Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Useof Selected Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

This research is devoted to study the performance of Iraqi EFL learners with reference to idiomatic expressions in modern Standard English.By definition , an idiom is a linguistic unit in which the meaning of a given construction cannot be understood from the words that compose it. Evidence shows that English idiomatic expressions represent a rather problematic area for EFL learners . Thus , this study aims at theoretically investigating the English idiomatic expressions and practically studying the Iraqi EFL learners' performance in dealing with these expressions by means of a specialized test designed for this purpose . It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in dealing with idiomatic expressions in both recognition and production levels . The test includes two questions , each with 25 items. Results show that , at the recognition level (question 1) , most Iraqi EFL learners fail in recognizing the idiomatic expressions , whereas at the recognition level the percentage of learners unable to employ the given idiomatic expressions increased including the avoided items , which are considered as incorrect in both first and second questions . The findings arrived at support the above mentioned hypothesis . The study ends with some of the recommendations for EFL teachers and learners and the way they encounter such expressions in spoken and written English .

The present study falls into fivesections. The first section includes general definitions of idiomatic expressions in English from scholars' and

linguists' points of view. The second section deals with the idiomatic expressions in modern Standard English with reference to the definitions , characteristics and types of idiomatic expressions. The third section is devoted to investigate the predicted Arabic counterparts to the English idiomatic expressions and the aspects of similarities and differences of these constructions in both languages . Sectionfour includes the test which is made for the students from the third stage of the College of Basic Education to measure their total performance at the recognition and production levels with a discussion of the main types of errors which are committed by them. Finally , the fifth section summarizes the main conclusions and findings of the present study.

Keyword: idiomatic expressions, Iraqi EFL learners, modern Standard English

Section One :

In this paper, an attempt is carried out to investigate the idiomatic expressions in modern standard English and their counterparts in modern standard Arabic .Also , it aims to investigate the extent to which Iraqi EFL learners are able to recognize and produce the idiomatic expressions in modern standard English. An idiomatic expression is defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010,p270) as " an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts " as in saying ,p

The girl **washed her hands of the matter** (which means that the girl refused to have anything to do with a specific matter) .

As far as modern standard Arabic is concerned , an idiomatic expression can be seen in :

لم تكن تلك الحادثة سوى زوبعة في فنجان .

Evidence shows that the comparison between idiomatic expressions in both of English and Arabic has not been adequately carried out .Therefore , it is hoped that such constructions will be thoroughly studied in this paper .

This study aims at :

1- Investigating the idiomatic expressions in modern standard English as far as definition , semantics , syntax and illustrations are concerned .

2- Investigating the Arabic idiomatic expressions that may serve as adequate counterparts to those of English .

3- Comparing between such expressions in both languages .

4- Making an achievement test that measures the Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' ability in recognizing and producing these idiomatic expressions as far as modern standard English is concerned .

5- Finally , the study aims at formulating suggestions that may be of value in recognizing and employing such expressions in modern standard English .

This study hypothesizes that(1) idiomatic expressions in both languages differ from each other and that(2) Iraqi EFL learners face considerable difficulties in employing these expressions in modern standard English .

The present study falls into five sections , the first section is an introduction whereas the second section focuses on idiomatic expressions in modern standard English .The third section is devoted to investigate the Arabic counterparts to English idiomatic expressions . Section four is devoted to the achievement test . Finally, the fifth section summarizes the main findings and suggestions of this study .

Section Two ,p Idiomatic Expressions in Modern Standard English

2.1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language includes studying the morphemes , simple words , compound words and their meanings . Also , it includes studying certain fixed phrases that consist of more than one word , whose meanings cannot be predicted from the meanings of their individual words . In other words ,learning a language must include learning the idiomatic expressions of that language (Fromkin et.al , 2003,p206)

An idiom is defined as an expression which has a meaning that the listener (or reader) cannot get from the literal meanings of the separate words (

Kuipper and Scott,1996)(Flavell and Flavell,1992,piv) (Richards et.al,1992,p172) . Thus , when saying :

I want you to bring **the idea home** to Peter .

the underlined words mean " to make Peter understands what is going on " Oxford Word Power (2010,p398) .

Other examples of sentences with idiomatic expressions can be seen in ,p

Bill asked Philip to **bite his tongue** . (i.e. **not to speak**)

She wanted to **sell** him **down the river**. (to **deceive him**)

I want you to **give** me **a piece of your mind** .(to**listen attentively**)

Fromkin et.al (2003,p206)

The old woman next our home **kicked the bucket** last night .(i.e. **died**)

I'm not saying that Mr. Smith **missed the boat**entirely .(i.e. **has no chanceto do something**) (Biberet.al , 2000,p 1026)

We wanted to make Elizabeth **round the bend** .(i.e. to **make her angry orfrustrated**) (McCarthy and O'Dell , 2002,p6) .

Furthermore , in saying :

Get me an ice-cream … and **step on it** .

The speaker is not asking the addressee to " step on an ice cream " (as the sentence may superficially indicate . Rather ,he is merely asking the addressee to hurry because " **step on it** " indicates " **pressing down on the accelerator of aparticular car** " (Bruke , 1995,p1)

 Denham et.al (2013,p316) and Bruke(ibid) agree that idiomatic expressions have no literal interpretation or meanings and that the literal interpretation must not be confused with the underlying meaning of what is said .

2.2. Semantic Features of Idioms

A rather significant distinguishing feature of idioms is that they are semantically non – compositional and are therefore likely to be idiosyncratic to speech communities. Their meanings tend to be unpredictable from their constituent parts (Levinson, 1983,p 270). Furthermore, (Lyons, 1983,p 143) mentions that phrasal lexemes (i.e. lexemes whose forms are phrases in the traditional sense of this term) are in this sense semantically idiomatic, these may be illustrated in "put up with, draw a bow at a venture, pg in a poke … etc." Palmer (1980,p 35) and Ullmann (1962,p 80-82) think that idioms are OPAQUE. Accordingly, (Disciullo& Williams, 1987) agree that idioms are "listed syntactic objects". They, also emphasize the fact that the meaning of a given idiom must be listed in the lexicon and memorized. Thus, the meaning of the phrase "kick the ball" is semantically detected from its constituent parts, while the meaning if the idiom "kick the bucket" (i.e. die) cannot be predicted from its constituent parts.

Here are some other illustrations:

"**A can of worms**" (i.e. **a complicated problem**).

"**Spill the beans**" (i.e. **disclose a secret**).

"**Sell a person down the river**" (i.e. **deceivehim**).

"**To bend over backwards**" (i.e. **to exert a great deal of effort**). (Swan, 2005,p 231) (Burke, 1995,p vii).

It seems worth mentioning, however, that there are some idioms which have figurative, and often transparent, meaning. Accordingly, their meaning can be worked out rather easily (e.g. "**break A's heart**", "**givesomeone to understand**", "**behind A's back**"). (Seidl&McMardie, 1988,p 13), (Cowie, et. al., 1983,p xii). This type of idioms is called "figurative idioms" when composed with "pure idioms" mentioned previously. Additionally, a third type of idioms is called "semi- idioms" because these tend not to be fully idiomatic (e.g. "**bite one's tongue**", "**catch one's breath**" (ibid).

2.3. Syntactic Features of Idioms

Because of their internal syntactic structure, idioms manifest "unusual irregularities". The syntactic properties of idioms help to distinguish them from other non – idiomatic syntactic structure. The following characteristics of idioms serve to distinguish them from other equivalent phrases:

2.3.1. Substitution of the Parts

This means that idioms do not accept any sort of substitution of their constituent parts, even for near synonyms. In this sense, (Crystal, 1998,p 189) mentions that; from a syntactic point of view, the words of an idiom "often do not permit the usual variability they display in other "**contexts**". Thus, in saying "**It is raining cats and dogs**", one cannot say **"*it is raining dogs and cats / a cat and a dog**". Similarly, in saying "**beat about the bush**", one cannot say "***hurt about the bush**" or **"*beataround the bush**".

(Flavell&Flavell, 1992,p xi) point out that the following illustrations are unacceptable as idioms:

"*kick the pail".

"*carry the bucket".

"*inter the hatchet".

"*bury the axe".

2.3.2. Insertion of Lexical Materials

Idioms often lose their idiomatic meaning when lexical materials are inserted within them. Accordingly, the following examples cannot be considered as idioms:

Bill spilled the green beans.

Mary kicked the broken bucket.

Frank buried the old hatchet.

2.3.3. Resistance of Syntactic Variations

Normally, idioms exhibit resistance to most syntactic variations. This means that idioms lose their "idiomatic" meaning when such variations occur. The idiom "**kick the bucket**", for instance, loses its idiomatic meaning when it passivized, as in

Bill **kicked the bucket** yesterday. (i.e. "Bill **died** yesterday") but ,

The bucket was kicked by Bill. (i.e. "**Bill kicked a certain bucketyesterday**").

In the same sense, the idiom "**spill the beans** "no longer" means "**reveal a hidden secret**" when passivized.

A further feature that idioms reject is pluralization. Thus neither **"*spill the bean**" nor **"*kick the buckets**" is acceptable. Additionally, idioms reject pronominalization. Thus, the following sentence has no idioms.

Tom kicked the bucket and Bill kicked it too (Flavell&Flavell, 1992,p iv).

Section Three ,p Idiomatic Expressions In Modern Standard Arabic

In this section , an attempt is made to shed light on the idiomatic expressions in modern standard Arabic that may correspond to the English idiomatic expressions presented in the previous section . As far as Arabic language is concerned , it can be seen that , similar to the English language , Arabic is enriched with constructions whose meanings completely differ from the meanings of the separate words they contain . This can be seen in :

وَلَا تَجْعَلْ يَدَكَ مَغْلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا تَبْسُطْهَا كُلَّ الْبَسْطِ فَتَقْعُدَ مَلُومًا مَحْسُورًا (الإسراء ،ص٢٩)

And cause thou not to **shackle thy hand unto thy neck nor stretch it forth to themaximum (limits of) stretching forth** , lest thou shouldst thereafter) sit down blamed , destituted (Ali , 1988 ,p 883) .

where the Almighty One God means in this verse " neither be niggardly nor be wasting but be moderate in even charity , neither abstain from giving

any simple thing at all to any person , nor give away everything you have and put thyself in need and misery (ibid ,p 897)

Similarly , in :

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٌ لِمَا مَعَهُمْ نَبَذَ فَرِيقٌ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَرَاءَ ظُهُورِهِمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ (البقرة ، p ١٠١)

And when there came unto them an apostle from God confirming what was (already) with them , some of those to whom the scripture was given cast the Book of God **behind their backs** as if they knew (it) not (ibid ,p 75) .

In this verse , there's a reference that the Israelites casting aside the covenant and their throwing

the Book **behind their backs** means that they **pay no heed orattention to it or neglected it**

(ibid ,p 131) .

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا عَنْهَا لَا تُفَتَّحُ لَهُمْ أَبْوَابُ السَّمَاءِ وَلَا يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ حَتَّىٰ يَلِجَ الْجَمَلُ فِي سَمِّ الْخِيَاطِ ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُجْرِمِينَ(الأعراف ،ص ٤٠)

" Verily those who belie Our signs and in pride turn away from them , shall not open for them the gates of heaven nor shall they enter the Garden (of paradise) **until the camel passeth through the eye of the needle** ; thus do We recompense the guilty " (ibid ,p 577).
Here , the example **of the passing of a camel through the eye of the needle** stands for **the impossibility of the action** (ibid ,p 575).
Similarly , in saying ,p
ـ قالت امرأة عجوز فقيرة للأمير: إني لأشكو إليك قلة الجرذان في البيت! (و تعني قلة المال حيث ليس لديها طعام).
An old woman to the prince ,p I complain to you that **no rats are in thishouse** .
Where the woman wanted to tell the prince that she suffers poverty that there's no any piece of bread in her house , consequently no rats will enter into it .

(الجرجاني ، ٢٠٠٢ ،ص ١١٢)

Also ,

<div dir="rtl">

نصحت عليا بان يضرب الحديد وهو ساخن.

</div>

I advised Ali to <u>strike while the iron is hot</u> .

Where the intended meaning of the underlined idiomatic expressions is " to act at the right moment " .

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صالح (٢٠١٤ ،ص١٤٣)

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Idioms and Translation

The question here ," can we translate idioms from one language to another?"

Despite the fact that there are some idiomatic expressions that look identical in two languages just like the English idiom " **strike while the iron is hot** " in the sentence

above, which **اضرب الحديد وهو ساخن "** in Arabic, nevertheless , it is argued corresponds to **" that the simple answer to the question of translating idioms is " NO " .**

In this respect , Wright (1999 ,p 10) says that translating idioms is an area where languages tend to be totally different . Sometimes , an idiom can be translated from one language to another , but in most cases this is not possible .Wright (ibid) says that " one of the reasons idiomatic language is difficult to translate is because it is an area of language closest to culture ".

Section Four,p The Test

3.1 Background

In order to reach the required aims of the present research, a test has been made to identify the aspects of difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL students in recognizing and producing sentences with idiomatic expressions and to diagnose the causes of their errors. The test consists of two questions. The first question measures the students' responses on the

recognition level. The second question, however, is specialized to measure their responses on the production level. The first question includes twenty-five items that are designed to measure the students' ability to recognize or underline the idiomatic expressions in the given sentences . The second question contains twenty-five items that are intended to measure the students' ability to employ selected idiomatic expressions in sentences .

The test has been applied to a sample of fifty Iraqi EFL university students at their third stage from the Department of English,in the year 2014-2015. The third year students are chosen to apply the test because in this year of study at the university, they are supposed to have a great deal of information about the idiomatic expressions in English . It is supposed that students have already become aware of these expressions in their syllabus as they face idiomatic expressions in both of comprehension and linguistics .

In this section, an attempt is made to present the results of the students' performance regarding the test. The degree to which they master the idiomatic expressions is, thus, conditioned by their correct responses.

As mentioned above, the first question of the test is constructed to measure the students' performance at the recognition level. In brief, the students' total performance of question one is presented respectively in the following table:

Table (1): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition Level in Question (1)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
1	425	34	780	62.4	45	3.6

As Table (1) shows, the total number of correct responses in question (1) is (425 ,34%), while the incorrect responses (in addition to the avoided ones) is (825 , 66%). The rate of the correct responses reflects the subjects' inability in(1) identifying the idiomatic expressions   and (2) in

matching between sentences or situations and the adequate idiomatic expressions to be used in the first question of the test. The rate of the incorrect responses, indeed, reflects that some of them have encountered difficulty in identifying the idiomatic expressions employed in this question.

As for the question of the subjects' performance at the production level, table (2) summarize the results:

Table (2),p Subjects' Total Performance at the Production Level in Question (2)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
2	325	26	895	71.6	30	2.4

Depending on the results presented in Table (2), it can be concluded that most of the

subjects are incompetent in (1) identifying the intended meanings of the idiomatic expressions and(2) in employing idiomatic expressions in written sentences because most of their responses to the second question are incorrect (925, 74%) when compared with their correct ones (325, 26%).

Finally the subjects' performance of the entire test with respect to the recognition and production levels can be revealed in the following table:

Table (3): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition and Production Levels

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
1	425	34	780	62.4	45	3.6
2	325	26	895	71.6	30	2.4

Chapter Five,p Conclusions and Findings

In this research, it is concluded that idiomatic expressions in Modern Standard English are very important in everyday spoken and written language. Thus, due attention must be given to their study and meaning. In addition, it is found that English idiomatic expressions reveal, in many cases, differences from their counterparts in Arabic. According to the results of the test , it is found that Iraqi undergraduate students face difficulties in recognizing and producing the English idiomatic expressions .Thus, such expressions must be adequately studied . EFL teachers and lecturers must pay due attention to the study of these constructions in order to help students thoroughly understand and produce these expressions in their spoken and written English .

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The Test

Q 1:) Underline the idiomatic expressions in these sentences:

1– If you break into the party , it s your funeral.

2- They asked him to bite his tongue.

3 – Well go to Manchester to do the shopping and well pop in to see aunt Madge. We want to kill two birds with one stone .

4 – Unfortunately , Bill kicked the bucket last week .

5 – 200 Russian troops occupied the airport in Kosovo's capital Pristina under the noses of NATO forces .

6 – Susan and Jim are such airhead – they love sports but they are failing all of their classes at school .

7- I was all ears as Mina told me his exciting story .

8 – Tom had all of his eggs in one basket – Yoyodyine com stock – and when the stock market crashed he was bankrupt .

9 – My new Mercedes cost me an arm and leg .

10 – That lazy fellow turned a deaf ear to my sincere advice .

11 – Your true friends will stand by you through thick and thin .

12 - That poor labourers live from hand to mouth .

13 – He made a clan breast of his crime under pressure .

14 – Forward your complaint in black and white .

15 – Though Pt.Nehru was born with a silver spoon in his mouth , he led a very simple life.

Q1:B Match between the sentences given in list A and their suitable idiomatic expressions in list B that can fill the blanks .

NO.	List A ,p Sentences	List B,p Idiomatic Expressions
1	To try to write a novel in English is a ……………………. For Rattan .	Cut me dead
2	Do it now ! ………………………………… !	Get hold of the wrong end of the stick
3	What's wrong with Linda ?she …………………………. in The bank this morning .	Light at the end of the tunnel
4	We could visit the Railway Museum as well . According to this guidebook , it's only a ………………. from here .	Wild – good chase
	No , no , I said exactly the opposite ! It's just like Iris to …………………….	Changes horses in mid-stream
6	After months of hard work and no income , there was …………………………. A small publisher had agreed to publish his first novel .	Reading between the lines
7	How can anyone ……………………………. On 40 dollars a week .	Strike while the iron is hot
8	She didn't tell me directly , but …………………………. I think she intends to settle in Geneva.	Throw good money after bad
9	Don't count on Alf's support. He says he s with you now , but he often ……………………………..	Make ends meet
10	Douglas lost money on some foreign investments , so I Suggested good investment scheme in this country . but he said that he wasn't prepared to ………………………..	Stone t throw

Q2:A) Paraphrase the underlined idiomatic expressions in these sentencesand tell their meaning using your own words .

1-That kid is always beating up other kids on the playground . I wish someone would give him <u>a taste of his own medicine</u> .

2- Peter: What will you do if you can't afford to go on holiday next summer ?

Jack ,p I'll <u>cross that bridge</u> when I come to it .

3- Every time I mention Patricia , Sam <u>hits the roof</u> .

4-The strange combination of colours<u>hits you in the eye</u> as soon as you enter the room .

5- He <u>had</u> just <u>not done his homework</u> for the interview . He couldn't answer our questions .

6- When we arrived we found the hotel we'd booked looked awful , but as they say, <u>you should never judge a book by its cover .</u>

7- He got married for the first time when he was 85 and a week later he <u>kicked the bucket</u> .

8- Government ministers are being accused of taking <u>a leap in the dark</u> as they prepare to radically change the education system.

9- The police <u>left no stone unturned</u> in their effort to find the little girl .

10-Learning to speak English is <u>a piece of cake</u> for her .

Q2,pB) Put the following idiomatic expressions in meaningful sentences ,p

1- let the cat out of a bag .

2- held out an olive branch .

3-leave the field clear for (somebody) .

4- recharge your batteries .

5- on top of the world .

6- build castles in the air .

7- live from hand to mouth .

8-wash your hands of somebody / something .

9- without a second thought .

10- add fuel to fire .

11- miss the boat .

12- once in a blue moon .

13- cry over spilt milk .

14- spill the beans .

15- make a storm in a tea cup .

دراسة اداء المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في استخدام العبارات الاصطلاحية

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الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة ظاهرة دلالية في اللغة الانكليزية وهي ظاهرة التراكيب الاصطلاحية حيث تم التركيز على تعريف تلك التراكيب دلاليا اعتمادا على الأدبيات والمصادر ذات الصلة ودراسة إمكانية طلبة اللغة الانكليزية لغة أجنبية على فهم وإدراك التركيب الاصطلاحي وتوظيفه لغويا . يتألف البحث من خمسة فصول حيث يعطي الفصل الأول نبذة مختصرة عن البحث ومشكلته وأهدافه في حين يقدم الفصل الثاني دراسة تفصيلية للتراكيب الاصطلاحية وتعريفها وخصائصها وأنواعها . يهدف الفصل الثالث إلى دراسة التراكيب الاصطلاحية في اللغة العربية واهم خصائصها . الفصل الرابع لهذا البحث يمثل الاختبار حيث تم اختيار عينة مكونة من خمسين طالبا من طلبة قسم اللغة الانكليزية – المرحلة الثالثة لإجراء الاختبار المكون من سؤالين حيث كان على الطلبة تحديد التراكيب الاصطلاحية دلاليا في السؤال الأول في حين كان المطلوب من الطلبة في السؤال الثاني توظيف التراكيب الاصطلاحية في الجمل المعطاة لهم .أخيرا ، يلخص الفصل الخامس أهم نتائج البحث .

الكلمات المفتاحية: ظاهرة دلالية في اللغة الانكليزية، ظاهرة التراكيب الاصطلاحية،متعلمين اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية