

## The Value of Using English Idioms in Writing and Speaking Skills in EFL Context

قيمة استخدام المصطلحات الإنجليزية في مهارات الكتابة والتحدث في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### Abstract:

Understanding and mastering idioms in the written and the spoken communication are considered as a sign towards proficiency. Idioms are still unturned stone in their way, as being amongst other issues, towards proficiency. However, it is noticed clearly that there is not much researches done in this respect. Idioms give beauty to language but confusing to language learners. In fact, the level of command of idioms serves as an important indicator of L2 proficiency. Different techniques have been offered to facilitate L2 learner's acquisition of idioms, however, there are also various factors that influence the learning of idiomatic expression. One of the main blocks of L2 idiom learning is that idioms are often unpredictable in meaning, because their meanings cannot always be derived from the literal meanings of the constituent parts. This means that the use of idioms has a great influence in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, because it could be one of the ways to give students better conditions to improve communicative skill in the daily context. Thus, this paper offers some practical suggestions could be translated into more effective classroom practices.

**Keywords:** *idiomatic expressions, idiomaticity, literal and figurative meaning, Idiom processing strategies*

### المخلص:

يعتبر فهم المصطلحات وإتقانها والقدرة على استخدامها في الاتصال الكتابي والمنطوق علامة على الكفاءة. لا تزال التعبيرات الاصطلاحية حجرًا في طريقها، من بين أمور أخرى ، نحو الكفاءة. ومع ذلك، يُلاحظ بوضوح أنه لم يتم إجراء الكثير من الأبحاث في هذا الصدد. التعبيرات الاصطلاحية تضيف الجمال على اللغة والصداق لمتعلمي اللغة في الواقع، يعتبر مستوى إتقان المصطلحات مؤشرًا مهمًا على إتقان اللغة الثانية. تم تقديم تقنيات مختلفة لمنشآت اكتساب متعلم اللغة الثانية للتعبير، ومع ذلك هناك أيضًا العديد من العوامل التي تؤثر على تعلم التعبير الاصطلاحي. تتمثل إحدى الكتل الرئيسية لتعلم المصطلحات في اللغة الثانية في أن التعبيرات الاصطلاحية غالبًا ما تكون غير متوقعة في المعنى، أي لا يمكن دائمًا اشتقاق معانيها من المعاني الحرفية للأجزاء المكونة. هذا يعني أن استخدام المصطلحات له تأثير كبير في عملية التدريس والتعلم للغة أجنبية، لأنها قد تكون إحدى الطرق لمنح الطلاب ظروفًا أفضل لتحسين مهارات التواصل في السياق اليومي. وبالتالي، تقدم هذه الورقة بعض الاقتراحات العملية التي يمكن ترجمتها إلى ممارسات أكثر فاعلية في الفصول الدراسية.

### 1.1. Introduction

This paper aims to help FL students in understanding idiomatic expressions in English. They are very common in both written and spoken language and considered as the colorful side of language. Ellis (1997) argued that sufficient knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in L2 are an essential indicator of the language learners' communicative capability. Therefore, learners should use the language through rose-colored glasses to learn every single item that leads to proficiency. The study of idiomaticity in language has been of long-standing interest to linguists. Linguists such as Langlotz (2006) intend on characterizing the internal structure of languages and psycholinguists, intent on characterizing the internal cognitive structure of language users. Idioms are usually grouped within a larger

class of linguistic expressions called figurative or non literal language. Irujo (1986) argues that in a second language learning classroom, completely idiomatic teaching will not usually be offered and required; however, all learners must be prepared to meet the challenge of idioms occurring frequently in spoken and written English. Thus, definitions of idioms, the importance of learning English idioms in FL context, Using Idiomatic Expressions in Speaking and writing, the role of vocabulary and culture in understanding idioms, the role of Context in Idiom Comprehension and problems in teaching L2 Idioms are reviewed below.

## 1.2. Definition of Idioms

Defining idioms, however, has never been easy. Researchers in the field have made various attempts to define what constitutes an idiom, but due to different theoretical classification criteria adopted in the definition, philologists still are not able to agree on a shared set of terms or to describe the whole process clearly. An idiom is an institutionalized construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi-clause. As Moon (1998: 244) argues that idioms are “not simply a matter of the lexical realization of meaning, but part of the ongoing dynamic interaction between speaker/writer and hearer/reader within the discursive context”. According to Fowler (1996), an idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words, which can make idioms hard for ESL (English as a second language) students and learners to understand.

Furthermore, it is considerably fixed and collocationally restricted (Langlotz, 2006). An idiom is a fixed expression which meaning cannot be taken as a combination of the meanings of its component parts. Thus, the common phrase *kick the bucket* has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets, it means simply, “to die.” In other words, idioms are not literal expressions (Ifill, 2002). Moon (2006) defined idiom as a fixed sequence of words which has a meaning beyond that of the constituent parts. An idiom is “an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts”

(Marlies, 1995: 283). An idiom is a figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally but that takes a nonliteral meaning when used in a specific context (Cain et al., 2004). To conclude the above definitions, it is obvious to say that an idiom is a combination of words that has a particular meaning that is different from the lexical meaning of the individual words themselves.

### 1.3. The Importance of Learning English Idioms in FL Context

The importance of learning idioms has been emphasized by linguists and language teachers in recent years. Using figurative language is one of the main features of native like language and idiomaticity is a nature of proficiency as well as fluency that language learners are expected to achieve. In this regard, Moreno (2011: 43) refers to three main reasons why it is so crucial to teach idioms arguing that because of their high frequency, special attention should be paid to idioms and language teachers should not relegate them to a secondary state in the curriculum: First, frequent use of idioms makes language learners as fluent speakers, and figurative competence in a foreign language is a sign of communicative competence. Moreover, idiomatic expressions which give language variety and character help learners to penetrate into culture, customs, and lifestyle of the target language. Secondly, cognitive linguistic studies have demonstrated the crucial role of memory in learning fixed expressions such as idioms. Hence, the teachability and learnability of idioms and their pedagogical aspect should be taken in to account. Finally, many idioms are constantly changing over time, in order to find out their underlying essence, we have to resort to cultural factors and adopt a diachronic view of the language (such as etymological elaboration). Bortfeld (2003) believes that the increasing number of idioms in *Dictionary of American Idioms* is indicator of the essential role of idioms which play in daily language use.

### 1.4. Using Idioms in English Speaking Skills

Speaking is one of the important English language skills that should be mastered by students and teachers. According to Chancy (1998:3), "speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols in a variety of context. Speaking

is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching". In order to become more fluent in English, students should be able to understand how language components combine and interact to produce meaning and discourse (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). L2 learners need to become skilled users of vocabulary, phrases, and syntactic constructions. They need to build their spoken discourse repertoire in order to participate in conversations, formal and casual alike. Swan, (2006) and Ur, (2014) agreed that spoken routines and idiomatic sequences can be utilized in an extraordinary range of functional contexts and for a practically unlimited variety of communicative and social purposes.

Furthermore, spoken routines and idiomatic sequences can be utilized in an extraordinary range of functional contexts and for a practically unlimited variety of communicative and social purposes (Swan, 2006; Ur, 2014). Certain studies have been found, that in casual conversations most exchanges are prefabricated and extremely stereotyped. For example, Carter and McCarthy (2006) identified an enormous array of conversational and pragmatic formulas and phrases that are continually adjusted to suite specific discourse and social contexts. Many research reports have determined that much language acquisition, which the first or second, entails the acquisition of conventionalized expressions and repeated routines. This means that social interactions "employ a number of standardized and stereotyped procedures" that mark and characterize them (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992: 114). Therefore, teachers should use suitable classroom activities in teaching speaking in order to make students to talk to each other in pairs or groups. They should be more active to stimulate discussion and information trading transaction (Nation, 2013).

### **1.5. Using Idiomatic Expressions in Writing Skills**

The development of students' writing requires providing input to which students respond and focusing on students' skills (Badger and White, 2000). Therefore, academic phrases can be useful in instruction on such discourse functions as to express a point of view, support a position, develop an argument, or present a research finding.

Researchers such as Horwath, (1998) and Swales, (1990) agreed that there are several conventional and highly predictable phrases that mark discourse junctures are called ‘institutionalized’ because they occur more frequently in certain types of texts than in others in research on academic writing. Ferris, (2004) argued that when students produce any written academic style, using conventionalized expressions and portions of sentences is not a language skill that is natural in L1 users and writers. Nor is academic writing a universal ability that most L1 writers come by in the course of their daily life.

Moreover, researchers such as Boers et al., (2007) and Coxhead, (2008) found that L2 academic writers have a great deal of difficulty becoming proficient users of idioms and institutionalized phrases, without which formal written prose probably cannot be produced. It is also a known that the types of writing represent a relatively well-covered set of discourse moves and their attendant phrasing because the academic phrases can be useful in instruction on such discourse functions as to express a point of view, develop an argument, support a position, or present a research finding (Widdowson, 2003; Ur, 2014). This means that providing student with idioms leads to improve their writing skills in one a way or another.

### **1.6. Strategies Employed in L2 Idiom Processing**

In order to interpret the meaning of idioms, L2 speakers recall the strategies acquired during the first language acquisition. It can be argued that L2 speakers, just like L1 speakers, apply some strategies while processing the idioms in spite of the lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of language contact as it is shown by research in the field of foreign/ second language (L2) teaching. Bulut and Yazici (2004) indicated that they rely on the literal meaning conveyed in the context and guess what it means. Furthermore, contextual clues are useful to learners in comprehending unknown idioms. Cooper (1999) explored the comprehension strategies used by L2 learners when trying to decipher the meanings of English idioms in one- or two-sentence contexts. The most commonly used strategies are as follows: guessing from context, discussing and analyzing the idiom, and using the literal meaning. Zyzik, (2009) added that overall,

guessing from context was the most successful strategy. Palmer and Brooks (2004: 12) pointed out that the interpretation of figurative language is mainly related to learner's background knowledge (schemata) in order to interpret the expression within context. They stated "figurative language interpretation is based on student's schemata; therefore, direct or explicit instruction is often needed to provide the knowledge necessary to understand not only the figurative language expressions but the context surrounding them as well". In short, instructions are needed to provide guidness for learners to figure out the intended meaning of the figurative language.

Furthermore, there are some researchers such as Clark and Paivio, (1991) who have turned the attention to a mnemonic strategy by stating its effectiveness. A strategy which is mnemonic and which effectiveness has been established is encouragement of 'dual coding', that is, to help learners to form and process lexical understandings which have an imagistic component as well as a component that is symbolic/ propositional in nature. In contrast, many researchers have studied the role of L1 in L2 idiom processing, but it is a double edged sword. In other words, L2 learners' reliance on their own L1 in L2 idiom processing may assist or hinder their understanding of L2 idioms. Such a phenomenon is termed the "interlingual factor" by Cornell (1999: 6). It has been suggested that the use of L1 may assist L2 learners in their comprehension of L2 idioms which are identical or similar to L1 equivalents. At the same time, idioms that have no similar or identical L1 equivalents cause difficulty for L2 learners (Irujo, 1986).

## **2.7. The Role of Vocabulary and Culture in Understanding Idioms**

Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words, it requires the speakers to have connotative word comprehension and to understand the figurative language. Idioms fall into this final category (Gillett, 2004). It can be argued that it is easy to comprehend and interpret an idiom when it is more familiar to someone. Exposure to a wide range of idioms may play an important role in idiom comprehension. Therefore, more

familiarity of idioms, the more frequently are use (Liu, (2008). Word familiarity has an important influence on word recognition and the comprehension of new metaphors (Abel, 2003). Moreover, Schweigert (1986) studied the relationship between familiarity and idiom processing. Reading rates for sentences containing highly familiar idioms were shorter than those for sentences containing low familiar idioms. Cronk & Schweigert (1992) argued that the fact that highly familiar idioms were understood more quickly than less familiar idioms.

The studies above reveal that idioms, like words, are processed more quickly depending on the degree of experience a comprehender has with a particular phrase. Nippold and Taylor (1995) stated that the frequency with which an idiom occurs in a language is often defined as familiarity; however, frequency and familiarity are both moderated by culture. Familiarity is relative and depends on such factors as geographical location, linguistic background (including dialect), culture, and age (Nippold & Rudinski, 1993). It appears that idiom comprehension is easier when an idiom is more familiar to someone because less conceptual analysis is required (Qualls & Harris, 1999). Furthermore, exposure may play an important role in idiom comprehension since having more experience with idioms may make those idioms more salient (Norbury, 2004). Ultimately, more frequently used idioms may be more familiar. Glucksberg (2001) described idioms as a secret language and a language owned by a culture that one has to be steeped in. In other words, idioms vary in frequency and familiarity depending on variables like demographic characteristics and cultural and linguistic identification.

### **1.8. Issues and Solutions in Teaching English Idioms L2 Context**

The problem is that the English idioms are not taught in L2 classroom due to the fact that teachers either do not know many idioms in L2 or they do not know their origin. They may feel that their origins need to be explained. The literature also showed that there are some factors such as familiarity, transparency and context which effect using English idiom comprehension (Cain et al., 2004). They believed that idioms that are presented in text easier to understand than those are

presented in isolation. Rohaniet al., (2012) conducted a study to know the effect of context on the strategies used by EFL learners to process idioms. They found that the participants used different strategies such as referencing context, focusing on key words, referencing background knowledge, and visualisation. Cain et al., (2005) also maintain that “context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which reader (listener) can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression” (p. 67). Therefore, contexts are important for less common idioms which meanings are not yet fully known, particularly for unfamiliar opaque idioms whose meanings are not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrases.

Furthermore, Buckingham (2006: 35) found that “idioms’ arbitrary language-specific nature makes them difficult for learners to understand and acquire, resistant to translation”. According to Hussein et al.,(2011), the difficulty of learning idioms comes from the fact that idioms are arbitrary and nonliteral. The arbitrariness of idioms makes them incomprehensible based on the meaning of their constituents, and hence they cannot be taught systematically. Hinkel, (2009) added that research has demonstrated that most L2 learners employ constructions that are error-prone which hardly ever encountered in English spoken or written discourse. It means that there are probably different ways to say something or convey a thought, but quite often even when the meanings of phrases can be transparent, “the problem is that native speakers do not say it in that way” (Shin & Nation, 2008: 340). Pimenova (2011: 117-119) pointed out that the difficulty of learning idioms could be related to five major challenges: (a) unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms; (b) no analogous idioms in L1; (c) cultural differences; (d) lack of experience dealing with idioms; and e) lack of the broad context for a given idiom. In conclusion, that in English writing and speech, expressions and phrases are typically culture-specific with implicit references to abstract or metaphorical constructs.

Moreover, Mola (1993) identified that idioms are not treated in L2 classrooms as regularly as might be, because of time pressures. Lennon (1998) suggests that exercises of problem-solving nature can

help learners to discover the metaphors in idiomatic expressions. Moreover, Lennon believes that students will become highly motivated to translate their language's metaphors into the target language so as to share with the class of their own culture method of metaphor encoding. In light to what is mentioned above, it is important for EFL teachers to design various activities for students to use with English idioms and subsequently acquire them efficiently. Furthermore, students learn better when they are provided with collaborative activities. They can interact with peers and share fun in learning. Ultimately, when teachers integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing activities together in teaching English idioms. Consequently, the students can be involved in the application of English idioms in the four language skills (ibid).

According to Mantyla (2004) who states that idioms should not be taught directly at all. She considers the best policy of teaching to be a method where the students' attention is focused on the common characteristics of idioms. Moreover, another issue that is very critical to understanding idioms is L1 transfer. A study conducted by Cooper (1999), showed that the LI plays a role in L2 idiom processing even though L2 learners are less likely to transfer LI knowledge when they perceive the meaning as figurative. Thus, it is likely that L1 transfer may play some role in learners' processing of L2 idioms, but it need better understanding when and how this and other comprehension strategies are used in L2 idiom processing. Non-literality could be another factor that affects understanding of idioms.

In addition, Swinney and Cutler (1979) mentioned to another issue when they stated that an idiom is a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string. Thus, the idiomatic meaning of "*kick the bucket*" has little to do with the meanings of either "*kick*" or "*bucket*"; similarly. The meaning of "*by and large*" has little to do with the meanings of either "*large*" or "*by*." This may confuse the second-language learners when they learn idioms. Moreover, many second-language teaching materials used either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the 'other expressions' section of vocabulary lists,

without providing exercises or other aids to learn. The exposure to idioms is also one of the reasons that are considered of a vital importance. Hussein et al., (2000), concluded that the acquisition of idioms has thus far been a neglected variable in the EFL environment. They also stated that learner's poor competence of English idioms can be related to the fact that the study of lexis in general and idioms in particular was stated at a minor position. Thus, it is effective to teach EFL learners English idiom when they are provided with various activities to practice and utilize English idioms in different contexts.

### 1.9. Conclusion and Implications

This research focuses on the most important issues that face L2 learner's in understanding of idioms. The importance of this paper as it spot light on an essential part of the English language, what are idioms and how to understand and use them. Different techniques have been offered to facilities L2 learner's acquisition of idioms. There are also various factors that influence the learning of idiomatic expression. There is a general belief that idioms are extremely difficult for nonnative speakers. One of the major problems that L2 learners face in understanding idioms is the frequency of idioms. A fundamental fact in regard to idioms, collocations, phrases, expressions, and multi-word units are essential. For most learners, the meanings of these constructions are usually impossible to figure out from the meanings of their component parts. Without learning, using, and being able to understand these language units, neither spoken nor written communication can be effective or even successful in accomplishing its goals. The outcome of this paper shows that the lack of idioms knowledge has an academic impact on the learners' overall performance. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers and students to deal with idioms in a suitable environment, where issues such as idiom definition are solved.

Moreover, the use of specific idioms should be included in the syllabus as a useful strategy to help the learner to improve their productive skills. Teaching vocabulary also should be inseparable part from teaching idioms, in which the idioms are type of phraseological unit and are largely figurative in nature, are widely spread in human

language. In fact, the level of command of idioms indicates L2 proficiency. Although it is generally accepted that L2 learners of English need to gain a good grasp of idioms and the teaching and learning of idioms in L2 is considered a hard task. One of the reasons is that a considerable number of idioms are figurative in nature-that is their overall meaning cannot be obtained by simply adding up the literal meanings of the item. The use of idioms and idiomatic English are both characteristic of advanced EFL learners. It seems that due attention is not given to the learning of idioms, and students' competence in these forms needs to be developed further not only on the recognition level but also on the production level. Finally, it is hoped that the solutions introduced in this paper and the review of the theories behind them will encourage teachers to devote more attention to idiomatic language, and inspire them to explore further about the ways in which idioms can be made more accessible and more memorable to develop students' language skills in English.

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