



## The Necessity of idiomatic expressions to English Language learners

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**Abstract:** Non-native speakers of English are found in different parts of the world. The usage of Idiomatic expressions by those speakers are considered as an important issue and is regarded as an essential part of the English Language competence. It is a necessity that all speakers of the English Language become aware and proficient in using English idiomatic expressions. It is essential and is considered a big part of English language proficiency to be able to use idiomatic expression when communicating in the English Language. However, many English learners, especially those of Arabic origin, lack the competence to use English idiomatic expressions adequately. This paper aims to discuss the importance of idiomatic expressions to English language learners. In this paper, personal suggestions have been reached for better idiomatic comprehension and acquisition. Contributions have been made by the author regarding the importance of understanding and how to better use idioms.

**Key words:** *Idiomatic expressions, native speakers, non-native speakers, linguistics.*

Idiomatic expressions are part of every language. According to Boers (2008) in MED Magazine, all languages have idioms and are full of them. Native speakers tend to use idiomatic expressions spontaneously without thinking of the figurative meaning. It is natural that non-native speakers find idioms difficult to understand because they do not know what the image of the idiomatic expression is based on. For example, if non-native speakers of English Language come across the expression that exams are part of a "carrot and stick" method, they will find it difficult to process. Non-native speakers will find it uneasy because they are unable to realize that it is based on the image of a donkey that is encouraged to move forward by dangling a carrot in front of it or by hitting it with a stick. Thus, it is almost impossible for a non-native speaker who is unfamiliar with this idiom to imagine that such an idiom is used to describe any event which involves rewards (a carrot) and threats (the stick). If a non-native speaker is unfamiliar with the idiom "show you the ropes" and comes across such an expression, he or she will find it difficult to immediately understand. As such, they will find it difficult to realize that this expression proposes to teach one how a certain job is done. If these non-native speakers were told that such an idiomatic expression is used in a sailing context in which experienced sailors teach a novice how to handle the ropes on a boat, this may help them to understand and realize its meaning. Consequently, realizing the image that the idiom is based on and the origin of the idiom could help in resolving the figurative meaning of that particular idiom. Using the idiom in a certain context rather than using it alone may



also help non-natives who are unfamiliar with that idiom to realize and figure out the metaphorical meaning. In Linguistics, idioms are defined as fixed expressions that are typically used in a figurative sense and they have arbitrary meanings. That is, Idiomatic expressions make their meaning by coincidence and by chance. Students are taught that there is no link between an idiom and its meaning and that idioms have to be learned by heart.

However, recent research has shown otherwise; it has shown a link between idiomatic expressions and their meanings. The link between an idiom and its meaning could be based on physical experiences, which are universally shared or based on specific domains, which are culturally specific. Realizing the origin of the idiom and what it is based on help in realizing the idiom's metaphorical meaning. These findings will be presented and explained in this paper. In the English language, idiomatic expressions are spontaneously used by native speakers daily. It is an essential part of the English language lexicon and vocabulary. Idiomatic expressions are, therefore, considered inevitable for non-native speakers of English.

As a result, Non-native speakers of English should get accustomed to using these expressions. Non-native speakers of English need to learn idiomatic expressions and practice how to use them, parallel to native speakers. As such, it is a requirement to include idiomatic expressions in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom and in their teaching materials. such issues and will present previous linguistic studies as well as recent research in the area of idiomatic expressions. It will also explain the link between idiomatic expressions and their meanings. The differences between native and non-native speakers in the area of understanding English idioms will also be clarified.

Personal experiences as an English Language learner, teacher and researcher will be mentioned and listed.

Results and findings will be stated and summarized to support the fact that idioms are a necessity. The use of figurative expressions and metaphorical speech is essential and indispensable in EFL/ESL environments in order to reach a more native-like language proficiency and knowledge.

### Literature Review

Idiomatic expressions, also known as idioms, are numerous and repeatedly occur in the English language. It is estimated that the English language contains at least 25,000 idiomatic expressions (Idiomatic Expression, 2014). English idiomatic expressions are used in both formal and informal communications (Laflin, 1996). However, Non-native speakers of English have been found incapable of using Idiomatic expressions. Unlike native speakers of English, non-native speakers lack the ability to use Idiomatic expressions and to understand their meanings adequately. This presents a problem in non-native speakers' knowledge and proficiency of the English language and is considered a gap in their language learning process. Ambrose (2008) opines that understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and an understanding of figurative language, and idioms fall into this final category. Idiomatic Expressions are defined as an expression whose meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of the words that make it up (Idiomatic Expression, 2014). On the other hand, it is also defined as an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers. This meaning is different from the literal



meaning of the idiom's individual elements. In other words, idioms don't mean exactly what the words say. They have, however, hidden meanings (Idiomatic Expressions, 2015). For example, the idiomatic expression "to kick the bucket" has nothing to do with the physical action of kicking a bucket with your legs, which is part of your body. The idiom "to kick the bucket" means "to die". So, an idiomatic expression carries a figurative meaning, not a literal one. That is, it carries a meaning that cannot be understood just by the literal meanings of the words that make it up.

Another example is "to spill the beans", which also has nothing to do with the actual physical action of spilling or dropping a can or plate of beans. What it actually means "To spill the beans" is to "tell a secret". As can be seen, this previous idiomatic expression carries a meaning that is figurative, not literal (Cowie et al., 1983). As a result, idiomatic expressions in linguistics are said to be figures of speech (figurative language) (Lyons, 1997). Thus, in linguistics, idiomatic expressions oppose the principle of compositionality, which states that the meaning of a whole should be constructed from the meanings of the parts that make up the whole. In other words, one should be in a position to understand the whole if one understands the meanings of each of the parts that make up the whole. (Wikipedia, 2015).

Thus, for example, the idiomatic expression "to pull someone's leg" means to fool them by telling them something untrue. The idiomatic expression "it is raining cats and dogs" means that it is raining heavily. Another example of an idiomatic expression and how it carries a whole meaning that is different from the literal meaning of its parts is, "it is not rocket science" which means that it is not difficult (Ibid).

In Linguistics, it is known that idiomatic expressions carry arbitrary meanings. That is, idioms mean what they mean for no reason other than coincidence. Idiomatic expressions in linguistics are said to randomly carry the meanings that they do (Boers, 2008). However, it has been found by recent research, that many idioms are explainable and carry non-arbitrary meanings. Idiomatic expressions are found to carry meanings due to reasonable causes. Recent research tells us that idioms are non-arbitrary features of a language. Fortunately, teaching students that idioms carry non-arbitrary meanings help them to realize their meanings and memorize them. So, instead of teaching students to memorize idioms by heart, which is difficult, idioms can be taught in a systematic way. In such a way, idiomatic expressions become much easier to understand and remember (Ibid). Idioms mean what they mean for a reason. For example, idiomatic expressions such as "hot under the collar", "breathe fire", and "let off steam" refer to being angry. These three idioms carry the meaning that they do because anger is processed through the image of something hot inside. By being angry, one's body temperature is raised and that is why many people get red in the face when angry. Also, for instance, the idiomatic expressions "lend someone a hand", "try your hand at something" and "have your hands tied" all refer to the meaning of performing an action. These idioms carry this meaning based on the image that we use our hands usually, to perform most activities. Nevertheless, many other types of idioms are derived from specific domains and specific areas of experience. For example, the idiom "clear the decks" which means "to finish a job completely"; the idiom "a leading light" which means "a good example to follow"; and the idiom "be on an even keel" which means "to make steady progress" are all derived from "sailing". Idioms such as "stick to your guns", which means "to refuse to change your opinion"; "fight a losing battle", which means "to be unlikely to succeed"; and "be in the front line", meaning "to have an important role"



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are all derived from the domain of "war". Other idioms are derived from other experience domains, such as entertainment, cooking or sports. Even though some of these domains may no longer exist and are uncommon today, learning the original context the idiom was derived from and the original image the idiom is based on will help in understanding its meaning. So, if one recognizes the origin of the idiom, one will be able to work out its meaning. As a result, idioms carry their meanings not by coincidence or chance and not for unexplainable reasons (Ibid). Despite the difficulty that non-native speakers of English Language might face in realizing and understating the meaning of idioms, understanding idioms and knowing their actual meaning is a necessity. Idiomatic expressions are used in both formal and informal communications. Native speakers of English use idiomatic expressions daily, naturally and spontaneously, unlike non-native speakers of English who lack this very essential language skill. Non-native speakers of English, from various backgrounds, are found incapable of using idiomatic expressions when communicating in English Language and are found incompetent to understand their meanings. It might not be a piece of cake for non-natives to use idioms but it is considered a vital part of the English Language. As mentioned, idiomatic expressions are used in formal and informal speech. They are part of the standard business, media, and everyday life, talking about written or spoken English. Thus, non-native speakers of English should learn idiomatic expressions in order to be able to communicate effectively and sound more natural and native-like. It could be said that the more a non-native speaker is capable of understanding and using idiomatic expressions, the closer he or she is to the native proficiency of the English language (Teaching Idiomatic Expressions, 2015).

Furthermore, idiomatic expressions are found to be culture-based. That is, idiomatic expressions carry within them the history, heritage, culture and customs of its native users (Rizk, 2015). It can be said that idioms that are derived from physical human experiences are, in general, culturally equal. That is, idioms that are based on physical human experiences, such as anger being associated with heat are easier to recognize and understand by non-natives. Due to the strong similarities across different cultures in basic physical experiences such as, being sick or well, hot or cold, idioms that are derived from such images are often the same and fairly easy to understand (Boers, 2008). However, idioms that are derived from specific domains are usually different across cultures, because these domains are not equally important across cultures. For instance, many idiomatic expressions in the English language are derived from

sailing because of England's history as a seafaring country. English Language, for example, has many idioms such as "neck and neck" meaning "it is hard to say who will win"; "win hands down" meaning "to win easily"; and "go off the rails" meaning "to go wrong or out of control". These three idioms are derived from horse racing due to the popularity of horse racing as a sport in England. So, as mentioned, specific domains are not equally shared and are not equally important across cultures. As such, idioms derived from such domains are more difficult to realize and understand by non-native speakers of the English Language. Unlike idioms derived from physical experiences which are universal, it has been found that idiomatic expressions that are derived from specific domains may not be culturally shared and, therefore, harder to grasp and understand (Ibid).

Thus, learning idiomatic expressions also teaches nonnative speakers of a language the culture of its people (Ovando and Collier, 1985). As a result, the more the learner of English is aware of idioms and their meanings, the better knowledge that learner carries of the English culture.



### Methodology

As an English language learner, teacher, and researcher, it has been noticed by the author of this paper that there are noticeable differences between professors, native and non-native, in their use of idiomatic expressions. It has been observed that native English-speaking professors used idiomatic expressions when communicating in EFL/ESL classrooms. Nevertheless, non-native English-speaking teachers used them scarcely or rarely despite the fact that many of them attained their M.A. and Ph.D. from native

English speaking countries and from prestigious universities. This indeed has an impact on academic performance and thus, lead the author to investigate in this area and to emphasize the importance of teaching idioms in EFL/ESL classrooms. It is needed that more emphasis should be on idiomatic knowledge in EFL/ESL environments and materials. Lack of knowledge in idiom is a lack of one's English language knowledge in general because idioms are used in both spoken and written English and are very common. The qualitative approach was used as the methodology of this work, relying on the analysis and description of previous researches and studies of idiomatic expressions and their importance. This paper relies on analysis of previous evidence and case studies. By analyzing and studying such data, results and data are collected. Also, several studies regarding idiomatic expressions, how to improve their acquisition and how to better teach them have been studied, compared and summarized. Results have been reached and stated based on such findings.

### Results

Teaching idiomatic expressions in EFL/ESL environments and classrooms is a necessity. Nevertheless, most importantly is that non-native speakers should practice how to use idiomatic expressions. The more a non-native speaker of English is capable of using idiomatic expressions, the closer he or she is to English Language competence. Using idiomatic expressions in an adequate amount, parallel to native speakers brings the non-native speaker closer to English Language proficiency. Lack of idiomatic use and knowledge by non-native speakers equates their lack of English language competence. Idiomatic use and knowledge are not an easy task. That is, learning idioms, their meanings and the ability to use them copiously is not easily attainable. Nevertheless, this is not to be taken as a motive to disregard them.

Idiomatic expressions must be included in English Language learning environments, materials, and EFL/ESL classrooms. Teachers of English must inspire their students to become aware of idiomatic expressions. They should point out to their students the importance of the knowledge and usage of idioms, in order to be in a parallel position to native speakers. Teachers of English should not neglect such an important skill and should make their students realize it.

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