the 90s. For example, referring to the case of the United States of America as a country of

diversity, Vandrik (1996) proposed the use of multicultural literature and textbooks claiming that this will help teachers and students improve their understanding of other cultures. Similarly, for native English teachers who have the desire to travel abroad and teach in other countries, it is essential to explore the cultural norms of their students. In other words, teachers need to improve their cultural awareness of the country they choose to teach in by getting insights into their cultural values and customs, and develop an understanding of sensitive issues, such as religion (Tomalin, 2008). According to Kramsch (1993), having multicultural classes encourages teachers to read more and gain better knowledge about different cultures while teaching English. Thus, teachers should be given awareness about certain cultural and religious restrictions so that they will not be interpreted as being impolite or offensive (Fang, 2011). Traditionally, many countries, particularly the Arab world, prefer to recruit native English teachers for their fluency and native accent. In such cases, “culture becomes an issue” since “native speakers don’t necessarily know the home culture of their students nor the intellectual tradition of their school system” (Kramsch, 2013, p. 58). Religion, in particular, deserves foreign teachers’ attention as it is an integrated part of culture. In this regard, Saville-Troike (1978) argues that a teacher should have knowledge about students’ religion since this plays a great role in their culture. This is particularly true about the faith of Muslims because religion is the main element of the Islamic culture. As Xinton (2002) asserts “one of the features of the Islamic culture is that its religion is not only the source of the whole cultural system, but also its quintessence and core” (p. 149); hence further justification for the present study.

Considering the population of Muslims in the world (over one billion) covering a vast area, especially in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, it is most likely for EFL/ESL teachers to end up teaching in an Islamic country or have Muslim students in their multicultural classes elsewhere. Without adequate appreciation for religious values and restrictions, certain verbal or non-verbal behaviors of the teacher may be deemed offensive to some students. For instance, a teacher’s use of the OK gesture by making a circle with his thumb and index finger, as it is customary in the Western world,

to denote approval and/or praise of a student’s performance can be misconstrued by the latter in an Arab country, where this hand gesture is not appropriate. Therefore, EFL teachers should study the norms of the society and factors that play a role in forming them in order to avoid conflict and misunderstanding. As Kojima (2012) puts it, “knowing students’ culture is essential for an English language teacher to understand English learners deeply” (p. 1). Accordingly, the current study concerns English teachers who intend to teach in a Muslim country or have Muslim students in their multicultural classrooms in their home country.

2.2. Proverbs and Idioms

Proverbs are wise and popular sayings that embody a general truth and can be considered a source of wisdom and a moral lesson in the form of a short phrase. In the word of Varyani (2011), “proverbs are the gems of wisdom” (p. 1). Proverbs and idioms play an important role in manifesting a nation’s culture and customs. In other words, they can be considered as social mirrors that reflect culture and characteristics of a group of people. For example, the Arabic proverb *blood never turns into water* reflects the strong family ties in the Arabic culture that value the sense of belonging to family by respecting the elders and caring about young family members (Brosh, 2013).

Based on common sense and a community’s shared experience, proverbs add flavor to the idea or truth we want to express. As an example, consider the message/advice the proverb *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* conveys to a colleague who wants to risk his current job for the sake of a better one about which s/he is not certain. Therefore, “proverbs not only enhance linguistic knowledge, but also contribute to the better understanding of the cultural background of the people who speak that language” (Syzydkov, 2014, p. 319). Perhaps one of the first proverbs EFL students learn is “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” quoted from Benjamin Franklin. Phrases like this not only enrich the student’s vocabulary knowledge, but also embodies a great lesson in his/her life.

An *idiom* is a phrase whose meaning is established through usage and not by the literal meaning of the words that constitute the idiom. According to O’Dell and McCarthy (2010),

“idioms are fixed combinations of words whose meaning is often difficult to guess from the meaning of each individual word” (p. 6). Similar definitions have been provided by Makkai (1972) and Richards and Schmidt (2002). Thus, paying attention to the words contained in an idiom will be a source of misunderstanding. Therefore, second language learners have to learn the meaning of idioms as a whole and pay attention to their contextual use. For instance, the idiom *he spilled the beans* does not have anything to do with *spilling the beans on the floor*, rather it refers to *revealing a secret*. The fact that the meaning of idioms does not consist of the meaning of individual words that constitute the idioms makes them perhaps the most difficult aspect of second language learning. The results of a study conducted by Rizq (2015) showed that “70% of the participants agreed that idioms are difficult for ESL learners” (p. 2). English idioms may become even more difficult for EFL learners when their equivalents do not exist in the learners’ mother tongue due to cultural or religious reasons.

The authenticity of idioms and proverbs in the speech of native speakers gives them a special position in English language teaching. Knowing such aspects in the language improves a student’s communicative ability and facilitates her or his understanding of the point that the speaker wishes to convey by using a proverb. They are particularly useful in developing fluency in the second language (Lewis, 1997).

Idiomatic expressions and proverbs, which are the main theme of the present study, are an integrated part of the English language and culture. As Ren and Yu (2013) state, “the English language is particularly noted for its wealth of idioms—those ways of expressions peculiar to the dialect of a language that frequently disobey logical and grammatical rules” (p. 78). Thus, it is essential for second language learners to develop a sound understanding of English idioms. Proverbs and idioms may be used by the teacher to teach some vocabulary items more effectively or illustrate certain points.

Sources of proverbs and idioms vary from references to holy books to that of modern and classic literary works by famous writers, such

as Shakespeare (for a comprehensive list of idioms and proverb and their origins see Martin, 2019). Although some proverbs and idioms may have similar meaning in other languages, most of them are culture-specific and may appear odd and inappropriate to members of other cultures. In particular, many English proverbs and idioms are potentially offensive to Muslims, in varying degrees. These include proverbs and idioms associated with the name of certain animals like *dogs* and *pigs*, *alcoholic beverages*, and certain *culturally inappropriate expressions*, such as *pissing in the wind*. Lack of awareness of such religious restrictions on the part of the non-Muslim teacher may lead to the use of certain idioms in the classroom situation that may be found inappropriate or offensive by his/her Muslim students. This may cause social blunder and conflict for the teacher, to say the least. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the reaction and attitude of Muslim students towards such idioms and proverbs. More specifically, the study seeks to find answer to the research question: *What is the attitude of Muslim students towards religiously and culturally-loaded English idioms and proverbs?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Setting

Thirty male and female students from a private university in North Cyprus participated in this study on a voluntary basis. Their length of stay in North Cyprus varied from one to three years. They were selected based on convenient sampling. All of the participants were Muslim students majoring in different fields of study. They came from 11 Muslim countries namely Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Pakistan, Libya, Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. However, despite this demographic diversity, the participants shared the same general Islamic culture, which is the main variable in this study. That is to say, they have certain cultural norms taken from Islam which may be regarded as having influenced their attitudes and worldview. As Inglehart (2007) claims, “the publics of Islamic countries have distinctive and relatively similar basic values” (p. 25). As to the interviewees’ age, with the exception of one participant (Interviewee No. 4) who was 36

years old, the rest of them were nearly within the same age range (18 to 24).

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the necessary data for this study. The interview questions consisted of five examples of potentially inappropriate and/or offensive English idioms and proverbs, which were culled from two reliable collections of idioms and proverbs (Siefiring, 2004; Speake, 2008). The participants were asked to express their feelings and attitudes towards these English idioms and proverbs upon hearing them.

In the majority of cases, the prospective participants were approached in the university cafeteria during the lunch break. If they agreed to participate in the study, a quiet place, mostly a vacant classroom, was chosen for the interview during their free and relaxed time.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and were assured that their identity will remain confidential and their responses will be used for research purposes only. They were asked to read and sign the consent form before the interview started; however, the interview questions were not shown to them as the purpose of the study was to investigate their reactions to the idioms upon hearing them. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without giving any reason. However, the participants showed interest in the project and willingly participated in the interviews. The data for this study were collected under the direct supervision and observation of the first author. In fact, the first few interviews were conducted by the first author as a sample, with the second author being present in order to follow the guidelines for collecting the rest of the data.

3.3. Data Analysis

After the data were collected, they were first listened to carefully and then transcribed. Since the two main themes namely religiously-loaded and culturally inappropriate idioms were predetermined deductive approach was used for the analysis of interview data. Although the interviewees' responses were straightforward and unambiguous they were double checked by the first author for accuracy of interpretation in

order to add to the reliability of the data analysis. Since the participants' responses to the interview questions were similar, the researchers felt they have reached the saturation level and further data would not be required in order to be able to draw certain conclusions.

4. Results

As mentioned earlier, the interviews aimed at eliciting the participants' attitudes and reactions towards two categories of idioms and proverbs. The first category (category A) was religiously loaded as it contained idioms and proverbs including the names of animals that are prohibited in Islam, and the second category (category B) included idioms and proverbs that were culturally inappropriate. In order to facilitate the presentation of the results, first the two categories of idioms and proverbs are listed below. Then a sample of interviewees' responses, which are related to the idioms numerically, is provided. It needs to be pointed out that in order to maintain the originality of the interviewees' responses erroneous constructions have not been grammaticalized; however, for the sake of clarity sometimes missing words are provided by the writers in square brackets. Moreover, when the interviewees' responses were not clear the interviewer would ask them further questions to clarify the ambiguity. Non-verbal reactions of the interviewees as well as further comments appear under the *interviewer's reflections*.

List of idioms and proverbs:

Category A. How would you feel if your English teacher used idioms or proverbs containing the name of dogs and pigs, such as the following?

1. Didn't you pay the technician to fix your laptop? So why are you fixing it yourself?
Don't keep a dog and bark yourself.
2. It seems you have been working very hard;
you sweat like a pig.
3. *You can't teach* your father at the age of 79 to use a computer. **You can't teach an old dog new tricks,** you know.

Category B. How would you feel if you heard expressions like the following being used by your English teacher in the classroom situation?

1. Don't waste your time, he won't listen to you; **you are just pissing in the wind**.

2. If you study hard **you will give the finger to anyone** who tells you that you won't pass the exam. (*Giving someone the (middle) finger* means making an obscene gesture with the middle finger raised as a sign of offense).

For ease of presentation, questions 1 and 2 of Category B of idioms and proverbs are changed to 4 and 5, respectively.

4.1. A Sample of Interviews

Interviewee No. 1 (Female, age 18, from Turkey)

1. I'd feel upset and bad because in our culture dog is not used as [it is used] in their culture; it's different. We use other words than [instead of] dog in our culture; that's why it's a bit unusual for me, but I know their culture, that's why it's OK [in their culture]. In Turkey it's not OK [to use dogs], they [people] will get offended and angry.
2. Pig is a little bit... it's not a good animal in Islam. That's why I would feel bad and offended.
3. I would feel bad and sad. That's not a good definition.

Interviewer: You mean it's not appropriate to compare one's father with an animal?

Interviewee: Yes, I'd get upset.

4. I think it's not as bad as '*You can't teach an old dog a trick*' that's why I don't feel that bad as the other examples.
5. Yes, eh it's...How'd I say that—it's in a society it's a little inappropriate. I'd feel a bit bad but not angry.

Interviewer's reflection: When asked which of the two categories of idioms she found more offensive, her reply was Category B.

Interviewee No. 2 (Male, age 21, from Pakistan)

1. It's very offensive. I come from a Muslim background and I am from Pakistan. In my culture we don't use these types of idioms and proverbs, even when our teachers want to tell that we are

doing something wrong they won't use such words.

2. (Surprised) It's again very offensive and our culture doesn't allow it. Pigs in Islam are Haram [prohibited] and [the] teacher shouldn't say [i.e., use these idioms in class] because we take him as an idol.
3. Ok! Now that's about father, it's not possible. Our families and parents in my culture are very dear to us. If someone called a father with something [like that] in Pakistan, they will fight for this. So if my teacher said that I will be very angry and want to fight him, but he is still my teacher, I can't do this.
4. I think it's a foolish language [expression] and he shouldn't be using this as a teacher, I am here to learn from him not to get abused.
5. That's such a demotivation, because I want to study hard but not to do what he is saying. As a student, I don't need such language to motivate me.

Interviewer's Reflection: This participant was very upset and showed rather negative attitudes towards all of the idioms in question.

Interviewee No. 3 (Female, age 22, from Jordan)

1. I have studied this proverb at the secondary school, but I still believe that it shouldn't be used with us as adults.
2. I know that the word pig is rude, but we should understand the point the teacher wants by saying this proverb.
3. I know the meaning behind this proverb but I will not accept it as it compares my father to a dog.
4. We are using a similar proverb in my country which is "pissing on the wall" which I think is normal for me.
5. I think it would be a rude sentence to be used by a teacher.

Interviewer's Reflection: This student was familiar with these idioms. Therefore, she understood that the teacher introduced them in class with the intention of familiarizing students with authentic English. However, when it came to comparing her father to a dog in No. 3, she became upset and did not approve of the use of this expression by her teacher in class. Similarly, she found No. 5 inappropriate to be used by an English teacher. This is perhaps

related to gender as in the Islamic and Middle-Eastern culture showing a finger to a women is extremely rude and unlikely to happen.

Interviewee No. 4 (Male, age 36, from Iran)

1. It is very offensive especially in my country; I think we cannot relate animals to humans.
2. I think that using the (F) word would be much better than using names of animals like pigs.
3. As I mentioned before teachers should avoid comparing people to animals.
4. This one is very bad to be used, this one is definitely NO! NO! in Iran
5. This one sounds less offensive because it is not directed to the person; while I think it is not welcome but also not as bad as the fourth one.

Interviewer's Reflection: This participant was an English language teacher in Iran, hence he was familiar with such idioms and proverbs and did not show harsh reactions towards them. However, he found it inappropriate for a native English teacher to use such idioms in a classroom situation in Iran.

Interviewee No. 5 (Male, age 20, from the United Arab Emirates)

1. It offends me because he is comparing me to an animal.
2. Pigs are the dirtiest animals and they are forbidden in our religion, so he cannot compare me to them.
3. Humans don't stop learning even at the age of 100 and it's very offensive to compare them with dogs.
4. It is not very offensive I think, he is just using a metaphor.
5. Same like the fourth.

Interviewee No. 6 (Male, age 20, from Libya)

1. Firstly, he can't compare me to a dog, it's not nice and respectful at all because he is an open minded doctor [instructor].
2. He can't even compare me to a pig, we Muslims don't eat it and don't even love it because it eats s**t.
3. You can't speak about my dad in anyway because it's none of your business and he is my dad and number one in my life. So if he speaks about my dad he speaks

about me and that means that I will kill him.

With regard to idioms 4 and 5, the interviewee stated that the teacher should be respectful and not use such words in the classroom.

Interviewer's reflection: This interviewee was extremely angry to the extent that he wanted to withdraw in the middle of the interview, but then he changed his mind, perhaps out of curiosity to listen to the rest of the idioms.

Interviewee No. 7 (Male, age 22, from Egypt)

In reaction to the first three idioms, this interviewee said stated all of these idioms are too offensive and that he would write a report to the dean of the faculty about that English teacher who uses such idioms complaining about him. He added, "Maybe for him [the teacher] it's ok, but he should know that he is teaching Arabs and Muslims, so he must take care of his words before saying them".

With reference to idioms 4 and 5, he stated that these idioms are too rude to be used by a teacher and he should be warned against using them.

Interviewee No. 8 (Male, age 21, from Saudi Arabia)

1. I don't see it very offensive, but it depends on who is the speaker and to whom he is saying it. For example, we can't say it to people older than us.
2. This one is a bit offensive as in our culture and traditions pigs are animals prohibited to be eaten, so comparing a person to a pig could be very offensive to him.
3. This one is extremely offensive because he will be talking about my dad.
4. This is normal even if it was used by my teacher. Because it doesn't offend anyone.
5. I think a teacher shouldn't say something like this to me.

Interviewee No. 9 (Male, age 24, from Palestine)

With reference to idioms 1, 2, and 3, this interviewee said "I will not accept any of those; they are insulting to me, my family, and my culture. I think this [the third one] is the most insulting, our fathers, mothers, and all family

members are holy and no one can talk about them in a bad way”.

As to idioms 4 and 5, the interviewee stated: “I think also it’s not acceptable because it’s impolite and you should always be polite saying your words especially when you are a teacher, you are like an idol to the students you teach. So, it won’t be acceptable anyway”.

Interviewer’s Reflection: This student got angry upon listening to these idioms and proverbs. He considered the first category as being offensive to Muslim students, and found the second category culturally inappropriate.

Interviewee No. 10 (Female, age 18, from Jordan)

1. It’s very rude; he shouldn’t compare me with a dog.
2. It’s known worldwide, but it’s also offensive because we Muslims have something against pigs and stuff like that.
3. This one is really offensive because he is offending my father and that’s really bad.
4. This one is offensive because of the use of words of the toilet like pissing, so it’s not nice.
5. This is really offending (blushing) saying such words in front of me.

Interviewer’s Reflection: This interviewee, who was a shy person, was upset about the first category of idioms, and blushed when she heard the second category of idioms as she found them culturally inappropriate.

Interviewee No. 11 (Female, age 18, from Turkey)

1. I’d feel upset and bad because in our culture dog is not used as in their culture; it’s different. We use other words than dog in our culture; that’s why it’s a bit unusual for me, but I know their culture, that’s why it’s OK [in their culture]. In Turkey it’s not OK [to use dogs], they [people] will get offended and angry.
2. Pig is a little bit... it’s not a good animal in Islam. That’s why I would feel bad and offended.
3. I would feel bad and sad. That’s not a good definition.

Interviewer: You mean it’s not a good way to refer to one’s father?

Interviewee: Yes, I’d get upset.

4. I think it’s not as bad as ‘You can’t teach an old dog a trick’ that’s why I don’t feel that bad as the other examples.

5. Yes, eh it’s...How’d I say that—it’s in a society it’s a little inappropriate. I’d feel a bit bad but not angry.

Interviewer: How would you compare the two sets of idioms?

Interviewee: I think the first ones are more offensive than the other.

Interviewee No. 12 (Male, age 20, from Lebanon)

1. It’s not normal for me if somebody mentions me as a dog because I am a human being.
2. Pigs are forbidden for me and I don’t like anyone to say that to me.
3. Nobody can compare my father to a dog because he is my father and I will be angry at the teacher.
4. He should be polite with me because he is a teacher and old enough to know how to choose his words.
5. I will feel normal and I will love it because I study hard so that guys deserve this.

As can be seen, the majority of the interviewees found the first group of idiomatic expressions, which contain the name of animals such as dogs and pigs, offensive to their religion and the Islamic culture. However, the interviewees’ reaction towards the use of the second category of idioms was, in general, milder as such expressions are not religiously loaded. Nevertheless, most of them found these idioms culturally inappropriate and stated that English teachers should avoid using them in the classroom situation. In particular, female participants were very uncomfortable and felt embarrassed when they heard the expressions *pissing in the wind* and *showing the finger to someone*. The reason for this seems to be the fact that in the Islamic and Middle-Eastern culture such expressions are considered extremely impolite, especially when they are used in the presence of a woman. It is also worth mentioning that most interviewees put emphasis on the fact that a teacher is a role model and an idol for his students; therefore,

s/he is expected to use polite language in the classroom.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the reaction of Muslim students towards the use of idioms and proverbs containing the name of certain animals. In general, calling a person an animal would be regarded offensive and provocative. As Haslam (2017) asserts, “to call someone an animal is to demote them to a lower rung of existence, a more primitive state of being where they lack human virtues” (p. 3). However, it is maintained here that in terms of semantics a distinction should be made between *calling someone an animal* and *comparing a person with an animal*. The former seems to be always offensive, even in cultures where there is love and respect for animals, e.g., the Western culture, whereas the latter could have positive or negative semantic load, depending on the type of animal name used. For example, in most languages and cultures brave people are compared to lions to express praise and compliment. In Persian, even a courageous woman is compared to a lion (and not a lioness!) and the attribute *shirzæn* ‘lion woman’ has traditionally been used in Iran. Similarly, in academia a meticulous and perceptive editor may be compared to an eagle, as in ‘He is an eagle-eyed editor’. Such metaphors have always positive load. On the other hand, some comparisons may convey negative meaning. For instance, comparing a person to a chicken has the connotation of cowardliness.

In the case of comparing humans to animals (not calling them animal), there are cultural and religious differences. For example, in English one can say to one’s friend “You are as sick as a dog, let me take you to the hospital”, something which is unimaginable in an Islamic country, as the findings of the present study demonstrated.

Along the same line, the results revealed that the idiomatic expression *You can’t teach an old dog new tricks* was found the most offensive one by almost all participants. The reason for this seems to be twofold: (a) dogs are considered impure in Islam and Muslims are not allowed to touch them, and (b) there is a great deal of respect and love for parents and elder relatives. Thus, comparing a person’s

father to a dog is a great insult, which normally leads to hostile reaction and confrontation. However, it should be mentioned that a couple of participants (# 4 and 5) were annoyed of being compared to animals in general, whether those animals were prohibited in their religion or not.

Item No. 2 (*you sweat like a pig*) was also considered offensive by most participants since this expression contains the word pig, which like dog, is prohibited in Islam and its meat (pork) cannot be served in Islamic countries. Therefore, using the name of this animal to refer to Muslims may provoke hostility hence it should be avoided. This finding is in line with Gammell’s (2008) assertion that, while comparing a human being to a dog may not be polite in many cultures, it is more stinging among Muslims and Arabs, who traditionally consider dogs unclean. However, it should be mentioned in passing that in some Muslim countries, such as Iran, some middle class families keep dogs at home as pet. In spite of this, people normally do not wish to be named or compared with animals, particularly dogs. For example, personal observation shows that in cases of conflicts, such as traffic confrontation, people use swear words including ‘dog’ to provoke their adversaries.

With regard to pigs, it needs to be pointed out that Islam is not the only religion that dislikes pigs. This animal is also prohibited in other religions such as Judaism, as stated in Chapter 11 of the book Leviticus, in God’s speeches to Moses: “... and the swine, ... their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch. They *are* unclean to you.” Therefore, the use of idioms and proverbs which liken human beings to these animals in such religions might be extremely offensive, as seen in the responses of the participants in the present study.

Apart from religion, some cultures may find certain English idioms and proverbs offensive. For instance, Lekešová (2006) conducted a study in which he explored the attitudes of Czech people towards certain English idioms. Some of these idioms were classified by the participants as taboo, some impolite, and others inappropriate. Similar to Lekešová (2006) findings, the results of the present study also showed that participants found some idioms culturally inappropriate and impolite. Female

participants, in particular, showed rather negative reactions to culturally inappropriate idioms and proverbs, such as *pissing in the wind* and *giving someone the (middle) finger*.

Some English idioms and proverbs have negative connotations and pejorative meanings even in the native-speaking context. For example, Sterbenz (2013) asserts that there are many idioms and phrases Americans use which represent dark offensive meanings. Therefore, EFL teachers should take the cultural and religious sensitivity of such idioms into consideration in order to avoid conflicts with their students. In fact, a dilemma seems to exist with respect to the teaching of English idioms and proverbs. On the one hand, idioms and proverbs are an integrated part of the English language, and EFL students need to be familiar with idiomatic expressions and use them in appropriate contexts. Idiomaticity is, indeed, a sign of fluency in English; hence the significance of teaching and learning idioms and proverbs. As Lewis (1997) argues, “fluency is achievable in case the acquisition of a substantial store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items [such as idioms and proverbs] is accomplished” (p. 15). On the other hand, as the results of the present study show, some idioms may arouse cultural and religious sensitivity and teaching them in certain classroom situations may provoke negative reactions, if not hostility, on the part of the students. A way out of this dilemma seems to be to introduce such idioms indirectly in texts and tell students to learn them for mainly receptive purposes. This way, the students will not feel embarrassed or offended since such taboo expressions and idioms are not used in the classroom situation. As Kecskes (2015) asserts “no act is inherently impolite, that such a condition depends on the context or speech situation that affects interpretation” (p. 43). Therefore, the EFL teacher should consider the teaching-learning situation as well as the learners’ cultural background to avoid problems. The first author’s experience shows that after establishing rapport with students and gaining their friendship and trust a teacher may introduce even target language items that may appear culturally inappropriate. In fact, if handled adequately, idioms and proverbs can be a good source of discussion in multicultural classes as students can be asked to give examples of the uses and restrictions of similar

idioms in their native language. In other words, “norms and values associated with the target language [as well as the native language of the learners] may be areas of great interest to the learners” (Hinkel, 2013, p. 110), and may engender lively communicative exchanges among students.

In the era of globalization, a typical classroom situation is multicultural. As Piasecka, (2011) notes, “to achieve successful intercultural communication, people have to be sensitive both to similarities and differences between cultures in contact” (p. 31). Hence the job of an English teacher is challenging as s/he needs to be familiar with students’ cultural background in order to be successful in his career. When EFL students are not familiar with the meaning and use of certain English idioms and proverbs they normally concentrate on the meaning of individual words that make up the idioms and if some of those words are inappropriate in the learners’ native culture they may be humiliated or even offended. Therefore, care should be taken when teaching to speakers of other languages and cultures to clarify ambiguities in order not to hurt the feelings of students through violating their cultural or religious norms and values. As Nunan (1991) asserts, the emotional factors during the process of language teaching are as important as the linguistic and the psychological ones. Thus, EFL teachers should make necessary adjustments in their instruction so that learners would feel valued and respected (Ziegahn, 2001). Also Honna (2000, cited in Yoshikawa, 2008) argues that “the difficulty in interpretation caused by idiomatic expressions could be solved by the introduction of language and cultural awareness and metaphorical training into school curriculums” (p. 221).

As to the limitations of this research, the participants were university students who were studying in a multilingual/multicultural setting. Consequently, they had the opportunity to mingle with non-Muslim students from different countries in the world. This may have affected their attitude and worldview. For more realistic results, this research may be replicated in certain Islamic countries. This study was restricted to Muslim students. Future studies may compare the attitudes of students with different religious and cultural background towards English idioms and proverbs. Finally, in this research qualitative design was used.

Future studies may employ mixed-methods designs.

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