
Teaching English in Turkmenistan

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Turkmenistan is one of the last frontiers for ESL teachers

Introduction

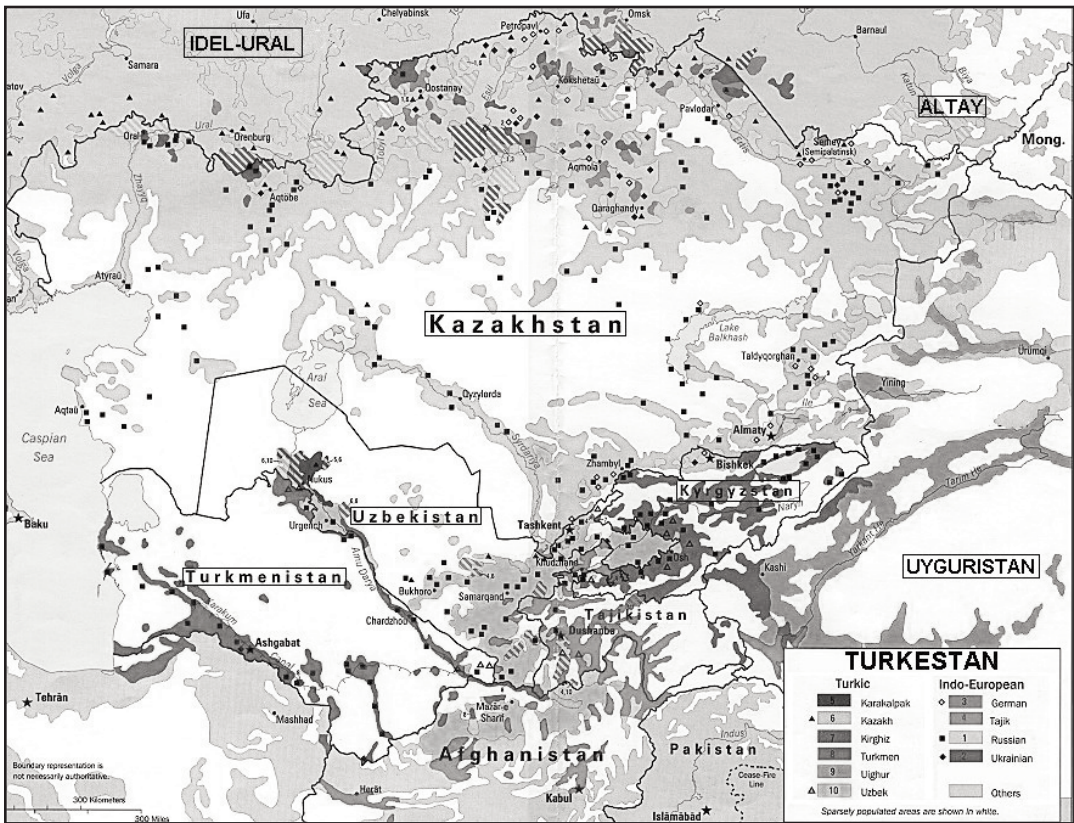
The English language has fast become a global language. In Asia, from the far steppes of Mongolia to the beaches of Thailand, to the shores of the Caspian Sea, English print, music, and along with language, Western values, have spread and multiplied. New technology and media, especially the Internet (Crystal, 1996/2003), have helped carry English to people of all nationalities and economic classes. But many scholars feel that the rise of English is connected with the downfall of indigenous languages (Fishman, 1996; Crawford, 1996; McCarty, 2003). Minority languages face extinction as English rides the wave of increasing globalization (Romaine, 2001). Since 2007, *Newsweek*, *The China Daily*, and other international media sources have been citing English as the language of economic success in China. Adherents of English claim that it brings positive social change, economic opportunities, consumer goods, and new technologies (Castells, 2001). Such materialistic temptations cause some minority youth to discount the value of their languages and traditions. In Native America, for example, a small minority of Native Americans youth may feel that exchanging, dismissing, or even abandoning their native language and culture for English and a Western lifestyle represents progress and success in the form of material goods and a modern lifestyle (Crawford, 1996; McCarty, 2003). Similarly, in China, English is viewed as the language of economic success by many young Chinese. Opponents of the rise of English view the language, and its underlying cultural messages, as imperialistic. Phillipson (1992) accuses ESL educators of making a negative

cultural impact upon unsuspecting indigenous peoples all over the world. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) asserts that English can be used as a tool by Western nations for global dominance.

The rise of English and ESL teaching in the remote lands of Central Asia has been neglected. Economically poor, the region is rich in linguistic diversity. Due to its geographical and linguistic proximity, Turkey rather than first world countries such as the US and the UK, has become the largest purveyor of ESL education in Turkmenistan. Non-native Turkish ESL instructors, funded by the Turkish government and private sources, notably Fetuallah Gülen, work in private 'Turkish-Turkmen' high schools and 'Bashkent' institutes. Although economically underdeveloped, Turkmenistan and other countries in Central Asia are rich in linguistic diversity; many Central Asian languages have Turcic roots. Turkmenistan, a Central Asian country, has strategic importance, offering fly-over space



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for Western military airplanes and land for American military bases. Turkmenistan also borders two countries that have challenged US supremacy – Iran and Afghanistan. Moreover, the country is rich ... in hydrocarbons, notably natural gas. But Turkmenistan is an indigenous society that has not yet accepted globalization, English, and Western capitalism. Western culture and American values are not welcomed with open arms. Unsurprisingly, US scholars label Turkmenistan as a repressive, closed country (Kaplan, 2008). Both of the Turkmen presidents are perceived by the West as despotic leaders because they have absolute authority over every aspect of governing the country. For this reason, and other factors associated with the lack of democratic ideals and human rights, Western scholars view Turkmenistan as a police state (Kaplan, 2008). Since independence in 1991 from the now defunct Soviet Union, President Niyazov (1991–2006) and President Berdimukhammedov (2006–present), adopted what Dailey & Silova (2008) term sultanic leadership. Geography and politics have also kept the Turkmen

isolated from the outside world. Isolation combined with political mandates have promoted the creation of a new national identity, and revitalized the indigenous language. As a post-Soviet country, Turkmenistan has made great strides towards reinstating and revitalizing Turkmen as the nation's dominant language, usurping Russian, the language of the invader. At the same time, politics and isolation have kept English from invading. In contrast, other post-Soviet Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan – have more English friendly leadership. (William Fierman, personal communication, April 10, 2010).

This article attempts to fill an information gap about teaching ESL in Turkmenistan, by describing challenges that ESL teachers face. The first part of the article discusses the significance of English after independence. Next, I review some educational and linguistic problems teachers struggle with in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. General teaching challenges are reviewed, with emphasis on foreign teachers' woes. Together all these issues demonstrate how the Turkmen government's ideological

focus is bent on preserving indigenous culture by keeping out the English language, and its associated Western culture. After describing these challenges, I close by discussing how successful the current Turkmen regime has been in excluding English, and why.

What does English mean to the Turkmen?

English and ESL teaching in Turkmenistan are symbolic as well as educational: English represents an open door policy toward the West, as well as a willingness to join the world community. English is the language of international communication; it is the language of academics; it is the language of cutting edge technologies (Crystal, 1996/2003). English is the language of entertainment – music, film, video; it is one of the United States' most profitable exports (Castells, 1991). English is not perceived as a linguistic difficulty to the polyglot Turkmen; instead it is perceived as a threat to the traditional way of life. English signifies an unknown gateway to the outside world, a world dominated by Americans and Europeans who have waged war on adjoining Muslim countries. Yet English is also perceived as the key to globalization, and the way to join the world community, to enhance economic prosperity. Because of these conflicting viewpoints, the Turkmen leadership remains hesitant in its support of English language teaching. Consequently, ESL teachers experience many problems in Turkmenistan, which include problems related to corruption, computer woes, funding, and a host of other difficulties.

Corruption

Since Turkmenistan's independence in 1991, the country's leaders have legislated language and educational policies that simultaneously promote the Turkmen language and protect their own power base. Indigenous language policy in Central Asian countries has been correlated with promoting national identity (personal communication, William Fierman, April 15, 2010). Unfortunately, after the fall of the USSR, educational systems in post-Soviet countries, not just Turkmenistan, have become more corrupt, centralized, and unequal (Ledeneva, 1998; Silova & Steiner Khamsi, 2008). The Turkmen government's language planning policies can be viewed as self-defense

measures aimed at safeguarding the Turkmen language and culture from outside forces, given the invasions, colonization, and oppression by outsiders. By lowering the frequency of Russian as a language of inter-ethnic communication, and by blocking the study of other foreign languages, especially English, only a small, privileged elite class of people will be able to communicate with non-Turkmen speakers in the country and out of the country (Sartor, 2010). Turkmen will also be economically compromised. In effect, these language policies are creating a kind of internal colonialism (Silova & Steiner Khamsi, 2008).

It appears that fluency in foreign languages, specifically Russian and English, is now being acquired only by urban Turkmen elites (with the exception of some rural participants learning English from Peace Corps Volunteers). ESL education has not been promoted, despite the official government rhetoric acknowledging English as the language of international trade and communication (William Fierman, personal communication, April 15, 2010). The first president's educational policies, which have ranged from cutting the amount of mandatory schooling, as well as mandating Turkmen as the official language in the classroom, and forbidding overseas studies, have kept Turkmen students from reaching academic parity, English or otherwise, with the outside world. The current president has done little to remedy these issues, despite rhetoric to the contrary (Kaplan, 2008). All of these issues create problems for ESL instructors in Turkmenistan.

Computer woes

English rides on the Internet but Turkmenistan is slowly acquiring computer proficiency. Some schools that I visited have desktop computers, but they are not connected to the Internet. Offices I visited have computers with slow or limited Internet connections; one professional in a Ministry reported that his connection is cut every quarter for several weeks when funds assigned by the financial planners run out. Moreover, computers are expensive by Turkmen standards. Furthermore, Internet accessibility requires Russian or English, and/or Turkish; very little online information is currently available in Turkmen. Most of the general population cannot afford a computer and Internet. They have no opportunity to access online information, English or otherwise.

Funding woes

No significant funding exists for English language studies in universities; there are no government ESL scholarships for Turkmens to study English abroad. Funding that promotes academic information, textbooks, teacher training, and healthy interaction with the international academic community is lacking in all academic subjects, not just English. Funding for computer labs, the few that exist, is limited. Moreover, funding for ESL teachers' salaries is often delayed, sometimes for months.

Infrastructure woes

President Berdymukhammedov promised after his election in 2006 to build additional schools and educational institutes. Only one school of note has been constructed in Ashgabat during 2009: an elite Russian language school. In December 2009, Russian President Medvedev came to the opening of this Russian language lyceum. The school is closed to the public. No major repairs have been made on any existing educational structures.

The student curriculum

In addition to the problems indicated above, mindless social activities and political meetings take up many hours of student and educators' days. Students do not show up for classes regularly. They are often called to participate in political meetings and performances designed to build national identity. Some Turkmen colleagues suggest that these activities are deliberate, and meant to hinder the pursuit of knowledge.

Challenges for ESL educators in Turkmenistan

Language educators endure many problems as they seek to offer ESL instruction at all educational levels in Turkmenistan. From a lack of ESL funding to faceless fear, many factors have kept English and ESL out of mainstream Turkmen education. ESL jobs are limited by government restrictions and a lack of need. Teachers are impacted by corruption, government controls restrict teaching practices, resources and teaching standards are in decline, and the hardship of teaching in such a country makes Turkmenistan an undesirable place for foreign ESL teachers to work.

One reason for a lack of government support for ESL in the country is because few jobs

require knowledge and/or fluency in English in Turkmenistan. English remains popular but exotic. The educated population in urban areas such as Ashgabat seeks to remain bilingual in Russian and Turkmen, but the country overall is showing that Russian is decreasing as Turkmen revitalizes (Pavlenko, 2006), although the knowledge of English may be slowly spreading (Sartor, 2010). The Turkmen economy rests primarily upon oil and gas reserves, and cotton exports. The US and the EU have made no large, successful, commercial agreements regarding the processing and export of hydrocarbons; Russia buys most of Turkmenistan's cotton and has, until recently, purchased most of the hydrocarbons. According to *The Economist's* December 2009 issue, Gazprom, a Russian monopoly, has bought 70% of Turkmenistan's oil in the past, until recently, when a major pipeline exploded. That same month China signed a huge oil pipeline deal with the Turkmen government. The language of big money – oil and gas commerce – is not conducted in English. Turkish is also important for commercial reasons, both domestic and international. French and Turkish are also the languages of domestic construction enterprises implemented by Mr Niyazov and continued by Mr Berdymukhammedov.

As indicated above, one of the most blatant and distressing problems that ESL instructors, Turkmen and foreign alike, face in Turkmenistan is corruption inside the educational system. When corrupt practices pervade educational systems, specifically ESL classrooms, productive, reliable and talented students are not fairly educated, assessed, and validated. Corruption lowers the desire to learn in these students, because achievement is correlated to wealth and having the right connections, rather than talent and motivation to learn (Heynemann et al., 2007). Students who manage to succeed inside a corrupt institution and want to further their studies abroad and frequently find that their credibility is questioned by foreign institutions. Foreign educators question the validity of these students, because their schools are notorious for rent-seeking tactics. The social costs of corruption are enormous. According to Heynemann et al. (2007), corruption has effects on both low and high income people by impacting the ways people may increase their income.

Corruption in Turkmenistan has two layers: the first derives from the previous Soviet



An overview of Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan. photo courtesy William Fierman

system of *blat* – connection, bribes and gifts to get access to people, institutions, and opportunities (Ledeneva, 1998); it has now been overlaid with a second, Turkmen layer of corruption based on kinship connections and financial need. Clan alliances contribute to success in Turkmen society. Having good relationships, especially kinship relationships, helps secure slots in schools, and other educational opportunities. Because the educational system is in acute disrepair, bribes to administrators, teachers, and friends who know these people, all ease the way to offer ESL education.

For ESL students and teachers, the harm comes via a lack of commitment. My students and colleagues all understood long before I did that grades and assessment had nothing to do with their final marks. Because of this, students came to class sporadically, often arrived late, and less than 70% completed homework assignments. At the end of the term, all of them trudged into the teachers' room, bearing gifts for the department head. It was her assessment (capricious and whimsical and for a price) that counted, not rubric and testing. For Turkmen teachers who must work within this environment constantly, corruption of this sort degrades morale. Attempting to curb corruption by documenting it (Heyneman et al., 2007) is not a good idea in Turkmenistan. As a visiting scholar, I have been repeatedly warned by Turkmen colleagues not to publish anything negative and/or not previously approved by the government. In developed countries, the availability of data for all kinds of research,



A typical university classroom in Ashgabat. Photo courtesy of William Fierman.

criminal or otherwise, is taken for granted. In contrast, in Central Asia, specifically Turkmenistan, secrecy (and bribery) remains a key component to cultural norms (Redo, 2004). Moreover, documenting corruption via statistics – quantitative research – or via interviews – qualitative research – is difficult if not impossible, as government statistics are questionable (Redo, 2004). People fear grave consequences if they speak up. Available statistics cannot be verified; sources cannot be named. Negative publicity of any kind is a sensitive governmental issue for the Turkmen government and for foreign diplomats, who do not want to threaten their tenuous position in the country by challenging ministries (Lefebvre & McDermott, 2008).

Government control of information and the Internet

Information in Turkmenistan is tightly monitored. Education schoolbooks belong to the schools. They are 'rented' by students, and returned at the end of the year. English language books are out of date, full of mistakes, and colorless. Native English language teachers are rare. Turkmen colleagues have told me that they view conversation and friendship with foreign ESL instructors as potentially dangerous.

The Turkmen government has been able to significantly limit the Internet via price and availability. Only Bashkent, a Turkish funded language and computer school consortium, offers computer training courses. Less than ten

Internet cafes exist in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital city; they are small, dimly lit, cramped spaces, with few workstations. Only the US Embassy offers Internet access free of charge via the Information Resource Center (IRC) in its Public Affairs Office. Turkmenistan has limited English language resources; the US Embassy's Information Resource Center is the only English language library in Turkmenistan, with under 3,000 books and assorted magazines. No stores in Turkmenistan exist for the purchase of English language books. A large used book store exists in Ashgabat – but no titles are available in English.

The morale of the teaching profession

Morale is low among most Turkmen ESL teachers. Of the 50 Turkmen educators I have interviewed, 90% were concerned with a standard of low professionalism in ESL teaching; over 50% had no confidence in their abilities. Many Turkmen ESL teachers attributed their lack of morale to corruption; they said that the economic crisis, low wages, and deferred wages, all made them feel that bribe taking was not a serious issue. Teachers also felt that their profession was not treated with respect. Some teachers reported that good connections are needed to survive economically, and part of this cohesion translated into an exchange of gifts and money between students and educators. Some students and educators said that the lack of native speakers made the ESL profession appear below standard compared to the rest of the post-Soviet countries and the world at large. Many students felt that their own levels suffered because they had no place to use English, and no possibility of going abroad to study and enhance their English skills.

Remuneration and fear

Officially, everyone who works for the State in Turkmenistan receives a low salary, between \$200 and \$300 per month. Unfortunately, low salaries encourage corrupt practices, because people are always eager to supplement their incomes. Teachers tutor students when they can; the current rate of ESL tutoring is 20–30 *manat* per hour (1 *manat* = 2.84 US dollars). Turkmen ESL teachers do not have financial resources to obtain teacher training abroad. Turkmen ESL teacher training in country is almost non-existent, other than the Peace

Corps team-teacher partnerships, and a few sporadic workshops offered by visiting ESL fellows.

Many teachers felt uneasy in the work environment. One said, 'It is always possible that my colleagues will become jealous and report me for some minor incident.' ESL teachers desperately want to get more training and education abroad, but they fear going. 'In our country, such trips are for the bosses; they are perks, not training trips. If I were to go, my boss might fire me.' Turkmen educators said that publishing any information about Turkmenistan, and education – even innocuous ESL methodology – holds great risks to their friends and family. Sadly, teachers reported that their bosses and supervisors are watching them, not to support but to report them to the Turkmen security forces. In sum, no one can be trusted. Working in this ambiance is not easy.

Challenges faced by foreign ESL teachers

The first problem for foreign ESL instructors is obtaining a proper visa. Getting into Turkmenistan is not easy and requires a Turkmen sponsor. Foreign educators often learn only at the last minute if they are going to be admitted as a visiting scholar, teaching fellow, or lecturer. The visa process is relatively simple, but expensive. A one year visa costs American teachers \$522. Upon arrival, every foreigner must register with the immigration authorities. Because this process is difficult, must be completed within 72 hours, and all official business must be conducted in Turkmen, foreign embassies are in charge of this procedure. If registration is not done correctly by one's embassy clerks, the government of Turkmenistan has the right and the authority to levy a substantial fine and/or deport the foreign guest. After arrival, the next problem ESL instructors and scholars encounter is finding a venue. Although foreign teachers' salaries are paid for by their respective governments, usually through stipends and grants, or money allocated to programs, such as the Peace Corps Volunteers, every foreigner must have official permission to teach inside Turkmenistan at each particular venue. Diplomatic notes are also required to travel around the country to present ESL workshops. ESL Fellows and visiting scholars are often placed on interminable hold by the Turkmen Ministry of Education for no stated reason.

Another problem for ESL teachers, Turkmen

and foreign alike, is the general lack of English language print materials. This would not be serious in other countries, where Internet access is easily available; lessons and information could be downloaded. In Turkmenistan, however, most people, even professors and professionals, have limited Internet skills and limited access to the Internet. Turkmen Internet does not support video presentations to date. All of this makes print resources more valuable. Textbooks used in Turkmen schools are notoriously bad. None have any color pictures. These books are a mishmash of old Soviet English grammars (with glaring mistakes), jumbled readings about capitalism and socialism dating back to the communist era, and an assortment of translated thoughts from the *Ruhnama* – President Niyazov's book on Turkmen history, culture and philosophy. In brief, no clear curriculum, rubric, or assessment standards exist inside of academic institutions and schools run by the Turkmen government.

There is a dearth of culturally sensitive ESL textbooks, a lack of bilingual textbooks, multimedia learning tools and games, and a lack of colorful, interesting, fun ESL games and readers for children. Schools and universities have no funding for textbooks. 'We depend upon donations from the BC (British Council) and foreign teachers who come on exchange,' one ESL teacher told me, 'I Xerox lessons from these donated books.' Ashgabat, the capital city, has no English language bookstore, and no place to buy or order English textbooks, novels, newspapers, magazines, or comics.

Foreign ESL instructors must depend upon their embassies for internal support in Turkmenistan. The US Embassy hosts a few ESL Fellows every year. Because the embassy personnel turns around every 2–3 years, diplomatic staff are invested only in short term projects that aid and abet their careers. Fellows to Turkmenistan rarely stay over their ten month assignments because their hands are tied: they cannot do anything related to teaching without a diplomatic note. Supporting a Fellow or visiting scholar thus requires a time investment by embassy employees, who are often understaffed and harried. Many are indifferent to ESL Fellows, and great deal of potential is wasted. To add to this waste, as already mentioned, the Turkmen Ministry of Education appears to be actively blocking ESL opportunities, so that committed teachers are simply stonewalled in pursuing their profession.

Conclusion

Teaching ESL in Turkmenistan is no easy task. Yet, although the environment is not officially welcoming, the enthusiasm and desire for English among Turkmen educators and students is growing, along with a growing desire for international communications – using English and the Internet. No sustainable English language pedagogy can be built without access to adequate texts, the Internet, and educational trends around the world. Turkmenistan's forced isolation, combined with repressive politics, has stultified ESL educators in this country. The government must relax control over communications, pedagogy, and travel. This will lead to a more open and productive relationship with the outside world. Meanwhile, ESL training and English remains a rare commodity, distributed only to privileged urban Turkmen elites who utilize English for their own personal means.

English riding on a wave of globalization could disturb the existing balance of power in Turkmenistan by communicating new ideas about lifestyles, especially diverse ways of governance. Turkmens perceive that English carries the message that better economic opportunities are possible. Keeping Turkmen citizens incommunicado from the English speaking world indirectly supports the current leadership's legitimacy via ignorance. The leadership claims legitimacy by military might that asserts neutrality, and by offering the general population free subsidies for basic commodities: salt, water, electricity and gasoline. Turkmen leadership, despite its official avowal to go global, has done little to support English, ESL education and the Internet to date. This appears to be a self-defense measure: the less the Turkmen people know, the better the chances for Turkmen leadership to retain legitimacy and the power.

Yet globalization, in tandem with English, has been approaching other post-Soviet countries. Ideas transmitted via English offer diverse philosophies about economics, politics, religion and education (Silova et al., 2007). Because of this, English lures non-native speakers. English has become the most widely sought foreign language around the globe (Berns, 1988, 1995; Crystal, 1996; Fishman et al., 1977). Via satellite TV, Internet, and some contact with ESL instructors, English raps at Turkmenistan's still closed door.

But as Internet connectivity increases, as educational exchanges grow, and as the demand for Western commodities increases, Turkmenistan's intelligentsia have started to slowly support ESL education. The elite want this information; they see English as a gateway to better economic, social, and creative lifestyles. When Turkmenistan increases business deals with the Western world, ESL educators will be more welcome to do business with Turkmenistan. At that point, whether Turkmen leaders will be able to retain ideological control – linguistic and political – is yet to be answered. ■

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genitives or determiners are used to specifically indicate the person or company referred to by the idiom, and adjectives are used to describe the noun phrase. They are basically exploited for special effect or for stylistic writing. For this reason most idioms are modified by nouns or determiners. Another noteworthy reason for idiom modification is news headlines. When idioms are exploited for headlines it gives a tantalizing hint of the content of the news. Sometimes idiom modifications are deliberate ploys of the author. This study suggests that idioms like *kick the bucket* or *bite the bullet* are not altered because such modification does not contribute anything to the idiomatic meaning. In my list, twenty idioms are found without any modifications. All the other aforementioned idioms are modified to manipulate their idiomatic meaning. Thus modification does not mean they are no longer idioms. Rather this study reveals that every modification evolves out of a conscious manipulation of language and a deliberate selection of sign. An understanding of the idiom modification offers an important socio-psychological window on the English language that provides a knowledgeable observer with key insight.

I am well aware of the risk of using data from the Internet, as they may not be normal. Idioms may be used there on an ad hoc basis, say, for facetious or particular effect. There are dubious cases and obvious misspellings, which should be ignored. Yet, there are also many trustworthy examples of modification of idiom found on the Internet. A tremendous economy with words appeals to readers' psychologies and reflects the current usage of modified

idiom forms. Now it is known that among these idioms of the type V + the + N structure, some idioms permit a variety of modification probably because of the lexico-semantic and syntactic flexibility that it has even if it is usually quite fixed. Thus non-modified idioms should be regarded as completely frozen idioms (until now) and it would be better to call the flexible ones least frozen idioms. ■

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