



THE ROLE OF PROVERBS AS TIME-FILLER ACTIVITIES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

This article investigates the pedagogical relevance and effectiveness of using proverbs as time-filler activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Drawing on scholarly perspectives and a real-life classroom case study, the study critically examines the benefits, challenges, and strategies for integrating proverbs meaningfully into language lessons. While some scholars, such as Litovkina, criticize the superficial use of proverbs without context or instructional purpose, others highlight their value in enhancing vocabulary, grammar, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. The study emphasizes that proverbs, when used interactively and with appropriate scaffolding, can serve as versatile tools for reinforcing language skills and promoting cultural engagement. A qualitative methodology, including literature review, case study, and comparative analysis, is used to support the findings. The article also discusses the importance of teachers' paremiological competence. Through the classroom example involving the proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way," the study illustrates how proverbs can foster engagement and cultural reflection when used adaptively. Ultimately, the article argues that proverbs can be effective time-fillers if they are employed with clear pedagogical intent and cultural sensitivity.

Keywords: cultural awareness, language teaching, paremiological competence, proverbs, time-fillers

1. Introduction

In the world of language teaching, finding ways to keep students engaged is critical to achieving success in the classroom. One common way to maintain engagement is by using time-filler activities, which occupy periods of otherwise wasted time in a lesson. These activities can provide a welcome break between more intense learning tasks or

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serve to reinforce key concepts in a lighthearted manner. Among the many time-filler activities available, proverbs have long been suggested as a useful tool for language teachers. However, there are varying opinions among scholars regarding their use as time-fillers, particularly in second-language instruction. Some view proverbs as valuable cultural and linguistic resources, while others critique their frequent misuse in the classroom.

The purpose of this article is to explore the contrasting views on using proverbs as time-fillers, critically analyzing both the benefits and challenges of this approach. We will review the opinions of key scholars, provide a deeper look at the potential role of proverbs in language teaching, and offer practical recommendations on how to incorporate them meaningfully into classroom practice.

2. Understanding Time-Filler Activities

Time-filler activities, as defined by the *Collins English Dictionary*, are activities that occupy time that would otherwise be wasted. Typically, these are quick, engaging exercises designed to maintain the students' attention and reinforce learning while preventing the lesson from losing focus. Time-filler activities vary in nature and are typically low-stress, requiring minimal preparation or resources. They serve a variety of educational purposes, including reinforcing vocabulary, improving pronunciation, practicing grammar, and stimulating class discussions.

As outlined by *MyEnglishPages.com*, some of the most common time-filler activities include:

- **Quick Vocabulary Review:** Reviewing and reinforcing recently learned vocabulary.
- **20 Questions:** A guessing game where one student thinks of a word, and the others try to guess it by asking yes/no questions.
- **Word Association:** Linking words that are related in meaning or usage.
- **Simon Says:** A listening and following directions game, often used to practice commands.
- **Pictionary:** A drawing and guessing game to help students practice vocabulary and adjectives.
- **Classroom Debate:** A discussion or debate around a topic to encourage critical thinking and speaking practice.
- **Silent Reading:** Students read for a brief period to practice reading comprehension and fluency.
- **Brain Teasers or Riddles:** Short puzzles designed to challenge students' cognitive abilities while reinforcing language skills.
- **Sentence Building:** A task where students form grammatically correct sentences using specific vocabulary or structures.
- **Memory Game:** A game to help reinforce vocabulary by matching words with their meanings.

These activities can be used flexibly within a lesson, either to fill unexpected gaps in time or as part of a larger lesson plan. Time-fillers are especially useful when a lesson finishes earlier than anticipated, or when transitions between activities need to be smooth and engaging. However, the key to successful time-filler activities lies in their ability to reinforce specific language skills without causing distractions or deviating from the main lesson objectives.

3. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the pedagogical relevance and effectiveness of using proverbs as time-filler activities in language instruction. Specifically, the article aims to:

- Investigate different scholarly perspectives on the application of proverbs in EFL/ESL classrooms.
- Analyze the criticisms surrounding the use of proverbs as filler activities without meaningful pedagogical grounding.
- Highlight positive cases and practical strategies where proverbs have been effectively used to reinforce language learning.
- Discuss potential challenges in applying proverbs and suggest solutions for their effective classroom integration.
- Present a real-life classroom experience to illustrate the practical benefits and limitations of using proverbs as time-fillers.

3.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How are proverbs typically used as time-filler activities in language teaching contexts?
- 2) What are the main arguments for and against the use of proverbs as time-fillers in second-language instruction?
- 3) What strategies can be employed to make the use of proverbs more effective and pedagogically sound in classroom settings?
- 4) To what extent can proverbs enhance language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and cultural awareness?
- 5) What are the potential risks or drawbacks associated with the use of proverbs in EFL/ESL teaching, especially as time-fillers?

4. Literature Review

4.1 The Use of Proverbs as Time-Fillers: Litovkina's Critique

Anna Litovkina (1998, 2019) argues that while proverbs have been widely recommended by scholars across different linguistic and educational backgrounds for use in second language (L2) instruction, they remain largely underused and misapplied in actual

classroom settings. Despite their acknowledged potential, proverbs are seldom employed in a structured or pedagogically sound manner. Instead of being integrated into well-designed lessons, they are often chosen arbitrarily, typically sourced from outdated collections or books that lack relevance to current language use. Furthermore, when they do appear in the curriculum, proverbs are usually introduced without a thoughtful instructional approach or meaningful context.

According to Litovkina, proverbs are frequently relegated to the status of time-fillers—activities used to occupy leftover class time rather than to achieve learning objectives. In such cases, teachers may ask students simply to memorize a few well-known proverbs, without providing any deeper understanding of how they function within the language or how they relate to real-life situations. As a result, students are often unable to apply them appropriately in natural conversations. Litovkina emphasizes that for proverbs to contribute meaningfully to language acquisition, learners should be taught not only the literal meanings but also the nuances of when, how, and why these expressions are used in various cultural and communicative contexts. This requires a shift from rote memorization to more interactive and context-based teaching strategies.

Supporting this viewpoint, Hanzen (as cited on p. 9) also criticizes the superficial use of proverbs in classrooms, concurring with Litovkina's assertion that they are commonly used merely to fill time rather than as integral parts of language instruction. Both scholars highlight a disconnect between the theoretical value attributed to proverbs in the field of language education and the practical ways they are handled in educational settings.

Similarly, Gözpinar (2014) identifies a significant gap in language learning materials when it comes to proverbs. He notes that these culturally rich and linguistically valuable expressions are often either entirely omitted from coursebooks or appear sporadically without sufficient explanation or practice opportunities. In many cases, textbooks and classroom resources do not include dedicated exercises or engaging activities that would help students internalize the use of proverbs or understand their place in the target culture's communicative norms. Like Litovkina, Gözpinar observes that when proverbs are included at all, their function tends to be superficial, offering little in the way of educational depth or real-life applicability.

Despite her strong critique of the way proverbs are treated in second language teaching, Litovkina stops short of offering detailed empirical evidence or referencing specific experimental studies to support her claims. Her observations seem to be based more on personal experience and general classroom trends rather than on documented research findings. Additionally, she does not delve into the underlying causes of why proverbs have historically been relegated to filler status. There is no clear discussion in her work regarding the possible pedagogical, institutional, or curriculum-related reasons behind this neglect.

Overall, the perspectives of Litovkina, Hanzen, and Gözpinar highlight a shared concern about the underutilization and mishandling of proverbs in language education. All three scholars stress the importance of moving beyond surface-level exposure to

proverbs and advocate for a more structured, culturally aware, and context-rich approach to incorporating them into language instruction. Their critiques underscore the need for improved materials, better training for teachers, and a shift in how educators perceive the role of proverbs in supporting language development.

4.2 Supporting Views on Proverbs as Time-Fillers

Contrary to critical views that regard proverbs as outdated or ineffective fillers, some researchers advocate their purposeful use in language classrooms. Scholars such as Akhmedova (2023) and Ervin (1982) support the idea that proverbs and aphorisms are powerful tools in foreign language teaching. According to their findings, these expressions can be effectively integrated into various phases of a lesson—whether as engaging warm-ups, transitional fillers, or closing activities. They are particularly effective in reinforcing vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation, while also serving as prompts for classroom discussion and student interaction. Nuessel (1989), building upon Ervin’s earlier work, echoes this perspective, emphasizing the same educational functions of proverbs and advocating their use as meaningful instructional tools (pp. 171–172).

In a similar vein, Bencherab and Cetiner (2022) acknowledge the flexibility of proverbs in the teaching process. However, they stress the importance of intentional use. Teachers, they argue, must first define the purpose behind incorporating proverbs into their lessons. Whether used to stimulate conversation, review linguistic concepts, or introduce cultural elements, proverbs should align with specific learning objectives. When this alignment is achieved, proverbs become much more than filler—they serve as functional, engaging components of language instruction that contribute to communicative competence and intercultural understanding.

Meriacre (2018) provides a concrete classroom example demonstrating the effectiveness of proverb-based activities. Her lesson plan, outlined in *Insights into a Culture’s Worldview through Proverbs and Sayings*, involves a time-filler task that not only boosts language skills but also fosters cultural awareness. In this interactive activity, students are each given a sticky note containing half of a proverb. They are required to walk around the classroom and find the classmate with the matching half. Once paired, students collaboratively interpret the proverb, translate it, and share it with the class by writing it on the board for group discussion. This activity introduces proverbs from a wide range of cultural traditions—including African, Italian, Dutch, and French—encouraging students to reflect on cultural values embedded in language. A variation of the activity includes hiding the sticky notes under chairs to symbolize the “*invisible elements of the cultural iceberg*,” prompting learners to explore the deeper, often overlooked, aspects of culture.

Boykhanov (2020) also supports the practical use of proverbs in language learning, particularly through low-preparation, interactive exercises. He highlights their value as warm-ups, energizers, and end-of-lesson time-fillers. Despite their pedagogical benefits, Boykhanov acknowledges that students often face challenges when engaging with

proverbs. These challenges stem from internal difficulties—such as understanding the form, meaning, and appropriate usage—and external issues like limited teacher training and insufficient materials. Such factors can lead to hesitation, confusion, and avoidance of proverb use among students.

To overcome these obstacles, Boykhanov proposes an activity called “Share It.” Designed for the end of class, this time-filler involves splitting students into two groups: listeners and speakers. The listeners read aloud a proverb, and the speakers respond with a paraphrased definition or explanation. This format not only encourages student interaction and vocabulary retention but also promotes critical thinking and the ability to express complex meanings in their own words. According to Boykhanov, such activities help develop all four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while enhancing students’ paremiological knowledge, or their ability to understand and effectively use proverbs in communication.

In summary, while proverbs are sometimes dismissed as outdated classroom fillers, researchers like Akhmedova, Nuessel, Meriacre, and Boykhanov reveal their significant potential when applied with intention and creativity. These studies demonstrate that proverb-based activities, even when used as time-fillers, can foster linguistic proficiency, cultural understanding, and student engagement when aligned with well-defined instructional goals.

5. Challenges and Considerations in Using Proverbs as Time-Fillers

While proverbs can be a useful time-filler activity, their implementation in the classroom is not without challenges. One potential issue is the risk of proverbs becoming distractions from the lesson’s main objectives. If not integrated carefully, proverbs may take up valuable time without contributing to the overall learning goals.

Additionally, proverbs often contain idiomatic expressions and metaphors that can be difficult for language learners to grasp. These expressions may require more time and explanation than initially anticipated, which can disrupt the flow of the lesson. Teachers must be prepared to explain the meanings and nuances of proverbs clearly and efficiently, to avoid overwhelming students with additional information.

Moreover, the teacher’s own proficiency in using and explaining proverbs is crucial. Without sufficient knowledge of the cultural and linguistic aspects of proverbs, teachers may struggle to provide accurate explanations and may inadvertently create confusion among students. This highlights the importance of teachers’ paremiological competence, which refers to their ability to understand and teach proverbs effectively.

6. Material and Methods

We employ a qualitative research approach based on:

- **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review and analysis of existing academic literature, scholarly articles, and conference papers related to the use of proverbs

in second-language instruction. Works by Litovkina (1998, 2019), Akhmedova (2023), Nuessel (1989), Boykhanov (2020), and others are critically analyzed to present a well-rounded perspective on the topic.

- **Case Study Analysis:** An illustrative example from the author's personal teaching experience is provided to demonstrate how a proverb was successfully used to fill unplanned time in an English for Medical Purposes class. The approach includes observation, reflection, and interpretation of students' engagement and language use during the activity.
- **Comparative Analysis:** The article contrasts critical and supportive views from various researchers to provide balanced insight and draw informed conclusions.

No quantitative data collection tools, such as surveys or interviews, were employed; instead, the methodology relies on content analysis and reflective teaching practice.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 A Personal Case: Using Proverbs as a Time-Filler in Medical English

Partially, I also have some doubts about using proverbs as a time-filler activity; it may be risky for some reasons. For instance, it may turn students' attention or focus to an additional activity instead of the intended aim of the lesson. Another problem is that metaphoric and idiomatic proverbs may take much more time to explain than expected, which causes us not to achieve anything at all. Finally, and more importantly, insufficient teachers' paremiological competence and teaching ability may have a bad impact on applying proverbs successfully as time fillers. On the other hand, there is something to consider, that is, the teacher's readiness to use and fill students' time effectively, which sometimes unexpectedly finishes because of learners' language level or teacher's decision to avoid similar activities. In this situation, to our mind, it is suggested to develop students' paremiological competence indirectly. Once, I began the lesson and followed my lesson plan. Surprisingly, my students did all the exercises and activities quickly. Consequently, it finished ten minutes earlier than planned. At that moment, I had ready tests related to the topic "there is/are" to cover the time. However, I decided to apply the proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way." I taught it with some differentiated activities. Firstly, I wrote the first part of the English proverb "Where there is a will" on the whiteboard, and I asked students to guess the second part of it. Secondly, they were required to find its Uzbek equivalent. Students had difficulty completing this task. To use time effectively and follow the next activity, I told the beginning of the proverb in the Uzbek equivalent (I: "Qalovini topsang" Students: "qor ham yonadi" [word-for-word English translation of the Uzbek equivalent: If you find a special substance, even snow will burn.]) In the end, I divided students into small groups and asked them to discuss the relatedness of the proverb to our lesson and the actual context of it. I can state that this technique helped me way out of an unpleasant situation.

Based on the literature reviewed and the classroom case study, the following key results emerge:

- 1) **Valuable Linguistic and Cultural Tools:** In contrast, other scholars highlight the multi-dimensional value of proverbs in language teaching. They are seen as tools for improving not only language mechanics—such as vocabulary and syntax—but also cultural fluency and critical thinking (Akhmedova, 2023; Nuessel, 1989; Bencherab & Cetiner, 2022).
- 2) **Versatility of Use:** Proverbs can be used flexibly at any point during the lesson—either as warm-ups, mid-lesson refreshers, or closing reflections—making them suitable for various learning purposes, including as time-fillers.
- 3) **Contextual and Cultural Engagement:** When introduced through interactive methods—such as matching games, classroom discussions, or group interpretation tasks—proverbs engage students both cognitively and culturally, enhancing their paremiological competence (Boykhanov, 2020; Meriacre, 2018).
- 4) **Challenges in Comprehension:** A significant challenge lies in the metaphorical and idiomatic nature of many proverbs, which can be difficult for learners to understand without proper scaffolding. This issue is compounded by the lack of paremiological and pedagogical competence among some teachers.
- 5) **Case Study Evidence:** The author's personal experience of using the proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way" in a Medical English class demonstrates that proverbs can be effective tools for language engagement and cultural reflection, especially when used in an adaptive and context-sensitive way.
- 6) **"One Size Does Not Fit All":** The use of proverbs must be carefully tailored to the classroom context, student proficiency levels, and instructional goals. While effective in some cases, proverbs may not yield the same results across different learner groups or educational settings.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The use of proverbs as time-fillers in language teaching is a topic of debate, with scholars offering contrasting views on their effectiveness and appropriateness. While critics like Litovkina argue that proverbs are often used superficially and without a clear pedagogical strategy, others highlight the significant value of proverbs in enriching students' language and cultural knowledge. In this sense, I should argue that textbook writers themselves do not always incorporate proverbs. In this situation, how international non-native English teachers use proverbs, certainly, they have to use them, sometimes incidentally or intentionally, as time fillers. I consider this likely a direct response to Litovkina's critique. In addition to this, it is not always compulsory to revise proverbs in the next lesson. Importantly, how proverbs are used in the lesson for communicative purposes in connection with the main topic. So, proverbs as a time-filler activity can enhance vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and intercultural understanding when used thoughtfully and purposefully. However, teachers must be

mindful of the potential challenges involved, including the risk of distractions, the time required to explain idiomatic expressions, and the importance of having sufficient knowledge of proverbs. When used in a flexible, dynamic, and culturally aware manner, proverbs can be a powerful tool for engaging students and enhancing their language learning experience. In this article, I introduced a successfully used proverbial time-filler activity. What is to be remembered once more is that teachers' proverbial and pedagogical knowledge plays a significant role in the success of our claim. Hence, this was one of the most successful cases in which I applied proverbs over time, and it may not be generalized to other classes, as "one size does not fit all."

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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