

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The Necessity of idiomatic expressions to English Language learners

Rana Abid Thyab

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, College of Education for Women, Tikrit University, Iraq.

Received 17 January, 2016; Accepted 30 May 2016

**Non-native speakers of English are found in different parts of the world. The usage of Idiomatic expressions by those speakers is 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.

## INTRODUCTION

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

E-mail: [abidty@yahoo.com](mailto:abidty@yahoo.com).

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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) classrooms and in their teaching materials.

The Literature Review section will present and explain 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 mean "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" 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 (Rizq, 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 non-native 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 is 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.

## DISCUSSION

Here, it is suggested that it is best to teach frequently

used idiomatic expressions that one might come across when watching television programs, reading books, listening to music and when communicating with native speakers. Teachers may ask their students to write down idiomatic expressions they come across when using English Language (Cooper, 1999). Finding the meaning of idiomatic expressions may not be as easy as one might think. For instance, the meaning of an idiomatic expression is not always included in the dictionary. Actually, the dictionary may give you the literal meaning of the words composing an idiomatic expression. As mentioned by Jacqueline Ambros, ideally vocabulary shouldn't be learned in a vacuum, and this especially is true for idioms. There are a variety of idiom dictionaries for those who wish to learn more about idioms. Newspapers and magazines, radio programs, television shows and films are also sources of idioms. Roleplaying, writing and interactive activities such as matching the parts of idioms are some activities that can help second language (L2) speakers expand their knowledge and use of idioms. (Ambrose, 2015).

Therefore, using special dictionaries that explain idiomatic expressions and their meanings is needed. One may also search the internet in order to find the meaning of an idiomatic expression (Teaching Idiomatic Expressions, 2015). According to Rodriguez and Winnberg (2013) there are multiple methods that can be used in EFL/ESL classroom for the purpose of teaching idiomatic expressions. Learners are unique and each individual learns in a way that differs from another. Nevertheless, generalizations could be made and used when planning lessons in the aim of improving the acquisition of idioms by students.

As stated by Nation (2001), idioms are to be taught based on frequency and range of occurrence. The more frequent the idiom occurs, the more important it is to be taught in ESL/EFL environments. In this way, idioms are dealt with as if they were single words and a part of everyday vocabulary. Here, it is suggested that such items be learned deliberately and explicitly. So, in this way idioms are not to be taught by incidental learning, despite the fact that incidental learning is more effective and easy. Learning incidentally is more gradual, slower and lacks the focused attention of explicit learning. As a result, it is suggested that learning idioms should be similar to learning individual words. Therefore, idiomatic expressions should be learned unambiguously. This method of teaching idioms supports the use of repetition when teaching idiomatic expressions (Ibid).

It is also suggested that the learners of English should take responsibility for their own learning. They should try to speak the language in order to become aware of their language weaknesses and the parts that need improvement. The more they speak the language, the more they may realize their gaps in the language. This is also a strategy that needs to be considered as regard idiom learning (Ibid). Other strategies regarding idiom

teaching and learning focus attention on the importance of age in regard to correct interpretation of the metaphorical meaning. That is, a child should be of a certain age to acquire certain knowledge. It is suggested that children at the age of nine years interpret idioms literally and thus learners have to reach a certain age before being exposed to idiomatic expressions (Ibid). Also, idioms that occur in context are easier to interpret, because there is more information that the listener can rely on in order to realize the meaning (Ibid:17).

Furthermore, idiomatic expressions that occur in both the learners first and target language are easier to remember and interpret, despite some interference. It has been found that idiomatic expressions that completely differ from the learners' native language are harder and more difficult to process and understand (Ibid). Additionally, as mentioned earlier in this paper, many idiomatic expressions are based on images, for example, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse", is used to show the listener just how hungry the speaker is. Also, most idiomatic expressions carry non-arbitrary meanings, which mean that there is a link between an idiom and its meaning. Being aware of these links, the origin of the idiom and the image that the idiomatic expression is based on is one way to better help students learn and remember idioms. Teachers of English Language should be trained to be aware of the origin of idioms; so that they in turn can improve their students understanding of idioms and help them to remember.

It is suggested in this paper that the English language teachers should be aware of idioms and their origins and they should in turn explain to their students. Teaching such information will help learners better understand and remember idioms. Explaining the images that an idiom is based on simplifies the learners acquisition of that idiom and helps the learner remember the idiom more effectively. The teacher should also allow the learners to communicate using idioms in classrooms and ESL/EFL environments. Moreover, teachers should encourage their students to apply this new knowledge outside classrooms and to learn more in their spare time. Learners should be encouraged to listen to news, watch television programs and read materials that include idioms and idiomatic expressions (Chen and Lai 2013).

Idiomatic expressions are an essential part of every language and are built upon the history, heritage, customs and culture of a nation. Therein, learning the idiomatic expressions of a certain language helps one become more knowledgeable about the history, and social norms of the native speakers of that particular language. According to Ambrose (2008), idioms share cultural and historical information and broadens people's understanding and manipulation of a language. Native English speakers grow up using idiomatic expressions on a daily basis. This is because they are raised listening to idioms and using them almost every day. Consequently, it might seem a challenge for non-native speakers of English to learn idiomatic expressions, similar to natives,

but they can be learned with time and practice (Ambrose, 2008).

As mentioned above, idiomatic expressions are culture bound and they carry the cultural beliefs and customs of their native language users. As such, non-native users of English Language may be influenced by his or her culture regarding their realization of the meaning of their idiomatic expressions. Nevertheless, learning idiomatic expressions will enable the English Language learner to become more knowledgeable and better aware of the English culture and customs (Fromkin et al., 2003). The importance of idiomatic Expressions also lies in the fact that it is an everyday routine of the native English speakers' language. Learning idiomatic expressions by non-natives leads them to better English proficiency, help their second or foreign language seem more native-like, and more creative. Thus, learning English idiomatic expressions improves one's second or foreign language skills; helps non-native speakers of a language understand that target language better and therefore should not be taken for granted (Yule, 2006). According to Maisa and Karunakaran (2013) No translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms if a natural use of the target language is an aim.

## Conclusions

Idiomatic expressions or idioms should not be neglected and should not be taken for granted. Idioms are used daily and repeatedly by native speakers of English Language. Idiomatic expressions are a part of every language's vocabulary and are based on that language history, heritage, and culture. Learning idiomatic expressions helps non-native speakers of a language become more fluent, and sound more native-like. Learning idiomatic expressions increases the vocabulary and lexicon of the English Language learner. Moreover, idiomatic knowledge leads to a better understanding of the culture and customs of that particular language. English language teachers should teach idiomatic language to their students and not overlook such a vital issue because becoming more native-like in English Language is by learning idiomatic expressions, understanding their meanings and using them frequently parallel to English Language native speakers.

## Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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