The Effect of Sentence Writing versus Multiple Exposures in Different Contexts on EFL Learners’ Acquisition of Idioms

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Abstract
Some experimental studies in EFL vocabulary acquisition have documented the efficacy of the original use of words (Joe, 1995, 1998), ‘pushed output’ (Swain, 1996), and multiple exposures to words (Carey, 1978; Stahl, 1986) in the recall of word meaning. However, studies showing the superior effectiveness of exposures to a word over a word-focused activity, e.g. sentence writing, are scarce (Laufner, 2001). In this research, two parallel homogeneous groups of learners were exposed to two conditions of idiom learning: sentence writing and multiple exposures in different contexts. The results of the test for the immediate recall of the idioms and the test for the delayed recall of those idioms demonstrated that it was the former task that yielded better word gains.

Key words: EFL learners, incidental vocabulary acquisition, idiom, multiple exposures, context, sentence writing, immediate and delayed recall.

INTRODUCTION
According to the default hypothesis of vocabulary acquisition (Nagy et al., 1985; Sternberg, 1987), most words are acquired through exposure to language input, particularly reading input, rather than by deliberately committing words to memory. The default hypothesis is justified in negative terms: the number of words that are learnt is too vast to be accounted for by instruction. The hypothesis makes sense if
we take into account the number of words that people know in their native language. It is estimated that the number of words that English-speaking high school graduates know in English is about 20,000 word families (Goulden et al., 1990; Nation, 1990). This estimate is a support for the default hypothesis. There are other less modest estimates that claim the number is much larger. It has been shown and argued that American high school students’ estimated known vocabulary – between 25000 and 50000 words and even more – cannot have been learned solely by means of explicit vocabulary instruction; rather most words are acquired in an incremental way through repeated encounters during extensive reading (Nagy & Anderson, 1984).

The figures pertaining to the vocabulary size of native speakers are, as Laufer (2001) observes, very different from that of foreign learners. For example, Japanese college EFL learners were found to know 2000-2300 word families after receiving 800-1200 hours of instruction (Shillaw, 1995; Barrow et al., 1999). Some other studies by Laufer (1998) and Nurweni and Read (1999) report similar results.

Laufer (2001) does not rule out the possibility that most of the words that these foreign language learners knew were taught, not ‘picked up’. She believes it is possible to teach an average of 2-3 words per hour of instruction, otherwise, the figures concerning the vocabulary size of the foreign learners would speak against the efficacy of this way of learning if the vocabulary were acquired mainly through input.

In a survey by Laufer (2001) on L2 vocabulary acquisition, it is stated that word gains from reading activities alone are very small. By comparison, reading supplemented with word-focused tasks yields better results. Interestingly enough, when reading is compared with a word-focused activity alone, it is the latter that is more effective for L2 vocabulary acquisition.

**Incidental vocabulary acquisition**

As far as incidental vocabulary acquisition is concerned, the studies, surveyed by Laufer (2001), point to the superiority of word-oriented tasks or activities over reading. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is
defined as the acquisition of vocabulary as a by-product of another activity (Hulstijn, 2001). During a task or an activity, the learners may attend to some words by utilizing them in sentences or by looking them up in a dictionary. Some of these words may, as a result, be remembered even though the learners do not deliberately try to commit them to memory.

**Idioms**

Vocabulary is an indispensal building block for the ESL/EFL skills. Idioms, a substantial subcategory of the vocabulary, are highly frequent lexical elements of language. Goulden et al. (1990) in their analysis of a large and representative corpus found that compound entries (i.e. entries with internal spaces or hyphens) outnumber the entries for basic words. Interestingly enough, in an analysis by Anglin (1993), it was pointed out that more than half of the compound entries are idioms.

Idioms are units of language with a fixed grammatical and lexical content. The meaning of the idioms cannot be worked out from a study of the individual words making the idiom. Idioms frequently operate on a metaphorical level. Some are so fixed that it is impossible to change a word or the structure without losing, or irretrievably changing, the meaning. Idioms therefore function more like individual words than like phrases or sentences (Carter, 1987; Carter et al., 2001).

Carter et al. (2001) indicate that idioms present very real problems to learners of a language: first, it is not always possible for listeners or readers to recognize that an idiom exists, and they may assume the literal meaning. Second, it is unusual to be able to substitute one word for another and provide a translation into non-idiomatic English. Frequently, a whole phrase has to be rewritten. So, without access to a good dictionary providing examples of idiomatic uses, an idiom cannot often be translatable.

Carter et al. (2001, p. 92) provide some examples of translations into English by people for whom English is not a first language. The following examples have been taken from their work:
1. 'On the menu of a Swiss restaurant: Our wines leave you nothing to hope for'.

2. 'On the door of a Moscow hotel room: If this is your first visit to the USSR, you are welcome to it'.

In the first example, ‘hope’ is synonymous with ‘desire’. Unfortunately, ‘leaves nothing to be desired’ means the opposite of ‘nothing to hope for’. A translator, not fluent in English and not working with a thesaurus, could easily fall into trap. Likewise, in the second example, ‘you are welcome’ and ‘you are welcome to it’ have more or less opposite meanings. An inexperienced user of the language would have no way of knowing this (pp. 92-3).

Idioms then are useful devices providing users of language with ready-made phrases that communicate a clear and agreed meaning. They add color and variety to the language. Since most idioms are structurally and lexically fixed, they function more like words than phrases, and in any discussion or analysis of words and meanings, it is useful to treat idioms as words (Adkins, 1968; Carter et al., 2001).

**Frequency of input and sentence writing**

As stated earlier, vocabulary is an indispensable building block for the ESL/EFL skills. Further, language is more or less idiomatic. Therefore, as Irujo (1986) states, the learning and teaching of idioms must be regarded as an integral part of vocabulary learning and teaching. There is general consensus in the literature that students learn idioms as they do vocabulary. That is, they select and actively learn idioms that will be useful to them.

Evidence shows that substantial, if incomplete, knowledge about the meaning of a word can be gained through one or a small number of exposures. For instance, Carey (1978) found that very few exposures to a new word were necessary for children to learn something about its meaning. Sometimes, we can enhance comprehension of a text containing difficult words by instructing the difficult words in the text as well as involving multiple exposures to the words in context (Stahl, 1986). Also, in a study on the probable effect of different contexts on learning idioms as well as the interaction between learning idioms in different contexts and EFL
learners' language proficiency, Atai and Akbarian (2003) found that exposure to idioms in multiple contexts would result in more effective learning of the different aspects of idioms, such as the syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic features, etc.

Now, as to producing original sentences, it is a difficult and challenging task. However in this kind of task, the assumption is that a demanding task would yield good results. Swain (1996) has shown that 'pushed output' contributes to improving learners' grammar, and Joe (1995, 1998) has shown that original uses of words lead to retention of these words.

Laufer (2001) claims that "the richer input which characterizes second, as opposed to foreign, language contexts will provide enough repeated exposure to vocabulary for incidental learning" (pp. 49-50). However, she points out the scarcity of any empirical studies indicating the effectiveness of a particular number of exposures to a word in communication over a word-focused activity. Sentence writing and looking up words in a dictionary are only two examples of word-focused activities.

To explore the effect of word-focused activities versus multiple exposures to a word in different contexts on idiom acquisition, and to investigate the probable superiority of either of these two tasks, the present study was designed to seek answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' acquisition of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions?

2. Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' retention of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions?

Based on the above questions, the following null hypotheses were developed:

$H_0 (1)$ There is no significant difference between EFL learners' acquisition of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions.
HO (2) There is no significant difference between EFL learners’ retention of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions.

METHOD
Subjects
The participants for the present research were two parallel groups of EFL juniors (fifth-semester students) who were selected from the University of Qom, Qom, Iran. They were 60 students – 30 learners in the experimental group and 30 in the control one. Sex variable was not considered in this study.

In order to assess the homogeneity of the groups before treatment, a TOEFL test was administered. The results of an independent t-test showed, that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Therefore, each of the two groups was randomly assigned to a different type of vocabulary teaching and learning condition.

Materials and instrumentation
Thirty-seven idioms were selected according to the following criteria. Firstly, they were chosen based on frequency; the most-frequently-used words and expressions are the most essential for EFL readers to learn (Laufer, 1990). Secondly, three university colleagues teaching EFL courses were consulted in selecting the idioms to be incorporated in this research. So a sample of idioms from a corpus of EFL textbooks comprising 8 different international textbooks was selected and the most frequent ones, 37 idioms, were taken as the most frequent idioms. Thirdly, the probability of the students’ familiarity or unfamiliarity with the idioms was taken into account (Taglieber et al., 1988); that is, a pilot study was conducted prior to the experiment in order to verify the subjects’ unfamiliarity with the idioms. The subjects were presented with the idioms and asked to provide the meaning. Based on the participants’ feedback, seventeen idioms familiar to the subjects were eliminated, and the other twenty idioms were included in the experiment (see Appendix 1). Fourthly, the selected idioms did not have a word-for-word equivalent in the participants’ L1 (Boers, 2001).
Two versions of materials for instruction were prepared. In one version, only the definition was provided for each idiom and the prospective participants in this condition were to write two original sentences for each of the idioms each session, based on the definitions provided. In this version, the idioms were not used in a context (see Appendix 2).

For the second version, the definition and four different contexts, each incorporating a dialogue of a few short turns or some clear sentences, were prepared for each idiom. The prospective participants in this condition were to have multiple exposures to the idioms that had been used in different contexts (see Appendix 3).

The contexts along with the definitions (meanings) of idioms were adapted from the current international EFL textbooks, dictionaries, and the Internet. To ensure authenticity and originality, none of the contexts and the definitions was developed by the researchers. Three colleagues consistently approved the selection of the adequate and clear contexts in which the idioms were embedded.

Two tests had been prepared on those idioms to evaluate the immediate recall and the delayed retention of the idioms. The two tests – the first administered one week after the treatment and intended to assess the immediate recall of the participants, and the second administered at the interval of six weeks after the first test and intended to assess the delayed recall of the idioms – consisted of twenty items, ten of which were multiple-choice questions (with four options) and the other ten required the learners to write original sentences.

Two expert colleagues in the field evaluated the items of the tests for clarity and based on their feedback the deficient items were improved. Further, the tests were piloted with twenty subjects similar to the original subjects for clarity of test instructions and item characteristics.

Procedure
The present research consisted of two treatments of presenting vocabulary. Both of the treatments lasted for two weeks, but were
administered in four sessions. In the first treatment condition, the participants (henceforth MEG) were exposed to twenty idioms in different contexts. That is, in the two sessions of the first week, the students received the idioms in two different contexts. In other words, the subjects worked on only one context each session. The meaning of the idioms and a short and clear context accompanying the idioms were provided to the participants who worked on them in the class. They considered the idioms in both contexts, thus comparing and trying to find out where and how to use them in order to consolidate the meaning of the idioms in their minds. The definitions and the words in the contexts were quite clear so that they did not impose any difficulty on the participants. In case they faced some unfamiliar words in the contexts, they were allowed to check them with the instructor, thus clarifying everything. In the two sessions of the second week, the participants received the same idioms in two other different contexts and followed the same procedure as in the previous sessions.

As for the second treatment condition, the participants (henceforth SWG) of the second group received only the meaning of the twenty idioms with no exposure to contexts in which the idioms were embedded. They were assigned to work on the idioms and know their meaning in the class. The instructor explained the meaning of the idioms which had been provided and tried to assist the learners as to how and in which situation or context the idioms are used. After they had understood the meaning of the idioms, the participants were asked to write original sentences based on what they had learned from the meanings provided. In fact, the participants were involved in individual work and group work; they wrote original sentences individually or in pairs and then embarked on peer correction. The participants together checked the original sentences they had written and corrected the mistakes. Only one original sentence was discussed for each idiom and each learner took turns in reading their own produced sentences and the other students in the group tried to find the mistakes, if any. If the produced sentences were syntactically, semantically, lexically and grammatically all right, the students in turns followed reading their own sentences and working on the other remaining idioms till they had worked on all of the idioms. In the two
sessions of the second week, the students in the second group followed the same activity. So, the treatment in the two conditions was the same in terms of time; it lasted for two weeks.

The participants – who had enrolled in ‘The Use of Idioms in Translation’, a course usually offered in their fifth semester – were taught by one of the researchers and were not aware of functioning as research subjects. Everything was scheduled as part of the participants’ compulsory course.

The two groups took an idiom test in the third week. The test was administered to measure the immediate recall or retention of the idioms that the two groups worked on. Six weeks after the administration of the first test assessing the immediate recall of the participants, the researchers administered a second test which had been designed to estimate the delayed retention or to assess the delayed recall of the idioms by the students. This test again comprised twenty items, with ten multiple-choice questions and ten items for producing original sentences. It is worth mentioning that there was a difference between the first and the second test. The ten idioms, tested in multiple-choice form in the first test, were assessed in the form of sentence writing in the second test. Similarly, the ten idioms, tested through sentence writing in the first test, were offered in the form of multiple-choice questions in the second test for the delayed recall. The change of the form of the tests or altering the format of the items in the two tests was intended to reduce or to nullify the effect of being test-wise.

It is noteworthy that administering the two tests to the two groups took place under the same conditions in terms of the amount of time to finish the tests, the time of administering the tests, etc.

Data Analysis
One point was allotted to each correct answer in the vocabulary tests. Therefore, one point was reduced for choosing each wrong alternative in multiple-choice questions. As to the items for writing original sentences, the totality of the produced sentences from the structural and semantic point of view were taken into consideration; that is, the
idioms should have been used in the right context and the sentences should not have been semantically, syntactically, grammatically flawed. Proportionately, any violation in the use of idioms was penalized. More specifically, if a learner had taken an idiom for another and wrongly used it in the wrong place, thus implying that he had not learned the semantic features of the idiom; he received no point for the answer. Likewise, if the learner had grasped the meaning of an idiom but he had a problem only in the structure, such as the grammar of the idiom; thirty percent of one point for each correct answer was proportionately reduced. The following sentences are taken from the participants' responses:

1) 'Ahmad was fired from the office and had no other job to earn money, so he live from hand to mouth'.

2) 'When I wanted to tell the news to the teacher, my friend take the words right out my mouth and told it to him before I did'.

'Live' and 'took' should have been used for 'live' and 'take' in the first and second sentences respectively.

This was true if the mistake had occurred in the use of the idiom, not in the other parts of the sentence. So, any grammatical mistake in the other parts of the produced sentences that created no problem in understanding the sentence was not penalized. On the whole, the sentences made should have been used in a way that they showed they had been learned and utilized properly. So, the ambiguous and unclear sentences produced by the learners received no points. If there were no responses to some items, zero point was then given to each unanswered item, since the unanswered item gave no evidence of any potential learning.

Scoring of the responses was carried out both by the researchers and by a blind judge. There were no instances of disagreement in their assessment. A two-tailed t-test was run in each of the two tests to probe the null hypotheses in this research.

RESULTS
The two questions motivating the present research were a) whether there was any significant difference between EFL learners' acquisition of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions,
and b) whether there was any significant difference between EFL learners’ retention of idioms in multiple exposure versus sentence-writing conditions. Each of the two parallel homogeneous groups went under a different condition of presenting idioms, as described above; while the first group (MEG) had multiple exposures to idioms in different contexts, the second group (SWG) was exposed to the task of sentence writing with the use of those idioms.

The treatment in the two conditions, which lasted for four sessions in two weeks time, was followed by test 1 in the third week. Test 1 was intended to assess the acquisition of the idioms that the two groups worked on. Table 1 demonstrates the results of the performance of the subjects on test 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>t-observed</th>
<th>t-critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEG</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.388</td>
<td>3.302</td>
<td>10.903</td>
<td>4.908</td>
<td>2.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWG</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.283</td>
<td>2.827</td>
<td>7.991</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to evaluate the performance of the participants in the two groups, a two-tailed independent $t$-test was conducted on their means performances in test 1. The $t$ value (4.908) was higher than the $t$ critical value (2.000) with 60 d. f. at .05 level of significance. We were thus quite safe in rejecting the null hypothesis. The two groups had scored differently on this test. The difference was statistically significant. That is to say, this supported the task of sentence writing in learning idioms. The $t$ test supported the claim that the participants of SWG had performed better on the idiom test as a result of being exposed to the task of sentence writing.

Test 2 which had been designed to estimate the delayed recall or retention of the idioms by the students was administered to MEG group and SWG group six weeks after the first test. A two-tailed $t$-test was again employed in the second phase of the study. Table 2 demonstrates the results of the performance of the subjects on the second idiom test:
Table 2. The results of the two groups’ performance on test 2 (delayed recall or retention of idioms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>t-observed</th>
<th>t-critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEG</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.891</td>
<td>3.776</td>
<td>14.258</td>
<td>5.081</td>
<td>2.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWG</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.558</td>
<td>3.322</td>
<td>11.035</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 depicts, the t observed value for 60 degrees of freedom was 5.081 that exceeded the critical value at the .05 level of significance. Thus, the second null hypothesis was rejected as well. The task of sentence writing had been more beneficial than multiple exposures to idioms in different contexts in learning idioms. The t-test supported the claim that the instruction of idioms through the task of sentence writing helped the subjects of SWG group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, the learners were exposed to two conditions of vocabulary learning and teaching. The study was intended to assess the possible superior effectiveness of multiple exposures to idioms in different contexts versus sentence writing on the acquisition and retention of idioms or vice versa. The results of this study show that sentence writing, a word-focused activity, is more facilitating in the retention of the meaning of idioms than multiple exposures in different contexts, shortly after the instruction and in the long run. In other words, this study showed that writing sentences with a newly learned idiom is even more contributive to the recall of the idiom than exposure to that idiom in four different contexts, and this in turn points to the word gains resulting from incidental vocabulary acquisition. It may be concluded from the findings of this experimental research that the meaning of idioms might not be consolidated in the learners’ mind even if they have encountered the word and the idioms in a few contexts unless the learners produce them in original sentences. The subtle syntactic, semantic, and grammatical features of words and particularly idioms are acquired after they have been used in some way.

Therefore, exercises requiring the learners to produce original sentences of their own with the use of idioms, are suggested to
complement the exercises exposing the students to the idioms utilized in multiple contexts.

We need to acknowledge the limitations of the study in terms of low subject sample size and low item size. It is among the first studies done in this regard. Considering what Laufer (2001) clearly states that any empirical studies which show that a particular number of exposures to a word in communication is more effective than a word-focused activity are scarce, this research and its findings are of significance. Therefore, this research needs other enough replications and further studies are needed to shed more light on the issue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The authors acknowledge the help they have received from Mehrdad Taghipour, a member of the Department of Mathematics at the university of Qom, Qom, Iran, for taking care of the statistical analysis of this study.

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APPENDIX 1
The following are the twenty idioms that were included in the research:
A red herring – at sixes and sevens – bark up the wrong tree – bend over backwards to do something – bury one’s head in the sand – bury the hatchet – by hook or by crook – give someone a piece of your mind – handle/treat someone with kid gloves – head over heels (in love) – hear something on/over the grapevine – keep one’s head above water – keep up with the Joneses – live from hand to mouth – make ends meet – see eye to eye – sell like hotcakes – take the words (right) out of someone’s mouth – upset the applecart – wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve.

APPENDIX 2
The following are five out of the twenty idioms along with their definitions. The subjects were required to make original sentences of their own with the help of the definitions provided:
1. A red herring: an unimportant or irrelevant matter which is introduced into a discussion to divert attention from the main subject, the truth etc.
2. At sixes and sevens: used to say that a situation is disorganized and confused, or that a group of people does not agree. In a state of confusion.
3. Bark up the wrong tree: looking for something in the wrong place...
4. Bend over backwards to do something: to try exceptionally hard to please someone.
5. Bury one’s head in the sand: to ignore or hide from obvious signs of danger.

APPENDIX 3
The idioms below are five out of the twenty idioms used in the study. There are four illustrative multiple contexts for each idiom, along with the definition. The subjects had to read them and pay careful attention to the way every idiom had been used.
A.
1. A red herring: fact, argument, etc that leads attention away from the matter being considered.
   • In class pupils sometimes introduce a red herring to distract the teacher from his subject.
2. At sixes and sevens: in a state of confusion.
• “Everyone was at sixes and sevens after the announcement that the company was going out of business.”
3. **Bark up the wrong tree**: to ask the wrong person or look for information in the wrong place.
   • A: “I can’t believe my superintendent. I’ve asked him three times to fix my leaking pipes.”
   • B: “You’re *barking up the wrong tree*. The super only cleans the building. You need to have the landlord call a plumber.”
   • A: “Ugh! The landlord’s on vacation for a month.”
4. **Bend over backwards**: to try exceptionally hard to please someone.
   • A: “So, when did you get out of prison?”
   • B: “A few days ago.”
   • A: “Wow! I imagine you’re really happy to be home.”
   • B: “Yeah, everyone’s really *bent over backwards* to make me feel welcome.”
5. **Bury one’s head in the sand**: to ignore a problem or danger because you do not want to deal with it.
   • Our society’s attitude on AIDS is to hope that if we *bury our heads in the sand*, it will go away.
6. **A red herring**: an unimportant or irrelevant matter which is introduced into a discussion to divert attention from the main subject, the truth etc.
   • “Make sure Matthews answers all our complaints at the meeting. Don’t let him confuse you with *any red herrings*.”
7. **At sixes and sevens**: used to say that a situation is disorganized and confused, or that a group of people does not agree.
   • “Getting ready for the wedding, we were all *at sixes and sevens*, getting in each other’s way.”
8. **Bark up the wrong tree**: looking for something in the wrong place...
   • “I know you think I stole your umbrella, but you are *barking up the wrong tree*; I don’t have it.”
9. **Bend over backwards to do something**: try very hard.
   • “If I can, I will *bend over backwards* to help you get a promotion in the company.”
10. **Bury one’s head in the sand**: to ignore or hide from obvious signs of danger.
    • “Stop *burying your head in the sand*. Look at the statistics on smoking and cancer.”
C.
11. **A red herring**: an attempt to draw attention away from the main facts with an unimportant, unrelated detail.
    • The Prime Minister’s reference to unemployment was *a red herring*. He wanted to get away from the trade figures.
12. **At sixes and sevens**: in a state of confusion, muddle, and disorder.
    • “We moved into the house last week, but I’m afraid everything is still *at sixes and sevens*.”
13. **Bark up the wrong tree**: make a wrong assumption about something.
   - “If you think it was Penny who gave Mr. Evans the wrong information, then you’re barking up the wrong tree. She wasn’t even here when he rang.”

14. **Bend over backward/backwards**: to do as much as you possibly can in order to help someone or do what they want.
   - “I bent over backward, trying to be fair to him – I don’t know what else I can do.”

15. **Bury one’s head in the sand**: refuse to face up to the situation.
    - Having lost all his money in gambling, Nigel simply buried his head in the sand. That was too much for Clara, his wife, who was just the opposite. So she finally decided to leave him.

D.

16. **A red herring**: something irrelevant; something that would divert attention or discussion from essential matters.
    - The chairman refused to allow the meeting to discuss the point brought up by one of the members who opposed the motion because he said that it was merely a red herring.

17. **At sixes and sevens**: disorderly; lost and bewildered; at loose ends.
    - Mrs. Smith is at sixes and sevens since the death of her husband.

18. **Bark up the wrong tree**: choose the wrong course of action.
    - “He is barking up the wrong tree. He accuses me of causing the computer problem but I was away at the time.”

19. **Bend over backwards (to do something)**: try very hard; take great trouble to do something for someone else.
    - “Joanne’s a very good-natured girl. She’ll bend over backwards to help her friends.”

20. **Bury one’s head in the sand**: ignore the situation; pretend that nothing is happening; refuse to face the situation.
    - When trouble comes there are some people who cannot face it; they just bury their heads in the sand and hope everything will be all right.