Pedagogical Potential of Online Dictionaries in Metaphor and Idiom Language Instruction

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Abstract—Metaphors are an intrinsic part of thought and language that allow us to construe a cognitive domain in terms of another domain. Metaphors are especially relevant to the study of idioms, inasmuch as idioms are commonly underlain by metaphorical patterns of conceptualization. As figurativeness is a common phenomenon in everyday language, tackling metaphors and idioms effectively in the EFL classroom can enhance students' metaphoric competence and, consequently, increase their level of linguistic proficiency. This article explores the potential of online dictionaries and the multimodal affordances they bring to the teaching of metaphor and idiom in the language classroom. Dictionary skill descriptors are used to relate task types with idiom and metaphor content in online dictionaries and how it may be used to promote students' learning of both dictionary skills and metaphoric language understanding. Five dictionary skills descriptors are proposed and illustrated with specific metaphor related tasks that show online dictionary affordances present in six selected online dictionaries. On the whole, this article envisions online dictionaries and their multimodal affordances as a powerful learning tool for steering EFL students through the intricacies of metaphoric language.

Keywords—metaphor, idiom, online dictionaries, dictionary skills, multimodality

1   Introduction

One of the most notoriously complex fields in foreign language learning and teaching is the understanding and acquisition of metaphoric language. Metaphors are one of the cognitive phenomena that permeate in language [1]. Conceptual metaphors are motivated not only by embodied experience but also by the cultural context [1, 2]. Since metaphors are not always universal and tend to vary cross-culturally [3, 4, 5], tackling figurative language in the EFL classroom should become an intrinsic part of the learning process, especially in higher education.

Metaphoric competence and language proficiency are inextricably interwoven [6, 7, 8, 9]. As Littlemore and Low [10] (p. 268) suggest, "metaphoric competence has in fact an important role to play in all areas of communicative competence. […] It can contribute centrally to grammatical competence, textual competence, illocutionary

competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Metaphor is thus highly relevant to second language learning, teaching and testing, from the earliest to the most advanced stages of learning".

As language learners are expected to use metaphorical expressions in the real world, the role of the teacher should focus on lightening the learning burden of figurative language. According to cognitive semanticists, raising the learners' awareness of the patterns of conceptualization underlying metaphorical constructions of the target language could facilitate their comprehension, entrenchment and, ultimately, production of figurative language. Therefore, the traditional method of learning metaphors and idioms by rote should be avoided, since it cannot account for the conceptual complexity of figurativeness.

In this regard, previous studies have also broken away with the traditional method and followed more innovative approaches. For instance, Chen and Wu [11] proposed the S-S-P-C model for examining idioms from a syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and cultural perspective. This model was applied among college students and was proved to be an effective method for improving Chinese learners' idiom acquisition. As for the most valuable learning tools for the learning of metaphoric language, a raising number of scholars advocate for the use of digital tools, as a way of enhancing the students' motivation. A case in point is Al-Ramahi and Smadi's study [12] suggesting that video games could positively influence the learning of idioms, as they raise students' motivation and force them to use idiomatic expressions in an authentic context while interacting with other players. In the same vein, Smith [13] examined meme design and creation as a novel activity for fostering students' autonomous learning, multimodal literacy, instilling intercultural communication and mastering idiomatic expressions. With regard to messaging apps, Batianeh [14] explored the effects of utilizing online chats together with word processors on the students' writing skills, including aspects as punctuation, phrasal verbs, idioms and figures of speech, among others. His findings revealed that the use of Facebook and Skype to chat with English native speakers improved their writing skills significantly. Moreover, Almogheerah [15] investigated the effect of using WhatsApp-based learning activities on developing idiom acquisition among EFL students and the students' perceptions towards the application of WhatsApp in the learning of idioms. Regarding use of learning software, Grami [16] reported that the use of the AccurIT online writing checker as a pedagogical tool for assisting students in writing correct collocations and idioms in English provided students with valuable corrective feedback.

In an attempt to advance in this line of research, this article puts forward a pedagogical proposal that explores the potential of another online pedagogical tool: online pedagogical dictionaries. Online dictionaries are a useful tool to introduce metaphors in the classroom and that allows students to continue with their self-learning process in the area of metaphorical language. As Campoy-Cubillo [17] (p.132) indicates, "dictionaries are tools for which users need to develop specific skills if they want to achieve satisfactory results". These dictionary skills to be able to choose an adequate dictionary, locate information, interpret, understand and apply or use metaphorical language in a production task should be practiced and taught to achieve positive results in the use of idiomatic language. In this regard, we may ask ourselves the following questions about the importance of dictionary skill teaching and learning:

– Are online dictionaries an effective tool for learning figurative language?
– How does the use of online dictionaries impact the learning of idiomatic expressions? Which features of online dictionaries help learners most?
– How can online dictionaries help students learn/comprehend and retain figurative language/idiomatic expressions?
– How can online dictionaries be used to create meaningful language tasks to learn metaphors and idioms?

This article attempts to answer the last two questions by examining dictionary content, multimodality in dictionaries, dictionary skills descriptors and the affordances presented in six online dictionaries dealing with metaphors and idioms.

2   The role of metaphors in the interpretation of idioms

In the realm of Cognitive Semantics, metaphors are one of the vital cognitive operations that pervade language. Metaphors allow us to reason and talk about a certain domain of human experience (the target domain) in terms of another domain (the source domain) [1, 18]. The target domain is typically more abstract and complex in nature (e.g. LOVE), whereas the source domain is more concrete or physical (e.g. JOURNEY). The systematic correspondences between the source and the target domain are called conceptual projections or mappings.

It is essential to draw the distinction between linguistic metaphors and conceptual metaphors. Conceptual metaphors arise at the conceptual level (i.e. level of thought), whereas metaphorical expressions are linguistic manifestations of those conceptual metaphors. Therefore, conceptual metaphors are entrenched patterns in our minds that can be reflected in everyday language through the use of metaphorical expressions [19]. For instance, metaphorical expressions such as "I can't *swallow* that claim", "your theory is *half-baked*", "she *devoured* the book", are underlain by the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD, which represents the conceptual alignment between those two domains in our conceptual system.

The connection between metaphors and idioms, albeit not always apparent at first glance, is paramount to the interpretation of idioms, as in some cases metaphors can provide their systematic semantic motivation. Idioms commonly refer to conventionalized multi-word expressions whose meaning cannot be inferred directly from the meaning of its constituent words. In the traditional view, idiomatic expressions are mostly conceived of as just a matter of language, with no connection with conceptual patterns of thought. However, cognitive semanticists argue that the meaning of idioms is often less arbitrary than commonly assumed. The mechanisms on which the meaning of most idioms is based are metaphor, metonymy as well as conventional knowledge. Hence, idiomatic expressions are grounded in our sensory-motor and cultural experience with the world [20, 21].

As a way of illustration, in the idiom repertoire of English, the expression "blow off steam" is a linguistic realization of the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. The idiom "lend someone a hand" (*helping out*) is shaped by the conceptual metonymy HAND FOR ACTION/ACTIVITY. In other cases, by revealing the literal meaning

of an idiom we can associate that idiom with a specific source domain (e.g. the idiom "throw in the towel" (*give up, admit defeat*) stems from the BOXING domain). Thus, identifying the literal underpinning of certain idioms can facilitate the interpretation of their figurative meaning [22].

3 Materials

3.1 Multimodal online dictionaries and their affordances to present metaphors and idioms

In order to engage students in their learning process, the present study examines the potential of online dictionaries as a pedagogical tool for building up the students' metaphoric competence. Six online dictionaries have been selected for the study: *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Macmillan Dictionary Online, The Idioms, Oxford Learners Dictionaries, Idioms Online* and *The Free Dictionary's Idioms dictionary*. This selection represents online dictionaries that cover the five communicative modes (linguistic, aural, gestural, spatial and visual, as proposed by the New London Group in their pedagogy of multiliteracies).

The **linguistic mode** predominates in dictionaries, dictionaries are about language: they record a particular language as it is used. Inside dictionaries, metaphors and idioms appear as phrases and word combination possibilities combined with the producer's attitude and commitment to the message, which is usually conveyed in the form of usage notes or as part of dictionary definitions. The linguistic mode is also concerned with the range and depth of linguistic information.

The **aural mode** is conveyed in online dictionaries through word audio recordings for entry words. However, metaphorical phrases and idioms do not seem to have a corresponding recording. In some cases, these phrases are pronounced in the videos that some dictionaries include to explain them.

The **gestural mode** may be part of the information in online dictionaries when they include videos where the phrases are explained. This is the case of the *Idioms Online* dictionary which is one of the dictionaries employed in this study. The gestural mode includes sign languages, but we have not included a sign language online dictionary because metaphors work in a different way for languages in the visual-manual modality [23], and they would need a different analysis to that of the non-signed languages. Comparing the same expression in signed and non-signed languages, however, could in some cases support metaphor understanding (see for instance the entry for "keep an eye on someone" in the Multimodal Dictionary for Sing Languages "Spreadthesign" https://www.spreadthesign.com/es.es/search/by-category/40/verbos/?q=&p=7).

Dictionary websites rely heavily on the **spatial mode** to communicate meaning, and the decisions about how to arrange digital information are important in order to make dictionaries more user-friendly and allow them to navigate with ease within a dictionary space. This space is not only the dictionary entry, the whole dictionary macrostructure is part of the spatial mode. Thus, features like menus, headers, physical layout, and navigation tools help the dictionary users to interact with the site.

The **visual mode** is particularly relevant for dictionary users because it helps them locate information easily. Font size, colour, symbols, or labels are essential in the creation of a user-friendly dictionary. Images are also part of the visual mode and usually provide support to the meaning explained by words in definitions.

Understanding multimodality in dictionaries has three crucial aims for language teachers: (1) to be able to evaluate dictionary quality in term of user-friendliness for the learner, (2) to become aware of information types and where to locate them in each dictionary, (3) to enable teachers to design language learning tasks bearing in mind multimodal affordances of the dictionaries they select for their syllabuses. Making students understand dictionary multimodal affordances is essential for learners if they want to: (1) be able to locate information relevant to their information needs, (2) understand different spatial and visual resources that help them locate information easily, (3) be able to interpret information provided in different communicative modes that respond to different online dictionary affordances.

This study is based on six online dictionaries that have served as a resource to create meaningful language tasks to learn about the use of metaphors and idioms in English. The combination of multimodality and metaphor/idiom resources in these dictionaries may be summarized as follows:

a) *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

This dictionary includes metaphoric phrases and similes in the main entry, for example *blind with tears*, *as blind as a bat* are listed as phrases within the first sense of the word "unable to see", while a separate entry is provided for idiomatic phrases such as *blind spot*. Metaphoric uses of the word *blind* that have a specific sense are given their own sense label. For instance, under sense 6, the label "feelings" is used to introduce the use of *blind* in *blind faith/prejudice/obedience etc*. This is done through the use of typography (number different options within the same sense, use bold letter type to highlight each option, use of orange sense labels), and through the spatial mode by arranging two columns in the entry page, one central column for the main word senses where metaphor appears, and a right-hand side column highlighted by the use of a grey box where more possibilities of word combination with the word *blind* are given. This box provides options like *blind spot, blind date* or *blind somebody with science*.

b) *Macmillan Dictionary Online*

In this dictionary, metaphors are listed as separate word senses. Thus, the use of blind as "unable to see" is given sense number 1, while the use of *blind* in *blind faith* is sense 3. It has a separate section that lists phrases that is differentiated typographically and that take the reader to their separate entry through the use of links. It also has a scrollable separate column on the right where more combinations with the word appear (other entries for this word). But the interesting resource in this dictionary is the special metaphor box (see sample task 5.2) that provides a unique approach based on target domains used by this dictionary only. This resource is particularly useful from a pedagogical perspective to help students not only interpret meaning but also understand how metaphors around a specific domain are generated.

c) The Idioms

The Idioms is a specialized dictionary concerned with idioms only. For this reason, the content of the entries is expanded and each idiom occupies a whole page with detailed definitions, a larger number of examples for the idiomatic phrases and information on the origin of the idiom. There is also the possibility to consult idioms arranged by topics (e.g. animals, body, education, food, etc.). Topics are presented as a word cloud where all words are linked to the list of idioms under the topic in question. Idioms are also listed alphabetically, each letter taking the reader to the list of idioms starting with that letter presented in their shortened format with a "read on" link that takes us the full entry for the chosen idiom. The predominant communicative mode is the linguistic mode.

d) Oxford Learners Dictionaries

Oxford makes extensive use of the visual mode through the use of color and colored boxes used to highlight usage notes, among other information types. It also includes a specific Idioms box at the end of the main word entry, where each idiom may be followed by suggested synonym options or related topics with their corresponding language proficiency level. It includes a right hand-side column that takes the reader to related or alphabetically related words in order of proximity.

e) Idioms Online

This dictionary is also specialized and deals with idioms only. It includes a video explanation for most of its entries, and may also include pictorial information usually in the form of written summaries of the meaning accompanied by related images. Thus, the main communicative modes are visual (use of images), gestural (use of videos) and aural (voice in videos). The use of videos to present idioms provides learners the opportunity to hear how the idiomatic phrase is uttered.

f) The Free Dictionary's Idioms dictionary

This is part of the menu in the *Free Dictionary*. This menu includes several specialized dictionaries (medical, legal, financial, etc.) and one of them is the *Idioms dictionary*. It includes animated idioms videos with illustrated definitions and example sentences (visual, gestural and linguistic modes). Basically, it provides a short definition followed in most cases by a short video explaining the idiom. In some cases, there is no video and a definition followed by a few examples is given.

3.2 Instruments for dictionary skill practice and assessment: task design

In this section we will provide sample tasks to illustrate possible dictionary-based tasks designed to promote language learners' idiom and metaphor acquisition. We suggest five task types to present metaphors and idioms that follow the dictionary skill assessment descriptors presented in [17]. Thus, following C1-C2 language proficiency levels descriptors, we selected the dictionary skills that were adequate for working with idioms and metaphors and used the descriptors to introduce the task types. Dictionary skill assessment will respond to the descriptor, for instance the following questions assess the student's ability to achieve the skills required to successfully complete task

type 1: Is the student able to locate the idiom *go bananas* in different dictionaries? Is the student able to find the idiom or metaphor boxes?

Task type 1 descriptor. – Locating specific idiomatic phrases and understanding dictionary micro- and macrostructure. Introductory tasks aim to present learners with a wide range of online dictionaries. These tasks are oriented towards the spatial mode, that is, analyzing how information is presented and arranged both in dictionary micro and macrostructure. They help dictionary users identify those places in a variety of dictionaries where particular information types (in our case idioms and metaphors) appear. In this sense, it also helps identify typographical resources that help locate idiomatic phrases in the entry microstructure, such as different colors and letter types. It includes becoming aware of useful navigation routes that may enhance idiom learning by accessing different parts of the dictionaries.

Sample task 1

> Do you know the meaning of the expression *go bananas*? You may check the meaning in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/go-bananas.
>
> Do you think go bananas can mean to be extremely happy? If you are not sure, you can search this phrase in *The Idioms Dictionary*: https://www.theidioms.com/go-bananas/. Does any of the examples in this dictionary mean to be extremely happy?
>
> Try to find the same expression in the *Oxford Learners' Dictionary*.
>
> Which are the differences between the three dictionaries you used for this task?

Task type 2 descriptor. – Deciding which dictionary to use: comparing entries and how information is presented in several dictionaries and deciding which information fits the look-up purpose or dictionary user's personal interests. Part of dictionary skills training is helping learners become aware of a wide range of online dictionaries and of their individual differences. Comparing the same idiomatic phrase in several dictionaries may be a good exercise.

Sample task 2

> Compare the information about the idiomatic phrase *"(it's a case of) the blind leading the blind"* in these dictionaries:
>
> https://www.ldoceonline.com/
> https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/
> https://www.idioms.online/
>
> Explain how each of the three dictionaries present information regarding this phrase and give your opinion about their format and content for this particular search.

By performing sample task 2, learners will have to locate the requested phrase in the dictionaries, and then study the information regarding this phrase in order to complete the task.

Task type 3 descriptor. – Being able to combine dictionary information in various formats to obtain more in-depth information on a particular search. The aim of this type of task is to compare types and amounts of information on the same issue as presented in two or more online dictionaries. It makes learners aware of the fact that they may need to check several dictionaries to come with the answer or information they need. These tasks are oriented towards understanding online dictionary typology and enabling the language learner to choose the best dictionary for a particular language need.

Sample task 3

> What is the meaning of "beat about the bush"? you can check the definition in the Macmillan dictionary:
> https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/beat-around-about-the-bush?q=beat+around%2Fabout+the+bush
> Write two sentences using this idiom
> YOUR ANSWER:
>
>
> Now, please read the information in the Idioms Online dictionary:
> https://www.idioms.online/beat-around-the-bush/
> Try to provide your own example sentence within a paragraph that provides some more context for the situation described:
> YOUR ANSWER:

Task type 5 may also include the practice of the skill described in task type 3.

Task type 4 descriptor. – Interpreting idiom meaning from the information in dictionaries. In order to interpret idiom meaning, language learners need to not only understand the definition but also be provided with meaningful examples of usage. In the following task, newspaper excerpts complement dictionary definitions and give them a wider context. The aim of the task is to understand idiom definitions and to be able to check understanding deciding which of two closely related idioms fits better in each text.

Sample task 4

Use THE FREE DICTIONARY for this task https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/

Read the entry for "TURN A BLIND EYE / A DEAF EAR, TO" (go to the information from Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary)

♦ What is the shared meaning for these two phrases?

YOUR ANSWER:

♦ Can you see the subtle difference between their meanings? Which is that difference?

YOUR ANSWER:

You may also check the entries in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* (turn a blind eye (to something); turn a deaf ear (to something).

DECIDE which of the two metaphorical phrases is more adequate for the gaps in the following newspaper excerpts:

Text 1

Hackett won't '_____' to bush burners

IFA deputy president Brian Rushe has criticised Minister Pippa Hackett for allowing a farmer to undergo a trial by social media on Saturday.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture Pippa Hackett won't "_____" to farmers burning bushes.

She said that while "burning bushes is legal" "doing it during high fire risk warning and during the nesting season is not right".

(source: https://www.farmersjournal.ie/hackett-won-t-turn-a-blind-eye-to-bush-burners-688522, Irish Farmers Journal, 28 March 2022 Barry Murphy)

Text 2

SGBV MENACE

447 Kitui residents were raped in 2021, says health official

Kamenju says five of the SGBV victims ended up being HIV positive. (…)

Kitetu, a trained clinical psychologist, said gender violence has serious implications on the mental health of victims.

"We are struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. That is why there are many cases of suicide.

"Victims are engulfed in hopelessness and helplessness because of what has accosted them. They are ignorant of where or who to turn to. We cannot afford to _____," she said.

(Source: THE STAR https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2022-04-07-447-kitui-residents-were-raped-in-2021-says-health-official/)

Text 3

No one can afford to _____ to the consequences of Ukraine's suffering

The effects of Russian aggression reach far beyond Europe

(…) on February 24, Russia brought war back to Europe on a scale that we have not witnessed since 1939. (…). As of today, more than 10 million people have fled their homes. Close to 4 million people have fled to the EU, while 6.5 million have been forcibly displaced within Ukraine. There are thousands of civilian casualties, including women and children, with no indication that such alarming figures will slow down any time soon. (…)

This war has seen an unprecedented escalation of threats, with suggestions of the potential use of weapons of mass destruction or even attacks on nuclear energy facilities. We cannot afford _____ these acts of aggression and violence.

(source: Andrea Matteo Fontana. The National-Opinion, https://www.thenational-news.com/opinion/comment/2022/03/31/no-one-can-afford-to-turn-a-blind-eye-to-the-consequences-of-ukraines-suffering/)

Task type 5 descriptor. – Understanding idiom and metaphor usage and applying dictionary findings to reading and writing tasks. These are complex tasks that do not only imply meaning interpretation for a particular idiom but also a cognitive process of idiom understanding leading to a productive use of idioms, that is, students are expected to use idioms in their own texts.

Sample task 5.1

Idioms with EAT

Part one.

Please use the *Idioms Online* dictionary to learn about the following idioms containing the word EAT. Pay attention to the usage notes. The explanation of the idiom's origin may help you understand and remember the idioms.

Eat A Horse, I could	*Eat and Run*	*Eat Crow*	*Eat Humble Pie*
Eat Like A Bird	*Eat Like A Horse*	*Eat Your Heart Out*	
	Eat Up		

After informing yourself on the meaning and use of these idioms, create your own summary of the shared meanings that these idioms may have and how the more transparent idioms relate to the most idiomatic ones.

Part two.

The idioms in part one were all related to the same source domain (EAT). In part two we will deal with the target domain SUCCESS. Find out the meaning of the idiom *"(a case of) dog eat dog"* in the *Oxford Dictionary* online. Which topic is it related to? Using the same dictionary, find more idioms to talk about this topic.

Use at least 3 of these idioms to talk about a story of success in a short text of 150–200 words.

In this task, learners are first led to discover a series of idioms that use EATING as a source domain that can be mapped onto different target domains, such as TIME (*eat up time*) or SUCCESS (*dog eat dog*). Students are encouraged to understand the underlying conceptual mechanisms that originate the idioms with *eat*, and teachers may introduce the source and target domain concepts to the task feedback. The concept of similes may also be introduced identifying how they include words such as *like* or *as* (*eat like a horse, eat like a bird*), since they portray a directly expressed metaphorical comparison between two entities.

Relating idioms with the same source domain is expected to foster idiom learning and retention. Learners are then asked to work with the topic section of the *Oxford Learners' Dictionary* to be able to go from the EAT idiom *dog eat dog* to other success related idioms. This may provide learners with the opportunity to learn idioms around a topic and have access to a wider range of idioms to talk about it. Since learners' idioms repertoire is not commonly very extensive, this is deemed to be a good practice.

A second example of task type 5 is presented below. It is based on the Macmillan Dictionary's metaphor boxes. Each metaphor box is related to a particular target domain and portrays the range of source domains that can be used to construe that given target domain. For instance, in sample task 5.2, dictionary users are required to examine the metaphor box that deals with the concept of intelligence. By doing so, they can identify certain source domains (e.g. LIGHT, CUTTING INSTRUMENTS) they can use to reason and talk about intelligence. Moreover, each conceptual metaphor is illustrated with examples of diverse lexical units pertaining to the domain of LIGHT (e.g. *bright, brilliant, shine, flash*) and CUTTING INSTRUMENTS (e.g. *sharp, razor-sharp, cut, keen*) that can evoke intelligence. After examining the metaphor box, learners can deploy those metaphorical expressions to signal intelligence in their own texts. Therefore, this task allows language learners to expand their vocabulary while becoming aware of the conceptual mappings between certain domains in the English conceptual system and their corresponding entailments.

Sample task 5.2

> **Idioms about INTELLIGENCE**
>
> In this activity you are going to learn how to talk about intelligence and avoid repeating the words intelligent/intelligence all the time. You will need to use the Macmillan Online Dictionary (Source: https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/intelligence#intelligence__9). This dictionary contains metaphor boxes that explain how metaphors are created around a target domain (for example, INTELLIGENCE)
>
> Write a short essay about Elon Musk / Marie Curie / Einstein / Vivian Cook / JRR Tolkien / Doris Lessing / J. K. Rowling explaining why and how they are intelligent people. You are requested to use at least four metaphors from the ones explained in the metaphor box for "intelligence", two from each of the two metaphorical concepts that lead to the idea of intelligence:
>
> ## intelligence DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS
>
> **METAPHOR**
>
> Intelligence is like a **light**. The more intelligent someone is, the brighter the light.
>
> - She is one of the **brightest** children in the class.
> - He is the most **brilliant** scholar in his field.
> - She **shines** at languages.
> - She **outshines** everyone else.
> - I had a sudden **flash** of inspiration.
> - I admired his **dazzling/sparkling** wit.
> - He never said anything and seemed a bit **dim**.
> - This is the work of a very **dull** mind.
>
> Intelligence is like a **knife** or **blade**. The more intelligent someone is, the sharper the blade.
>
> - He's very **sharp/sharp-witted**: he notices everything.
> - She has a **razor-sharp** mind.
> - I want to **cut** through the waffle and get straight to the point.
> - We carefully **dissected** the problem.
> - He has a **keen** intellect.
> - They made some **pointed** remarks.
> - He was an **incisive** critic.
>
> → mind, understand

4 Discussion

The dictionary-based task types presented in section 3 allow language learners to sharpen their dictionary skills while fostering metaphor and idiom acquisition. Each of the online dictionaries proposed features an array of multimodal affordances that promote students' learning of metaphoric language in distinct ways.

Regarding task type 1, by exploring the spatial mode of different online dictionaries, dictionary users can learn to locate idioms and analyze the arrangement of both the micro and macrostructure of each dictionary. Moreover, with this type of task learners can examine the visual mode, since typographical resources such as font type, font size,

labels, colors and symbols are highly relevant to locate idiomatic phrases easily. Therefore, this type of task contributes to raising the language learners' awareness of the diverse multimodal affordances online dictionaries offer to tackle certain information types (idioms). In the case of the *LDOCE*, this online dictionary offers a definition and the audio recording (though not in all idioms) of an example of usage from the corpus. As for *The Idioms dictionary*, it lacks the audio recording for the entry "go bananas" but this dictionary contains a more detailed explanation of the meaning of this idiom, examples of usage in context as well as the origin of this figurative expression, which may lend mnemonic support for idiom retention. For its part, in the *Oxford Learners Dictionary* the idiom "go bananas" can be found in the section of idioms that is part of the entry "banana". Interestingly, this online dictionary also specifies the level of language proficiency (C2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference)) connected to this idiom and the domain to which this idiomatic expression is commonly applied (i.e. FEELINGS).

Task 2 allows dictionary users to compare the entries of the idiom *"(it's a case of) the blind leading the blind"* in different dictionaries focusing on the divergencies among those entries on the basis of the five communicative modes. By reflecting upon the individual differences, the learners can notice how *LDOCE* provides the basic information: definition and examples of use, and this can be useful if this is what the learner needs. The *Oxford Learners Dictionary* provides the same information but also informs the reader on the language proficiency level related to this expression (C2), points out the domain evoked by this idiom (i.e. SUGGESTIONS/ADVICE). It also lists more idioms containing the word "blind" which activate other domains/topics, but they are not specified. This inconsistency may be misleading, as some users could think all those idioms refer to the same domain or may fail to determine the specific domain in which they can be used. The *Idioms Online* dictionary provides a video description of the expression, the information in the video is also given in written and pictorial form below the video. It also adds examples of usage and an explanation of the origin of the word. While the Longman and Oxford dictionaries have a constant structure, the Idioms dictionary may vary from one entry to another, some do not contain videos and some videos contain the same information as the written explanation while others have an added value in the way information is presented with the help of images, the co-occurrence of the written and audiovisual formats enhancing the idiom's meaning explanation.

Task 3 pays attention to dictionary typology, either by combining dictionary information in various formats to obtain different perspectives on a particular search, or to be able to locate, understand and interpret more in-depth information.

With reference to task type 4, it focuses on interpreting and contrasting the meaning of two metaphorical idioms from different dictionary entries. To assess whether the nuances of meaning of both metaphorical idioms have been fully understood, learners can apply their knowledge of the target idioms in newspaper excerpts.

Task 5.1 enhances the linguistic mode and encourages students to discover the scope of a given source domain (e.g. EATING), that is, identify the range of target domains to which a particular source domain can be applied. Moreover, this task type provides the base for distinguishing indirect and direct metaphorical expressions (idioms). In turn, it helps students reflect upon the level of transparency or opaqueness of certain

metaphorical idioms. In addition, it explores idioms from several source domains that can evoke the target domain of SUCCESS so as to apply those dictionary findings writing a short text.

Similarly, in task 5.2 language learners can investigate how the domain of INTELLIGENCE can be conceptualized in terms of other domains (e.g. LIGHT, CUTTING INSTRUMENT). This can be attained by analyzing the metaphor boxes of *Macmillan Dictionary*, which provide an explanation of each metaphor and show examples of several lexical items that activate that particular cross-domain mapping.

5 Conclusions

This article explores the potential of digital dictionaries for creating tasks for learning idioms and metaphors in the EFL classroom, as enhancing students' metaphoric competence can help them gain a more native-like command of the language. As opposed to traditional methods, applying dictionary-based tasks can engage students in their learning process (promote autonomous learning) as well as increase their motivation.

Our proposal brings to light the distinct array of multimodal affordances several online dictionaries offer. Since dictionary entries and information regarding idioms and metaphors considerably varies from one dictionary to another (especially between general and idiom-specialized dictionaries), training on dictionary use with the task types presented in this study could help learners fulfil their look-up purpose by combining several dictionaries that feature different multimodal affordances and allow them to go from finding idioms and metaphors in different dictionaries and dictionary types to being able to understand, interpret, evaluate record and implement dictionary information about metaphors and idioms.

We have exemplified methodological issues in the area of dictionary skills development answering the question of how to teach dictionary skills in class. Moreover, we have shown examples of task type design and implementation based on dictionary skill descriptors with the aim of enabling learners' language development regarding metaphoric and idiomatic use of the English language.

Further experimental research is needed to elucidate which multimodal affordances of online dictionaries help students most in their comprehension, retention and production of metaphoric language.

All in all, our pedagogical proposal adds to the field of EFL vocabulary teaching and learning, as it may encourage other scholars in the field to apply dictionary-based tasks on figurative language following a cognitive-semantic approach.

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7   References

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