Idiomatic Competence Of Arab EFL Learner

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Abstract

Idiomatic competence constitutes an essential component of foreign language learners’ communicative competence. Unlike the other types of competences, idiomatic competence has not been accorded adequate attention in second language acquisition research. This study investigates the extent to which Arab learners of English, at the tertiary level, can recognize and use English idioms in culturally appropriate contexts. It is an attempt to provide answers to the following questions: (1) how well can Arab EFL learners recognize idioms in English texts? (2) How well can they produce idioms in their written performance? (3) What type of difficulties may they encounter in recognizing and producing idioms? (4) What are the possible causes of such difficulties? (5) What implications may such a study offer to language teaching and learning, curriculum designers, textbook authors, teaching translation and training translators? A specially designed test consisting of four elicitation tasks was used to evaluate the competence of Arab learners of English in recognizing and using idioms. The subjects of the study were 100 students, including 50 English majors and 50 non-English majors. The analysis of the subjects’ responses revealed that their idiomatic competence is deficient and below expectations at the levels of recognition and production.

Keywords: idioms, competence, Arab EFL learners.

Introduction

The definitive goal of foreign language pedagogy has always been to develop the learners’ communicative competence, part of which is to enable them to understand what others say or write and to make what they say or write understood by others. This type of competence has been investigated by many researchers since it was initially proposed by Hymes (1972), and then developed and extended by Savignon (1972, 1983), Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Candlin (1986), Bachman (1990) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1993), among others. Canale (1983)
developed the model that he and Swain (1980) proposed. In this modified model, Canale posited four major components of the notion of communicative competence:

1. Grammatical competence: the knowledge of grammatical rules, sentence structure, lexical items, pronunciation, spelling and word structure. In other words, it is the learner’s knowledge of the language code or linguistic competence as was proposed by Chomsky (1965) in his book Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.

2. Sociolinguistic competence: the knowledge of the rules of using language in appropriate sociocultural settings. This type of competence also involves knowledge of politeness rules, cooperative principles in communication, appropriate use of vocabulary in various language registers and an adequate knowledge of formality levels.

3. Discourse competence: knowledge of how to produce coherent and cohesive language in both speech and writing.

4. Strategic competence: the mastery of communication strategies that are essential for effective communication, including linguistic repair strategies and the strategies that interlocutors resort to in order to avoid communication breakdowns (Canale, 1983: 2—14)

Celce-Murcia et al proposed another more detailed model of communicative competence in which a new component labelled ‘Actional Competence’ was added. In this model Canale’s ‘grammatical competence’ was replaced with the term ‘linguistic competence’, which includes lexical competence of which idiomatic competence constitutes a basic component (Celce-Murcia et al 1995, 16-19). This view of communicative competence corroborates that of Bachman in which lexical competence refers to the knowledge of the meanings of vocabulary items and their figurative uses (Bachman 1990, 67). Knowing a word involves knowing its pronunciation, part of speech, denotations, connotations, metaphorical uses, collocations, sense relations, spelling, grammatical behavior, frequency, and register (Coxhead 2006; Nation 2001).

Research in vocabulary teaching has received scanty attention compared with teaching other language aspects such as grammar, reading, writing and pronunciation. This study investigates one specific component of lexical competence that is knowledge of idiomatic expressions, which constitute a major component in the lexical repertoire in any language. Idioms are commonly used in both speaking and writing; a matter that renders teaching them necessary in foreign or second language pedagogy. At the outset, it might be expedient to provide a definition for the word idiom.

The term idiom has been defined by a number of scholars. Crystal, for example, defines an idiom as “a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole” (Crystal 2008, 236). The Free Dictionary states that an idiom is “A speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements, as in keep tabs on.” Sporleder et al. (2010) define idioms as “multiword expressions
whose meanings cannot be inferred from the meaning of their parts in a completely compositional manner” (1).

In general, an idiom is a group of words whose meanings do not give the entire meaning of the idiom. That is to say, the meaning of an idiom cannot always be construed from the total meanings of its constituents. Some idioms are transparent as in ‘every dog has its day,’ or ‘see the light’ where the total meaning can be figured out. However, some idioms might be so opaque that it becomes very difficult for learners to figure out their meaning if they have not received solid exposure to the second language. The idiom ‘keep your hair on’ is one of such idioms. In his discussion of this idiom as an example of opaque idioms, Saeed (2012:181) states “the meaning of the individual words does not give the slightest idea of the meaning of the idiom. While the surface meaning of the components of this idiom implies keeping one’s hair neat, the idiom means ‘don’t be mad’ or ‘be calm.’” Nevertheless, not all idioms are semantically opaque.

Liontas defined idiomatic competence as “the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort,” (Liontas 2015, 623). Since native speakers use idioms in oral and written communication, it becomes a requirement that EFL learners should be exposed to a learning atmosphere where their ability of using these important pieces of the language is enhanced. However, this might not be an easy task for learners; idioms constitute a challenge for EFL learners due to a number of reasons, one of which is that they tend to be culture specific. Besides this, the meaning of an idiom is not compositional; the meanings of the constituent words of an idiom do not always make up the meaning of the idiom, as indicated above. Another reason is that foreign language learners are not frequently exposed to idioms in the process of learning a foreign language since in most cases foreign language learners are taught by non-native speakers of the foreign language. Indeed, even when the teachers are native speakers, they tend to avoid using idioms to avoid any potential breakdown in communication. This difficulty is aggravated by the fact that curriculum designers and textbook writers do not accord teaching idioms adequate attention.

This study proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the objectives of the study and its rationale, whereas section 3 reviews several related studies. The methodology of the research is presented in section 4 and the findings and the recommendations are presented in section 5.

**Objectives and rationale**

This study aims to investigate the ability of Arab EFL learners to recognize and use idiomatic expressions. Specifically, it seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How well can Arab learners of English recognize English idioms?
2. How well can they produce idioms in their written performance?
3. What type of difficulties may they encounter in recognizing and producing idioms?
4. What are the possible causes of such difficulties?
5. What implications may such a study offer to language teaching and learning, curriculum designers, textbook authors, teaching translation and training translators?

**Rationale**

An adequate command of idioms is essential for foreign language learners as it enables them to approximate a native-like competence at the levels of reception and recognition. In this respect, Danesi (1992) holds that metaphors and idioms should not be ignored in foreign language pedagogy due to their important role in improving the overall competence of learners (190). Furthermore, the Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (1993) states that the “accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners” (p. x). Strutz (1996, vii) strongly adopts the same stance. He states, “no one can be said to be proficient in a language until he or she possesses an ‘idiomatic control of it.’” Indeed, no EFL learner can claim that he or she has attained a native-like ability in English unless they have attained an advanced level of mastery of multi-word expressions, one of which, and definitely a prominent one, is idioms.

Liontas provides five reasons for teaching idioms to foreign language learners, including the following. First, idioms help learners understand how language works and develops creatively. Second, knowledge of idioms helps learners to better understand the role of context in comprehending idioms. In addition, teaching idioms promotes learners’ lexical knowledge, syntactic and grammatical competence and knowledge of usage. Furthermore, teaching idioms provides an opportunity to teach language and culture; a matter that leads to the development of idiomatic competence (Liontas 2017, 9-16).

English Vocabulary, of which knowledge of idioms is an essential component, is fundamental to language teaching and learning since insufficient vocabulary constitutes an obstacle for students to understand and to make themselves understood. In fact, there is a consensus among researchers that vocabulary knowledge constitutes an essential part of “communicative competence” (DeCarrico 2001, 285). Wilkins (1972) maintains: “…while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (111-12). Lewis (1993) went further to argue “lexis is the core or heart of language” (89). Therefore, lexical knowledge is essential for learners to develop proficiency in English. Nation and Meara (2002) state that proficiency in English has been found to be closely related to vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, students need large and rich vocabulary knowledge to be able to use language effectively and to achieve better language performance. Simply put, lexical knowledge facilitates fluent speaking and effective writing. Most learners and researchers agree that competency and proficiency in basic grammar and pronunciation can be attained relatively quickly, but lexical competency and proficiency appears to be endless.
This study attempts to evaluate the idiomatic competence of Arab learners of English, identify the difficulties they may encounter in this area of language, determine the causes of such difficulties and offer a proposal for teaching idioms at the secondary and tertiary levels of education.

**Review of related literature**

Idioms constitute an inseparable component of lexical competence, a fact that has motivated linguists and language practitioners to conduct studies that investigated idioms in the domain of second/foreign language acquisition in terms of their frequency, acquisition and the need to teach them to foreign language learners. Liu (2003) conducted a corpus-based study to identify the most frequently used idioms in Spoken American English. This study was based on three major corpora: Corpus of Spoken, Professional American English (Barlow, 2000); Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002), and Spoken American Media English (Liu, 2003). The researcher was able to compile four lists of the most frequently used idioms and offered suggestions for selecting idioms to be taught to foreign language learners. Another major study on the frequency of ‘core idioms’ was conducted by Grant (2005) in which he developed a list of the most frequently used idioms based on the British National Corpus (BNC) (Grant 2005, 429-451). It is worth mentioning that the current study is based on the frequency lists of these two studies.

As for the need to teach idioms to speakers of other languages, Liontas voiced the necessity of developing the idiomatic competence of foreign language learners, maintaining:

“Despite all the emerging theoretical accounts of idioms to date, little attention has been paid to teaching and learning idioms in the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classrooms…. Developing idiomatic competence among English language learners remains a formidable challenge,” (Liontas 2015, 622).

Liontas proposed a model for teaching idioms to foreign language learners throughout the various stages of schooling. In a more recent study, Liontas argued, “students’ knowledge of idioms needs to be anchored in language materials and situations that are both authentic and purposeful,” (Liontas 2017, 5). This is a valid point since acquiring idiomatic expressions requires exposing learners to a great deal of authentic materials and situations that would be conducive to helping learners perceive the need of using idioms. This is an essential task that teachers should strive to accomplish if learners are to take idiomatic expressions into serious account.

Thyab (2016) conducted a study that investigated the necessity of idiomatic expressions to English language learners in which she stressed the need for teaching idioms to foreign language learners. The researcher relied on the findings of other studies and on her anecdotal observations. She concluded that idioms should not be overlooked but rather be given the accorded attention in the Arab EFL classes.
The factors affecting L1 learners’ acquisition of idiomatic expressions were the focus of a study conducted by Cieślicka (2015). The researcher investigated how language learners acquire and process idiomatic expressions and managed to identify several factors that affect L1 learners’ processing of idioms including literal plausibility, semantic compositionality, salience and context. She also examined how such factors affect foreign language learners’ acquisition of idioms (209).

Similar to Cieślicka’s study, Türker conducted an experimental study that examined the role of L1 as well as the role of context in learning idioms. The analysis revealed that the influence of L1 is minimized if supportive contextual clues are available to foreign language learners in the process of teaching (Türker 2019, 133). This, again, stresses the importance of providing learners with contextualized authentic material that helps them in the process of learning idioms.

Another study that focused on learner’s acquisition of English idioms is that of Violeta and Marjan (2015). In this study, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of three methods in teaching idioms to Iranian and Lithuanian students at the tertiary level. In the first method, idioms were taught through translation whereas the second method presented idioms through pictures associated with a description of the cultural origin of each idiom. Finally, idioms were taught to the third group through output tasks in which learners were taught idioms whenever they occurred in texts. It was found that teaching idioms through using pictures associated with some historical and cultural explanation pertaining to idioms was the most effective method in the acquisition process. Despite the effectiveness of the pictures’ method, one should question the extent to which it can be used when teaching idioms that are highly nontransparent.

Investigating EFL learners of English competence of idioms at the levels of recognition and production has been the focus of many studies, one of which is Tran (2013). The study aimed at evaluating the idiomatic competence of 74 Vietnamese English language learners who were asked to complete an idiom whose meaning was given to them in order to test their ability to produce idioms. The second part of the test consisted of a 15-item matching task in which students were given 15 idioms and their meanings in two different columns. The third part of the elicitation technique was a gap-fill task. This task was designed to measure the learners’ ability to produce idioms. The findings of the study revealed that the students’ idiomatic competence was very low, especially the productive competence. The overall percentage of correct answers did not exceed 27% (Tran, 2013, 23-38). This study, though well written and conducted, was not based on an adequate and balanced elicitation technique. Only 15 items were used to evaluate the students’ ability to recognize idiomatic expressions and only 30 items were used to measure the subjects’ ability to produce idioms. It was recommended that developing idiomatic competence be accorded adequate attention in the teaching-learning process.

As far as the acquisition of idioms by Arab learners of English is concerned, only four studies were found in the literature. Alkarazoun (2015) conducted a study to analyze the errors that Jordanian learners of English commit in using idioms. Data for this study were elicited from a test consisting
of only 20 multiple-choice items. The twenty idioms were selected from The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2003) to represent 20 areas of idioms. The researcher did not describe the criteria she used in the selection of the idioms and the number of idioms on which the findings are based is not representative, which means that the findings of this study cannot be generalized. This study is also deficient in terms of methodology.

Another study that investigated Arab learners’ acquisition of idioms is that conducted by Al-Kadi (2015: 513-525). The study aimed at identifying the ability of Yemeni students to process idiomatic expressions and the strategies they use in learning idioms. The methodology adopted in this study raises issues that are not stated in the research questions, especially with the design of the study that aimed at measuring the correlation between the competence in idioms and the students’ achievement in the skills of speaking and listening. Furthermore, the study examined the students’ ability to process all types of idiomatic expressions, including phrasal verbs, collocations and metaphors. Largely, this study lacks focus and cannot be considered a study to evaluate the idiomatic competence of learners at the levels of recognition and production.

The current study differs from the previously reviewed studies in terms of its objectives, methodology and sample size as well as in the data collection techniques. Unlike the previous studies that mainly focused on evaluating the subjects’ productive ability, this study examined the idiomatic competence at both the recognition and the production levels. The number of the subjects in this study was 100 and the number of idioms examined was 75, which is larger than it is in other studies conducted on Arab learners.

Methodology

Data collection

To evaluate the learners’ ability to recognize and produce idioms in written communication, the researchers designed an elicitation technique consisting of four tasks as follows.

1. Task 1: a passage containing 20 idioms was used to evaluate the learners’ idiomatic competence at the level of recognition. Students were asked to read the passage and underline any idiomatic expression they were able to identify. The following are the first two sentences in the passage, presented here as an example:
   “The servant and the prince were like two peas in a pod even though the prince was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and the servant was born with chicken feed. The king had a very hard time with that because he was a fat cat…”

2. Task 2: a multiple-choice test consisting of 15 items was given to the subjects who were asked to circle the alternative that best explains the meaning of the bolded idiom in each question. The following is an example of this component:
I think that we have studied well and worked hard for our finals in order to get high grades, but the **proof is in the pudding**.

a. let’s wait and see the results  
b. we will be sure when we attend the party  
c. it is doubtful that we will get high grades  
d. we should not worry too much

3. Task 3 consists of twenty items in which the subjects were provided with an incomplete idiom in each question and asked to complete it by adding the missing word or words. The purpose of this part was to evaluate whether or not the subjects are familiar with the idiom as can be seen in the following example:

   The plan was intended to remain secret, but Jack let the cat ____________________. (Out of the bag)

4. Task 4 was a gap-fill activity in which the subjects were given a list of 23 idioms from which they were asked to select the idiom that best fills in the gap in 20 items. This section was designed to evaluate the subjects’ ability to understand the meaning of the idiom and use it in context.

To sum up, four elicitation techniques were used to collect data from the subjects in order to be as much comprehensive of the various aspects of the subjects’ idiomatic competence as possible:

Task 1: Underlining idioms in a passage.

Task 2: Determining the meaning of bolded idiomatic expressions -- choosing the best answer.

Task 3: Filling in blanks in sentences with a word or a phrase that best completes the idiom.

Task 4: Filling in blanks with the idiom that best fits the context in a list of sentences.

To ensure the validity of the elicitation techniques, the researchers requested two native speakers of English who are English Language instructors to review the test; their comments and feedback were taken into consideration, and the test was modified accordingly.

5. In addition to the four elicitation techniques, a survey of 15 English Language textbooks used for grades 9, 10, 11 and 12 in public schools and four textbooks used for the same grades in private schools was conducted. In other words, the study surveyed 19 textbooks to see how many activities were dedicated to teaching idioms or to raise students’ awareness of their significance.

**Selection of idioms**
A sample of 75 idiomatic expressions was used in the four parts of the elicitation technique. The idioms were selected from among the most frequent idioms in English. The list of idioms selected for the current study is primarily based on the lists of the most frequent idioms developed by Liu (2003) and Grant (2005). The sources from which the sample was selected include the following studies that were conducted in order to identify the most frequent idioms for pedagogical purposes.


One hundred idioms were initially selected from which 75 were finally used in the data elicitation techniques. The selection was made according to two criteria: two native speakers of English were requested to select what they believed to be the most common idioms. Also, each idiom was googled to see the result of its search. The idioms with the highest search results were finally selected.

**Participants**

The test was administered to 120 Arab learners at the university levels. All of them had fulfilled the university admission requirement of attaining a band score of 5 on the IELTS exam or a score of 500 on the TOEFL. The participants were graduates of private and public schools and have studied English for at least 10 years. They have also completed at least one or more courses in English such as English for Academic Purposes, English for Medicine, Speech Communication, Reading, or Technical Writing. Out of the 120 responses, only 100 were finally accepted because some responses were not complete; 16 subjects did not complete all the parts of the questionnaire and thus were rejected. Four subjects did not submit their responses at the end of the testing session. The sample included 30 students majoring in English language and literature.

**Method of analysis**

The number of correct responses were calculated in each part and averages and percentages of correct responses were computed.

**Findings and discussion**

The analysis of the subjects’ responses revealed that the average of correct responses in the four tasks is remarkably low, as Table (1) shows:
Table (1): Percentages of Correct responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Recognition</th>
<th></th>
<th>Production</th>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>Part 2</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Part 3</td>
<td>Part 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>31.20%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table (1) shows, the overall percentage of correct responses is 51.75%. This low level of performance is startling; it indicates that almost half the learners (48.25%) were unable to use idioms properly. This reflects a low competence level in the area of idioms, taking into account that all the subjects in the study have studied English for more than 10 years in both private and public schools. They have also satisfied the university admission requirement of obtaining a band score of 5 on the IELTS or a 500 on the TOEFL. In addition, they have completed at least two English language courses at the university, including English for Specific Purposes, English for Medicine, Speech Communication, Extensive Reading, and Introduction to Language (for the English major students). This low level of idiomatic competence implies that Arab learners of English do not receive the required dose of training in the area of idiomatic expressions during their EFL learning journey.

This can be clearly observed from their responses to Task 1 in which they were asked to underline any idiom they may find in the assigned passage. The percentage of correct responses on this task was only 58%. This means that 42% of the subjects were unable to identify any idiom in that passage. This is surprising because many idioms in the passage are easily identifiable. Idioms such as born with a silver spoon in his mouth; fat cat; hit the road; in the doghouse are usually encountered in reading passages that are presented to students, particularly in the intermediate stage of EFL learning, which means they should be quite identifiable for learners. Furthermore, the wordings in idioms such as a fish out of water; like a hot potato; see eye to eye should have helped learners realize that they were dealing with idiomatic constructions. Moreover, the Arabic equivalent of idioms such as a needle in a haystack; born with a silver spoon in his mouth are used in Arabic daily communication, and thus were expected to be easily recognizable for learners. It could be argued that part of the difficulty of identifying idioms in the provided text might be ascribed to the fact that some of them consist of common and familiar words, which did not strike learners as idiomatic. Constructions such as ‘chicken feed,’ ‘silver spoon,’ are examples. Yet, such reasoning cannot be the major account for this high percentage of incorrect answers, which means that weak performance in this part is indicative of the students’ lack of knowledge and awareness of such expressions.

The average of correct answers on the recognition components was 65%, which is again below expectations for the reasons given above. However, it is not as low as the recognition part in the
passage, discussed above. Data analysis revealed that context played an important role in ushering learners to the right response. That is, the contextualizing statements created for idioms in this task provided learners with overt and covert clues that were sometimes conducive to helping them opt for the right answer. Consider the following example:

1. He keeps saying that he will become rich once his new restaurant is opened, but I believe that it is just a pie in the sky.
   
   a. likely to be accomplished
   b. easy to accomplish
   c. unlikely to be accomplished
   d. realizable dream

As many as 73% selected the right answer here, which points to the importance of context as a significant element that helps learners select the correct response.

The contextualizing statements, however, were not always revealing the answers. Consider the following example:

2. The engineers wanted to completely redesign the product, but couldn't push the envelope because of a very restricted budget.
   
   a. find a way out
   b. were not allowed
   c. exceed the limits
   d. enlarge the envelope

   In this instance, neither the contextualizing statement nor the alternatives were of any help to the learners who were unfamiliar with the idiom. This means if some learners selected the appropriate answer, it was because they were familiar with the idiom. On the other hand, some idioms were stated in a non-contextualized way since they were expected to have been mastered by learners as lexical items. The following is an example:

3. Sami is a white-collar employee.
   
   a. project supervisor
   b. engineer
   c. a nurse
   d. an office worker

   Unless learners were familiar with the meaning of white-collar, they will find it difficult to select the right answer since no contextualizing clues were offered. The percentage of correct answers this idiom received was 55%.
On the production level, the average of correct responses was 38.50%, which is noticeably low and below expectations as well. It is also lower than that of the recognition level in which the average was 65%, as Table (1) above shows. This is in harmony with the results of other studies that found that learners’ level of production is usually lower than their recognition level (Fareh and Hamadi, 2019, 21). The averages in the production level are repeated below (Table 2)

(Table 2)

Table (2): Learners’ performance in the production parts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Part 3</th>
<th>Part 4</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31.20%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>38.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students in Task 3 of the production test were asked to complete an idiom that has one or more missing words. Part of the idiom in this task was given to the students in context as a prompt to help them recall the idiomatic expression. The percentage of correct responses on this task was only 31.2% which is far below expectations. The subjects in this part either did not add a word to complete the idiom or they added a word or more that are irrelevant as in “by and beyond (large), to make ends right (meet), hit the run (road).” By using beyond to complete the idiom ‘by and large’, learners might have figured that if two words alliterate, they might make an idiom. On the other hand, completing the idiom ‘hit the ___’ as ‘hit the run,’ might be ascribed to incomplete knowledge of the idiom hit and run.

This low level of performance at the production level reflects the subjects’ inadequate competence in using idioms in their written communication. Although the subjects were provided with part of each idiom, they were not able to complete it. However, we think that some idioms are not as frequent in daily communication. It is true that we endeavored to select the most common idioms based on the ranking of each in the idiom dictionaries and also based on the frequency of use as shown by Google, and finally based on two English native speakers’ judgment. Thus, while idioms such as go Scottish, once in a blue moon, dead horse, etc. are commonly heard in everyday exchanges, idioms such as green with envy and butterflies in one’s stomach may not be as frequent. Idioms such as speak your mind, pros and cons are among the ones that received the highest percentage of correct responses, plausibly due to the frequent use of such idioms in class settings where learners are asked to write about the pros and cons of an issue, encouraged to speak their mind in debates, etc. Idioms such as night owl, despite the provided context, was among the idioms that received a low percentage of correct responses. This idiom might be to some extent frequent, yet the word owl is negatively perceived by Arabs, which might explain the non-use of such a
word. Arabs usually prefer the expression a night person (see Saeed, 2017 for a discussion of the impact of mother culture on translating culture-specific idioms). Finally, a few erroneous responses in this part could be attributed to the effect of L1 interference as in: ‘give somebody the cold look/eye,’ which is a paraphrase to what is usually said in in Arabic, yet in completely different contexts.

The situation was slightly better in Task 4 where the subjects were asked to fill in the blank space in each item with the appropriate idiom to be selected from a list of idiomatic expressions provided at the top of the testing survey. The percentage of correct responses on this task was 44.9%, which is higher than that in Task 3. This may be attributed to the fact that the students were given clear contexts that helped them determine the appropriate idiom. Furthermore, the meanings of certain idioms were somehow transparent as in bite more than one can chew and make a mountain out of a molehill. Indeed, context was helpful in a number of statements. In the prompt: ‘Someone who remains a friend only when things are going well but abandons others during times of trouble or difficulty is ________,’ the word ‘friend’ helps the learners opt for the correct answer, i.e., fair-weather friend. Besides, the word ‘weather’ and its known characteristic of changing is a hint. Thus, even if some learners have had no prior encounter with such an idiom, context will help them make a smart guess. The findings show that as many as 68% of the informants came up with the correct response in this item. This helpful context is also seen in the prompts that attempt to elicit idioms such as over the moon, smell a rat, etc., which had a favorable impact on helping learners make appropriate guesses. Transparent idioms such as a man of his words and go broke were easily recognizable, especially with the revealing context, as evidenced by the high percentages of correct answers they receive. On the other hand, context cannot help a great deal with some idioms which tend to be field specific. The idiom red tape, which is usually encountered in business talks or business readings is not easily identified by non-business-oriented learners. Another aspect of the difficulty in this part was observed in learners’ filling in the blanks with words that look grammatically correct, but they do not properly complete the idiom. Examples of such erroneous responses include: as a rule in the university (of thumb), they always go together (Dutch), they do it once a year (in a blue moon), to live hand to hand (mouth), add insult to the situation (injury), to make ends effective (meet), etc.

Finally, the study involved content analysis of 19 textbooks. The purpose of this procedure was to explore the extent to which textbooks contribute to developing learners’ idiomatic competence. This survey was essential for answering the fourth research question pertaining to the causes of difficulty that learners encounter in learning English idioms. Analysis of the content of these 19 textbooks revealed that Arab EFL textbooks did not show any explicit efforts to present idiomatic expressions, nor did they provide learners with reading selections that include idioms. They did not contain any exercises that help raise the students’ awareness of the importance of learning idiomatic expressions. This is surprising; lack of treatment of idioms in these textbooks contribute to the inadequate competence of idioms demonstrated in this study.
To summarize, the subjects’ erroneous use of idioms was manifest in the following aspects:

1. Inability to identify the idiomatic expression in a provided text. The percentage of correct answer on this Task was 58%. Shallow knowledge of idioms and inadequate exposure to idiomatic expressions in the various learning stages resulted in learners’ inability to identify idioms in a provided text.

2. Inability to identify the meaning of an idiom although it is already identified for them as is the case in Task 2. The percentage of correct responses on this recognition task was 71%. The performance of the subjects on this task was much better than theirs on Task 1 in which they were asked to identify the idiom itself. The improvement in performance on this task may be due to the fact that the idiom was already identified and used in context. This may highlight the role of contextual clues in the prediction of meaning.

3. Inability to complete an idiom although parts of each idiom were provided: The percentage of correct responses on this task was 31%. This result is in congruence with the subjects’ result on Task 1.

4. Inadequate knowledge of idioms, where some students filled in the blanks with words that look grammatically correct, but do not properly complete the idiom despite the existing contextual clues in the prompt sentences.

5. Inadequate knowledge of the meanings of idioms: Only 44.9% of the students were able to fill in the blanks with the most appropriate idiom. In this task, the subjects were provided with a list of idioms and asked to fill in the blanks with the idiom that best fits the context. This low productive performance indicates that the subjects’ knowledge of the meanings of idioms is deficient and far below expectations.

6. Many erroneous responses could be attributed to the effect of L1 interference as in give somebody the cold look/eye (shoulder).

7. Context analysis of the 19 randomly selected Arab EFL textbooks reveal that idioms are hardly presented in all of them.

**Conclusion:**

Discussion of the findings show that the overall percentage of the subjects’ performance at the recognition and production levels is remarkably low, 51.75%. This indicates that the Arab learners’ idiomatic competence is rather deficient, a matter which may reflect the subjects’ overall lexical competence and consequently their communicative competence at large. The discussion above has provided an account that might be behind the inadequate level of idiomatic competence. To recap, the low percentages of correct answers might be accounted for in terms of the following factors:
1. Idiom meaning is generally not compositional. That is, the overall meaning of an idiom does not result from adding up the meanings of its single words. Many students attempted to realize the idiom literally without noticing that the common words they read in an idiom do not signal the meanings that students have in mind.

2. Some of the idiomatic expressions consist of familiar words that do not reflect their idiomatic nature. This feature aggravates the situation and renders these idioms hard to identify.

3. Foreign language learners are not frequently exposed to idiomatic expressions in the process of learning a foreign language neither in the textbooks nor by the teachers who are generally non-native speakers of English. Even native speakers of English would tend to avoid using idioms while teaching foreign learners in order to facilitate communication and avoid communication breakdowns.

4. English language textbooks do not provide students with any chance to develop their idiomatic competence. The researchers surveyed 19 textbooks that are used for teaching English in the Arab World, but none has a single activity that aims at teaching idioms or even raising students’ awareness of the significance of learning idiomatic expressions in the foreign language. The lack of adequate attention accorded to teaching idioms adds insult to injury.

**Recommendations for developing learners’ idiomatic competence**

In light of the learners’ deficient idiomatic competence, which most likely reflects a poor lexical competence on the part of the learners, the following recommendations are in place to remedy such a weakness.

1. Systematic pedagogical efforts should be exerted to raise students’ awareness of the significance of learning idiomatic expressions in order to improve their overall lexical competence. This can be done through exposing students to authentic teaching materials that contain idiomatic expressions and demonstrating to them how teaching idioms to foreign language learners is indispensable since not knowing the meanings of idiomatic expressions in a text may lead to communication breakdowns.

2. The noticeable deficiency in the overall students’ lexical competence calls for implementing remedial pedagogical procedures on the part of the curriculum designers, textbook writers and teachers. Teaching idioms should be explicitly and systematically incorporated in textbooks and teaching materials.

3. Specific courses for teaching vocabulary at the secondary and tertiary levels need to be incorporated in the students’ study plans. Such courses should be well designed in a way
that ensures that textbooks teach the various components of the lexical competence at both the receptive and productive levels.

4. Since idioms constitute an essential component of lexical competence and since lack of knowledge in this area may hinder the process of communication, the following procedures may be of practical significance for developing foreign language learners’ idiomatic competence at both the recognition and the production levels:

4.1. Awareness exercise: Students’ awareness of and attention to the significance of idioms in the process of communication should be accorded adequate care by teachers and textbook writers. Specific exercises on idioms need to be incorporated in each unit in order to enable students realize the role that idioms play in learning a foreign language. For example, you can ask your students to read a text like the following and ask them about the meanings of the phrases enclosed in quotation marks.

Before you go ahead and learn English idioms, consider these sentences - If you want to speak English like a native, then you have "no other go" but to learn English idioms. If you are hitting on any other website - other than LearningEnglishA-Z.com - then you are "barking up the wrong tree", because we are the "cat's whiskers" when it comes to English resources, and we make learning English "a piece of cake". Remember, we are here to "give you a hand" and teach you English "at a fast clip". (DE CARO 2009, 121).

Such an activity shows the students that the meanings of the phrases enclosed in quotation marks should not be taken literally; otherwise, the whole idea of the text will be distorted. This activity highlights the significance of understanding the meanings of idioms in communication.

4.2. Recognition exercises: students need to be trained on how to recognize that a phrase or a group of words constitutes and idiom that should not be interpreted literally. They should be given sentences or short texts containing idiomatic expressions and asked to identify the idioms in the text. The teacher should ask his students to explain the meaning of a sentence containing an idiom to check whether they can capture the meaning of the idiom as in the sentence “you cannot sit on the fence any longer__ you need to choose who of these two we need to fire.”

4.3. Production exercises of different types such as gap- fill, completing the missing part of an idiom, providing the idiom that fits the context given.

4.4. Translation exercises: Students are given sentences containing idioms and asked to translate them into Arabic to check whether they can properly interpret the meaning of the idiom.
4.5. Explicit and systematic teaching of idioms: incorporating a number of idioms in each unit and teaching them directly to students.
4.6. Training student to infer the meanings of idiomatic expressions from context.
4.7. Associating the idiom with the story behind establishing it.
4.8. Asking students to find equivalent idioms in their mother tongue.
4.9. Creating contexts conducive to using idioms.
4.10. Frequent exposure to idioms in texts.

5. Idioms to be taught should be carefully selected according to frequency, relevance to the field of study and similarity to mother tongue idioms.

References


