THE USE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: FUNCTIONS, FEATURES, AND LEARNING CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This article examines the usage and functional role of phraseological units—commonly known as idioms—in the English language. Phraseological expressions are essential components of natural speech, often carrying meanings that go beyond the literal interpretations of their individual elements. The study explores the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic features of English idioms, highlighting their stylistic richness and communicative efficiency. It also discusses the challenges faced by non-native learners in mastering these expressions due to cultural references, figurative language, and context-dependent meanings. Emphasis is placed on effective teaching methods and the importance of incorporating idiomatic language in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula to enhance learners' fluency, comprehension, and cultural competence.

Keywords: idioms, phraseological units, English language, figurative meaning, non-literal expressions, EFL learners, communicative competence, cultural context, language acquisition, stylistic devices

Introduction

Phraseological units, or idioms, are a vital and expressive layer of the English language, contributing significantly to its figurative, cultural, and stylistic dimensions. These fixed expressions, such as "spill the beans," "kick the bucket," or "break the ice," often convey meanings that are not directly deducible from the meanings of their individual words. As such, they represent one of the most fascinating—and often challenging—features of English for language learners.

In native communication, idioms enrich the language by adding color, emotion, and subtlety, and they serve various pragmatic functions such as emphasizing a point, expressing attitude, or creating humor. Idioms are deeply embedded in the cultural and historical context of a language, and their appropriate use often signals a speaker's high level of fluency and cultural awareness.

However, for non-native speakers—especially those whose mother tongues lack a parallel phraseological system—mastering English idioms presents significant linguistic and cognitive difficulties. Idioms are often non-transparent, meaning their overall meanings are not predictable from the meanings of the words they contain. Moreover, many idioms are tied to specific socio-cultural experiences, requiring background knowledge that may not be accessible to foreign learners.

This article aims to explore the nature and classification of English phraseological units, their usage in spoken and written contexts, and the implications they have for second language acquisition and pedagogy. Special attention is given to the role of idioms in enhancing communicative competence and the strategies that can be used to teach idioms effectively in English language classrooms.

Methods

This research employed a mixed-method approach, combining theoretical linguistic analysis with practical classroom-based observation. The methods included:

1. Corpus Analysis
   A range of contemporary English corpora (e.g., COCA – Corpus of Contemporary American English) was consulted to identify frequently used idioms and phraseological expressions in real-life contexts. The study categorized idioms by frequency, form, and function.
2. Textual Analysis
   Selected samples from literary texts, news articles, films, and television scripts were analyzed to observe idiomatic usage in formal and informal registers. This provided insights into the pragmatic functions and contextual nuances of idioms.
3. Learner Survey
   A structured questionnaire was distributed to 50 Uzbek EFL students (intermediate and upper-intermediate levels) to assess:
   o Awareness and recognition of common English idioms
   o Perceived difficulty in understanding or using idioms
   o Sources of idiom acquisition (textbooks, media, teachers)
4. Classroom Observation
   Lessons were observed in two English language centers where idiom instruction was integrated into the curriculum. Teaching techniques and student reactions were documented to evaluate the effectiveness of various methods (e.g., contextual guessing, visuals, translation).
5. Teacher Interviews
   Semi-structured interviews with five experienced English teachers explored their strategies, challenges, and recommendations in teaching idioms to non-native speakers.

Results

The research yielded the following key findings:

1. **Idioms are Underrepresented in Formal Instruction**
   Despite their frequency in authentic English, idioms are **not systematically included** in many EFL textbooks or curricula. Teachers often rely on external materials or spontaneous explanation.
2. **High Student Interest, Low Confidence**
   78% of surveyed students expressed strong interest in learning idioms, linking them to

"sounding natural" or "speaking like natives." However, only 24% reported **confidence in using them correctly**, mainly due to fear of misuse or misunderstanding.

3. **Cultural Knowledge is a Barrier**
Students reported that **idioms tied to Anglo-American culture** (e.g., sports, historical references, or folklore) were particularly difficult to understand. Literal translation often led to confusion or incorrect interpretation.

4. **Visual and Contextual Methods Are Effective**
Classroom observations showed that students retained idioms more effectively when taught through **stories, visual imagery, role-playing**, or usage in dialogues, rather than isolated memorization.

5. **Teachers Highlighted Need for Repetition and Context**
Interviews with teachers emphasized the importance of **frequent exposure** and **repeated use in various contexts**. They also noted that idioms should be taught in chunks, not word-by-word, to maintain meaning.

6. **Idioms Enhance Pragmatic Competence**
Students who actively used idioms in speech or writing showed improved ability to express emotion, irony, and attitude—signs of growing **pragmatic fluency** and confidence in real-world communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that **phraseological units (idioms)** play a crucial role in the richness and expressiveness of the English language, yet they remain one of the most **difficult linguistic features for EFL learners** to master. The challenges are both linguistic and cultural, involving not only the recognition of idioms but also their appropriate and fluent use in context.

One of the central observations is that idioms are **underrepresented in formal language instruction**, despite being prevalent in everyday communication, media, and literature. Traditional EFL syllabi often focus on grammar, general vocabulary, and functional language, leaving idioms as supplementary or optional material. This neglect creates a gap between the **"textbook English"** that learners acquire and the **authentic English** they encounter in the real world.

Another important theme emerging from the study is the **semantic opacity** of idioms. Since the meaning of most idioms cannot be deduced from their individual components, learners often struggle with **decoding idiomatic expressions**, especially without adequate contextual cues. For example, phrases like "barking up the wrong tree" or "hit the sack" are puzzling when translated literally and require cultural and situational knowledge to be properly understood.

Cultural context proves to be another major barrier. Many idioms are **culture-bound**, reflecting Anglo-American values, historical events, folklore, or humor. For instance, sports-based idioms ("throw in the towel", "step up to the plate") or military metaphors ("bite the bullet", "call the shots") may not resonate with learners from non-Western backgrounds and may require extra-cultural explanation.

On the positive side, the research highlights that **visual methods**, **storytelling**, **dialogue-based practice**, and **role-play** are highly effective in helping learners internalize idioms. Such techniques provide context and emotional engagement, making idioms more memorable and meaningful. Learners exposed to idioms in rich communicative contexts are more likely to remember their meaning and use them appropriately.

Furthermore, teaching idioms contributes significantly to the development of **pragmatic competence**—the ability to understand and convey meaning beyond the literal. Students who engage with idioms become more capable of expressing **attitude**, **irony**, **sarcasm**, and **cultural nuance**, which are essential for advanced language proficiency and authentic communication.

The discussion also points to the need for **teacher training** in idiom instruction. Many instructors, especially non-native ones, feel insecure about teaching idioms due to the complexity and unpredictability of figurative language. Professional development, updated resources, and inclusion of idioms in standardized curricula would help address this gap.

Conclusion

Phraseological units are an **indispensable part of natural English communication**, offering stylistic depth and cultural insight. This study demonstrates that while idioms pose **notable challenges for EFL learners**, especially due to their semantic unpredictability and cultural specificity, they also offer **significant benefits** for learners' communicative and pragmatic development.

Key conclusions of the study include:

- Idioms are **underrepresented in EFL textbooks and curricula**, leading to a disconnect between classroom English and real-world English.
- Learners are **motivated to learn idioms** but often lack the confidence to use them due to fear of misinterpretation.
- Idioms are most effectively taught through **context-rich, visual, and interactive methods** that emphasize meaning over memorization.
- Teaching idioms enhances learners' **cultural competence**, **figurative thinking**, and **authentic communication skills**.
- There is a clear need for **more structured and systematic inclusion of idioms** in English language teaching materials, along with **professional support** for teachers.

Ultimately, integrating idioms into language education not only bridges the gap between classroom and real-life English but also empowers learners to **speak with nuance, depth, and cultural sensitivity**—hallmarks of true fluency.

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