# An Inquiry into the Use of English Idiomatic Expressions in EFL Learners' Essay Writing

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**Abstract**:

Typically, the way learners of English as a foreign language display any learned target culture knowledge is to integrate it in their outputs, either through speech or through writing. This is because culture subsists along with the four language skills, and it is never a separate entity. In language pedagogy, in essay writing in particular, the inclusion of idiomatic expressions can be regarded as both an opportunity and a challenge at the same time because idioms are practically language and culture-specific. Accordingly, the present study intends to explore the presence of target culture knowledge, chiefly the detection of any idiomatic expressions in essays written by licence year two learners studying at the department of English, university of Jijel. The study used two research instruments, text analysis and a focus group discussion. The obtained results showed that learners' familiarity and interaction with English idioms is yet deficient, either at the level of theoretical knowledge or at the level of practical idiomatic usage. Further research into factors that influence learners' knowledge and use of idioms is highly recommended.

**Keywords:** Learners; Essay writing; Target culture; Idiomatic expressions.

1.  **INTRODUCTION:** Every language is part of culture; as such, it cannot but serve and reflect its culture needs. The both, according to Kramsch (1993), are inextricably linked, which necessitate that a big deal of discourse should be about the cultural elements associated with that language; this often involves cultural awareness, conversational routines, and knowledge of the target society's norms and values. In the context of language teaching and learning, the entire process not only requires an individual learner to engage with the linguistic forms solely, but also dictates that he becomes familiar with the culture of target language so as to guarantee a more authentic communication with the native speakers. Speaking of writing as a way for second/foreign language learners to show their linguistic and cultural attainments, employing idiomatic expressions is seen as an eminent depiction of target language culture in the written texts; according to Gaines (1986), "Idiomatic expressions give English its color and vitality. They are indispensable to the daily speech of the people and to the language of newspapers and books, television and movies." (p.7). Nevertheless, using English idioms makes academic writing an even demanding task because one needs to be well aware of the contextual and non-

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literal meaning of the different expressions so as not to miscommunicate the ideas or give false impressions to the reader. That is why idioms have always been clustered among the most notoriously complicated language features. Regrettably, this type of figurative language is not yet given enough consideration in academic settings, especially within the writing skills due to certain influences like in-and-out of classroom exposure to English language.

- **Research Aims**

The aim of this research is to discover whether idioms are actually used in academic English, and if so, which type is most frequently used in learners' essay writing. The research work also aims at finding more about the background of the current situation.

- **Research Questions**

1. Do learners of English as a foreign language (EFL learners) resort to English idioms in their academic writing?

2. What types of idioms are used more in their essay writing?

3. What is possibly hindering or boosting EFL learners' use of English idioms in essay writing?

**Literature Review**

**1.1.What Are Idioms?**

Idioms are common in all languages, and there are an estimated twenty-five thousand idiomatic expressions in English alone. ( http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiom). According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, an idiom or idiomatic expression "is a phrase whose meaning is difficult or sometimes impossible to guess by looking at the meaning of the individual word it contains" (2006, R49), this implies that an idiom's meaning is not a simple grouping of the meanings of its elements. Another description by O'Dell & McCarthy (2017) states that "Idioms are a type of formulaic language. Formulaic language consists of fixed expressions which you learn and understand as units rather than as individual words." (p.6), this includes, for example, phrasal verbs and proverbs like "It's a small world!" and "Turn down." Noticeably, the corresponding meanings are arbitrary and changeable just like when someone says, "drive somebody" which means making somebody angry or frustrated. That is to say, idioms are highly context and culture based, and any prediction of meaning based on word-by-word translation for example or by simply connecting the meanings of each single word to get the general meaning is not all the time workable.

McCarthy and O'Dell (2003, p.6 as cited in Mabruroh, 2015, p.13) made a syntactic classification of English idioms according to their possible combinations; the classification goes as follows:

1. *Verb + object/complement*: e.g., kill two birds with one stone (Achieve two aims with a single action or at the same time.)

2. *Prepositional phrase*: e.g., in the blink of an eye (In an extremely short time.)

3. *Compound*: e.g., a bone of contention (A subject about which there is disagreement.)

4. *Simile (as + adjective + as or like + a noun)*: e.g., as dry as a bone (Very dry indeed.)

5. *Binomial (word + and + word)*: e.g., rough and ready (Crude and lacking sophistication.)

6. *Trinomial (word + word + and + word):* e.g., cool, calm and collected (Relaxed, incontrol, not nervous.)

7. *Whole clause or sentence*: e.g., to cut a long story short (To get to the point of what one is saying quickly.)

On the other hand, Halliday & Hasan (1976, p.238, as cited in Boudersa, 2014) set out their conjunctive cohesion taxonomy which includes four categories of conjunction: additive, adversative, causal and temporal. The cohesive relations are often expressed by multi-word idiomatic expressions:

<u>Additive</u>: *in addition, or else, by the way, in other words, for instance, by contrast/* <u>Adversative</u>: *as a matter of fact, on the other hand, on the contrary, in any case, at any rate/* <u>Causal</u>: *as a result, to this end, in that case, under the circumstances, in this respect, in this regard/* <u>Temporal:</u> *at first, in the end, at once, once upon a time, in conclusion, up to now, to sum up, in short, last but not least.*

## 1.2.Idiomatic Usage in Formal Writing

Compared to general English, formal registers such as academic writing, drive some language learners and teachers to postulate that the use of English idiomatic expressions is quite informal considering the stern norms of academic literacy. In point of fact, this sense of distress is quite justifiable if one apprehends writing as a process that involves tough steps extending from "mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between" (Wall, 1981, as cited in Boudersa, 2014). Among the mysterious factors mentioned by the author, figurative language, which is when using idioms, proverbs and similes for example.

Probably, the reason behind seeing idioms as casual is that they are widely used in newspapers and magazines, TV shows and films, and even in songs (O'Dell &McCarthy, 2017); so, writing something like "Behind one's back" appears to be somewhat inappropriate in an academic essay. Nevertheless, idioms are indeed advantageous because they have a variety of purposes like describing and analyzing, emphasizing, paraphrasing, as well as signaling a change in focus (Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Similarly, lack of idiomatic usage may give the impression that the learner writer is not well aware of the conventions and culture of the target language community.

Idioms encompass diverse forms including Similes, proverbs, and metaphors related to separate fields like literature, transportations, and even feelings; fortunately, there are certain others related to the area of formal writing. They can be used in any part of the essay, in the introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, or in the concluding paragraph.

To illustrate, McCarthy and O'Dell (2017, p.86) mentioned some expressions

for structuring an argument in formal writing; this includes: *First and foremost, / On balance, by and large and in the main / On no account/ On the one hand and on the other hand / Last but not least/ In the final/ last analysis.* Also, some expressions which indicate the relationship between ideas include: *A conventional wisdom / a contradiction in terms /not the whole picture / a case in point /as a matter of course / points the way /sets the stage /set in motion /open the door to.*

Likewise, Miller (2019) investigated the spectrum of traditional textbook-type idioms appearing in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, then she compared their frequency to the same idioms used in the Oxford Corpus of Academic English (OCAE). In the end, she was able to identify a range of forty-three idiom which can be used confidently by English as an additional language (EAL) writers and teachers to enrich their own and their learners' English academic speech and writing; for example, *Bear in mind/ by and large/in its own right/ on one hand/in the long run/driving force/stepping stone/keep an eye on/last resort/ in a nutshell/from scratch.*

Looking at the above idioms, they are not complicated nor difficult to apply in an academic written text, but rather beneficial as they enrich the text and give the language of the essay a sound effect.

### 1.3. Related Works

In language learning contexts, there was an integral line of research about idioms used by EFL learners in their written productions. Not only there was a focus on academic essays, but there were also attempts to examine idiomatic terms in novels and even in song lyrics.

Laufer (2000) used a fill-in translation exam to assess EFL university learners' avoidance of English idioms, and as such, he discovered that poorer English ability was associated with greater avoidance of English idioms.

Similarly, in another study, Tran (2013) looked at fifty idioms from a list of widely used English idioms and concluded that EFL learners in Vietnam had weak idiomatic proficiency. This was related to some factors like learners' vocabulary knowledge, and the existing similarity of idioms between foreign and native language.

Funtek (2015) also demonstrated that non-native speakers or ESL (English Second Learners) found it challenging to recognize idioms due to their various meanings. She believes that one of the reasons behind this is that professors did not pay enough time and attention to teaching idioms to their learners.

The conclusion here is that EFL learners, in different contexts, are still struggling with the implementation of English idioms in their essay writing. This depends on several factors, but as long as the learners show pliability in the learning process, they will eventually be able to overcome any encountered setback and will be able to apply idioms in the most efficient way.

## 2. Methods:

### 2.1. Participants

For the current research study, license year two EFL learners in the discipline

of linguistics attending an essay writing course in the English Department at the university of Jijel were chosen as the sample population. They are considered to have passed the demanding phase of reconnoitering the nature of university studies, and now they are more likely to take things in a more conscious manner. The sample was asked to write an argumentative essay, and then they were interviewed as a group about the current issue of discussion during late June/academic year 2021. In the whole process, participants were not told about the purpose of the researcher so as not to affect their natural writing behaviors.

## 2.2. Research Instrument

This research is qualitative in nature; it is based on an analysis of a number of forty-five argumentative essays written by the sample population. The written essays were analyzed for any idiomatic expression be it a phrase, sentence, or any collocation. In addition to essay analysis, the researcher also resorted to focus group research with a number of four learners. Focus Group research is a method for gathering in-depth information through group interaction. The group is made up of a limited number of carefully chosen individuals who discuss a specific issue. (Due to their study commitments and irregular attendance, the researcher could only schedule a meeting with four learners)

## 2.3. Data Analysis

In the task of analyzing the participants' essays, the researcher followed three steps, which are: the *detection* of any idiomatic expression, its *verification,* and finally its *classification*. In this process, the researcher took as a reference a long list of idiomatic terms compatible with the area of formal writing, some were cited in McCarthy and O'Dell (2017) volume 'English Idioms in Use', while others were quoted in Miller (2019) 'Bottom Line' research work. In addition, Halliday and Hasan's (1976) conjunctive cohesion taxonomy was as well adopted for its inclusiveness and usefulness and to use it as a reference. While listing and organizing the detected idioms, the researcher chose to particularly follow the syntactic classification suggested by McCarthy and O'Dell (2003).

Besides, in analyzing the notes taken from the focus group of discussion, the researcher first grouped the data obtained into categories that represent the concepts chosen for examination. After the textual data are interpreted, the results of the analysis were then provided.

3. **Results:**

## 3.1. Text Analysis

Throughout the analysis, the researcher found a total of twenty-three idioms, but in all of the forty-five essays written by the subjects of study, the writer did not find any of the idiomatic expressions cited in McCarthy and O'Dell (2017) formal writing idioms or in Miller (2019) academic writing idioms, except for the expressions "on the one hand," "on the other hand," and "Keep an eye on" which were frequently used, presumably due to the position of the first two phrases in written academic English. The participants were also found to largely bank on the different types of conjunctions cited in Halliday & Hasan (1976). That is why conjunctions are not included in the table, owing to their ubiquity

and recurrent use, and so as to limit the scope of the examination.

The twenty-three detected idiomatic expression, and the corresponding numbers are shown in the table below:

**Table.** Instance Counts for the Idioms Found in EFL Learners' Essays.

| Type of Idiom | Idiomatic expression | Frequent occurrence of the individual idiom | Total Frequency for each type | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Verb+ object/comple -ment** **(12)** | Take into account<br>Find fault with<br>Put in the shade<br>Hold sway<br>Give up on<br>Get used to<br>Fix the problem<br>Go through<br>Set free<br>Keep up with<br>Get in touch with<br>Go hand in hand with | 3<br>1<br>1<br>1<br>4<br>5<br>2<br>7<br>6<br>5<br>1<br>1 | 37 | 56% |
| **Prepositional Phrase** **(4)** | by no means<br>out there<br>All over the world<br>In a blink of an eye | 1<br>4<br>5<br>1 | 11 | 16% |
| **Compound** **(4)** | Piece of advice<br>Wide spread<br>As a matter of fact<br>Step by step | 2<br>5<br>6<br>2 | 15 | 23% |
| **Simile (0)** | / | / | / | 0% |
| **Binomial** **(2)** | Safe and sound<br>Sooner or later | 1<br>1 | 2 | 3% |
| **Trinomial (0)** | / | / | / | 0% |
| **Whole clause/stce** **(1)** | To beat around the bush | 1 | 1 | 2% |
| **Total** | **23 idioms** | / | **66** | **100%** |

As the table above shows, the total number of individual idioms found in the forty-five essays, excluding all repetitions, is twenty-three idiom appearing more than one time (repetition from one to seven times) which makes the number of idioms raises to sixty-six usages. In the first category, which is 'Verb+ Object/Complement' type of idioms, there are twelve idioms being repeated thirty-seven times, which makes the first category as the most dominant type of idioms being used, with a percentage of 57%. In the second place comes 'Compound' idioms; here, there are four idioms which kept repeating fifteen times; this makes this category comes as the second most used

type of idioms with a percentage of 23%. In the third place, there is 'Prepositional Phrase' category, which similarly contains four idioms being repeated ten times; the percentage that corresponds to this number is 16%. In the fourth rank, there is the category of 'Binomial' idioms where there are two idioms being repeated two times. In the final, 'Whole Clause' type of idioms documented only one idiom which was used for only one time. The percentages which correspond to the two last categories are 3% and 2% successively. Concerning 'Simile' and 'Trinomial', it did not appear at all in the forty-five essays. Apart from the identified idiomatic expressions, almost all the sentences and expressions in the essays are learners generated.

As for conjunctive expressions, there is a remarkable tendency to make greater use of them since they are regarded as indicators of good quality essays, particularly utilized for text organization purposes, and because they support the cohesive structure of the overall written text.

### 3.2. Focus Group Discussion

In order to gain further insights about the obtained essay analysis results, a subsequent discussion was held about the notion of idiomaticity and its presence in essay writing from the subjects' own perspectives. The themes of the talk match to the three invested research inquiries.

### a. Beliefs about Idiomatic Usage

In defining the term 'Idiomatic Expressions', the participants failed to give a coherent description for the term; however, when they started explaining the basic concept, they all were clear that idioms are some fixed expressions used by native speakers, brought up at particular occasions, and which belong to English language exclusively; as so, any second/foreign language learner should have at least a minimum usage of them so as to sound more like a native. That is to say, those participants possess positive and encouraging attitudes toward English idioms usage in general; nonetheless, they showed indecision when it comes to the practical side of the issue. In their minds, employing idioms in academic writing is knowns to be quite informal, and that it is much more suitable for the spoken language.

### b. Actual Practices

The participants admitted that, theoretically and practically, they lack adequate familiarity with English idioms, its diverse meanings and appropriate usage. The number of expressions they know is far from enough. As for essay writing, the participants quite believe that idioms are more suitable for speaking classes rather than for writing classes; they said that the scientific nature of academic writing encourages preciseness over any form of figurative language.

### c. Affecting Factors

The main factor that the participants mentioned is the teacher's role. With reference to them, raising awareness to English idioms is a task that must be done in the early years of university studies. Except for oral expression classes, rarely do the teachers of writing skills or other content modules remind them of the essential position of English idioms in academic contexts. Ergo, the idioms

spotted in the essays they write are most of the time accidental, and unsurprisingly, finite in number. Another reported factor is the difficulty of memorization owing to the troublesome grammatical and lexical structure of some given idioms. This makes it necessary to be watchful while dealing with those idioms especially informal ones; thus, they think that it would be safer if the learner writer rely on just few of them.

4.  **Discussion:** The total number of the detected idioms, as well as the very few instances spotted in each type prove that this sample of EFL learners have, remarkably, little familiarity with idiomatic usage, which means also that their ability for diversifying the forms of employed idioms is quite bounded, especially formal expressions which are almost absent from their essays. Downright, even their idiomatic usage is not all the time in the right place. Thus, in response to the research questions, the data obtained showed that with this limited amount of idiomatic usage, there are two highly used types of idiomatic expressions which are 'verb + object/complement' in addition to 'compound' and 'prepositional phrases' (The former covers phrasal verbs as well.) The main cited influences which led to the present situation include issues like false conceptualization of the actuality of idioms implementation in academic essay writing, in addition to lack of observance and guidance from the part of the teacher. Peripheral reasons involve the fact that there is not a systematic teaching of English idiomatic expressions in the curriculum. This makes learners, who usually tend to disregard what is not assessed, more willing to ignore its practice. The findings are consistent with those of Funtek (2015) conclusions that teachers are not paying enough attention or doing enough efforts to enlighten their students about the place of English idioms in academic writing. Also, the findings are consistent with those of Laufer (2000) that low achiever learners tend to avoid the use of idioms in writing.

    In fact, the current study did not divide the subjects into low and high achievers so as to make comparisons; however, it is hypothesized that high language ability is associated with more idiomatic proficiency because the 'good language learner' is well aware of the different functions that idioms perform in the essay and the weight it gives to the written text.

    Speaking of this language skill, writing is regarded as a dynamic method of communication since it allows learners to exchange their thoughts with the reader. Coincidentally, this language skill is the one with which learners of English as a foreign language wade a lot, especially when trying to employ idioms. They suddenly find themselves doing extra efforts because each idiomatic expression in one language has its contextual meaning that is not necessarily the same in the other languages; sometimes, certain metaphorical constructs may not even exist in learners' natal cultures or first languages, which makes things seem somewhat awkward (Hinkle, 2017). In this vein, the latter believes that "L2 users may misinterpret non-literal meanings of words and phrases, as well as misuse them in various contexts—often due to limitations or shortfalls in their L2 vocabulary." (Ibid, p. 47)

All over the essay, the use of idioms is useful so as to help achieve different purposes "as to express a point of view, support a position, develop an argument, or present research finding." (Hinkle, 2017, p.52). By consulting them more frequently, like when resorting to dictionaries, internet, and even their notebooks, learners will gradually get hold of these essential language units and word combinations for a proper idiomatic usage in instructional settings (O'Dell &McCarthy, 2017).

As a concluding word of recommendation, teachers and educators ought to introduce idioms to learners more consistently and more systematically as to provide them with idiom sources such as famous literary texts or certain technological applications or even reliable books like Dixon (1971). With the abundant educational platforms about English language, learners are able to develop idioms' awareness, knowledge, and practice more autonomously; meanwhile, they succeed to learn the culture implications embedded in them.

5. **Conclusion**: Overall, in the process of building English language learning mastery, it is important to constantly expose learners to the target language culture, particularly, the use of idiomatic expressions. The main aim of this article was to identify frequently used idioms that this sample of learners use. It is thus, needless to say that there is a set of interfering factors which support the difficulty of dealing with English idioms; for example, the fact that these expressions are big in number and the fact that they are sometimes very cloudy and as such, difficult to understand. However, developing interest and showing resilience will certainly yield the desired results because implementing idioms does help learners figure out more facts about the nature of the target people and their mindset.

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