

RESEARCH ARTICLE	Incorporating English Idioms in Oral Expression Sessions for Fostering First Year Licence Students' Speaking Skill: A Case Study at the Department of English Language, University of Ghardaia	
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<b>Abstract</b> I The oral expression module has had great importance in the study of English language in the Department of English language at University of Ghardaia. Teachers are doing their best to help students develop their speaking skill through the suggestion of a number of topics to be learnt and discussed. Nonetheless, the first two years, namely first year Licence (L1) and second year Licence (L2) require much care and involvement on the part of teachers as well as the students. Suggesting topics to be discussed throughout the academic years of Licence is applied to first year Licence students who are, in the majority of cases, not equipped with the tools that assist them in fostering their speaking skill. One of the tools that fosters the students' speaking skill is the use of idioms, for native speakers heavily use them in their daily life conversations. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the importance of incorporating English idioms in the Oral Expression sessions for fostering first year Licence students' speaking skill. To this end, this study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with seven part-time teachers at the Department of English language at University of Ghardaia. The findings were analysed qualitatively and revealed that the great majority of the participants do not incorporate English idioms in the Oral Expression sessions. Finally, some recommendations were suggested.		
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## Introduction

The primary aim to teach a language is to enable learners to how to use it. This task cannot be achieved without involvement, much preparation and hard work. In fact, Students enrolled in English speciality at any Algerian university have the module of oral expression as one of the main modules during the Licence studies. In the oral sessions, students learn how to express themselves effectively. To this end, the teachers' job is to equip the students with all the tools that help them foster their speaking skill and through putting them in situations similar to the ones in English speaking countries. It is known that native speakers use formulaic expressions in their daily life conversations. These are referred to as idioms or idiomatic expressions and make part of the English culture. They also use phrasal verbs extensively. In the following, we shall focus on the importance of idioms in developing the students' speaking skill.

## 1. Literature Review

Speaking is, according to Bygate (1987), an undervalued skill because all people speak. He defined it as a popular form of expression which uses colloquial register; it is transient and improvised. Nonetheless, the author (ibid) pointed out that speaking deserves as much attention as literary skills in both first and second languages. Speaking is the means that allow students carry out most of their transactions; they need to speak with confidence in order to do so. Bygate (ibid) stated clearly that speaking: is the skill by which they are most frequently judged, and through which they make or lose friends. It is the vehicle par excellence of social solidarity, of social ranking, of professional advancement and business. It is also a medium through which much language is learnt, and which for many is particularly (p. vii).

From above, the speaking skill is very important and requires much effort and involvement in order to be developed. To achieve this goal, teachers must implement idioms in their syllabus.

However, teaching a foreign language does not focus on only listening, speaking, reading and writing; it also focuses on teaching the culture of the language being studied. Research has demonstrated that language and culture are inseparable. Researchers such as Peck (1998) stated clearly that teaching a language without teaching its culture is inaccurate and incomplete. Both parties, teachers and students, should be aware of the importance of culture in foreign language teaching and learning. The linguist Lado was the first to call for incorporating culture in education through his work titled *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957); moreover, Hall, the anthropologist, showed in his work, *The Silent Language* (1959), the complex ways in which 'culture is communication and communication is culture' (Cited in Kramsch, 2001). Consequently, students should be aware of the cultural differences. Hinkel (1999) pointed out that "Applied linguists and language teachers have become increasingly aware that a second or foreign language can rarely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community in which it is used" (p. 2).

Indeed, the use of idioms and idiomatic expressions is one facet of English culture. A small number of studies on the acquisition and use of idioms, or frozen metaphors, as stated in the literature, by second language learners have been conducted by L2 scholars. Irujo (1986) found that her pupils were able to transfer idioms from their home language into the second language when they observed a similarity between idioms in a study of advanced Spanish L1 learners of English. Irujo (1993) discovered in a later study that individuals who lived and worked as fluent bilinguals (L1 speakers of Spanish who acquired English as adults) working in an English speaking environment were able to produce appropriate English idioms. The latter were colloquial and did not have the equivalent in Spanish. In sum, idioms which do not have the exact equivalents in L1 pose many difficulties for both ESL and EFL learners.

### What is an Idiom?

An idiom is a group of words whose meaning as a group is different and difficult to guess from the meaning those words would have if you considered each one separately (Longman Pocket Idioms Dictionary, 2001, p. v). According to the Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins (1992), the word idiom comes from the Greek *idios*, 'one's own, peculiar, strange'; in fact, idioms are "anomalies of language, mavericks of the linguistic world" (ibid, p. 6). According to O'Dell and McCarthy (2010), idioms are a type of formulaic language. The latter consists of fixed expressions which you learn and understand as units rather than as individual words. Raims and Redman (2013) defined idioms as "expressions whose meaning is often difficult to understand by looking at the individual words" (p. 14). For McCarthy and O'Dell (2002), idioms are also "expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words" (p. 6). In the same way, Cystal (2008) stated in "A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics" that 'idiom' is:

A term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to 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. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts, e.g. it's raining cats and dogs does not permit it's raining a cat and a dog/dogs and cats, etc. Because of their lack of internal contrastivity, some linguists refer to idioms as 'ready-made utterances' (p. 236).

From above, idioms function as a single unit; their meanings are based on the meanings of individual ones. Moreover, they are fixed; they cannot change syntactically; they remain as they are in all contexts. Harmer (2012) confirmed when he defined an idiom as "a phrase that has a meaning which is different from the meaning of the

individual words in it” (p. 269).

All of the aforementioned definitions agree on the same definition. Besides, and according to Harmer (ibid) and McCarthy and O'Dell (2010), idioms are to be understood and clearer only in context.

According to Hamer (ibid), many metaphors end up being idioms if people use them a lot and they become a normal part of the language. An idiom is a phrase like *drop out of school*. We know what all the individual words mean, but unless we know that *drop out of* means ‘to leave a school or university before you reach the end of your course’, we will not understand the whole phrase (Harmer, ibid, p. 53).

Harmer (ibid) mentioned the following:

- Many phrasal verbs have the same kind of idiomatic meaning.
- Some metaphorical/idiomatic phrases like “I’m over the moon” are called clichés because people are bored with them as they are used too much.
- Some idioms become proverbs as ‘every cloud has a silver lining’ meaning there is always something good even when the news is bad. “These are phrases that a particular society uses to give advice or to say things that are generally true” (ibid, p. 53).

The author claimed that many idioms are very ‘culture-specific’. For example, there are idioms that are understood in both Britain and the United States such as “X was a wolf in sheep’s clothing” that indicates someone who appears harmless but is really dangerous. But, “she thinks she’s the cat’s whiskers” that means “She’s the best” is more common in the United Kingdom than in the United States.

Harmer (ibid) recommended that it is not a good idea to use inappropriate idioms in a foreign language.

### Examples of Most Used English Idioms

- A piece of cake
- Break a leg
- Full of beans
- Have a gander
- Hit the sack.
- Kick the bucket
- The ball is in your court

### Famous Books and Dictionaries on English Idioms

- Dictionary of idioms and origins
- Essential Idioms in English
- Longman Pocket Idioms Dictionary
- Oxford idioms dictionary for learners of English
- Oxford Learners Pocket: Phrasal verbs and Idioms

#### 1.1.1. Why idioms?

According to Longman Pocket Idioms Dictionary (2001), idioms add colour to the language, giving us lively and interesting ways of expressing ourselves. We use them in a wide variety of situations, from friendly conversations and business meetings to more formal written contexts (ibid). However, idioms are also used in more formal contexts, such as lectures, academic essays and business reports, e.g. It is hoped the regulations will open the door to better management. (let something new start).

#### 1.1.2. Idioms and change

According to O'Dell and McCarthy (2010), idioms change in English in a frequent way. Though idioms last for

a long time, some disappear very quickly; thus, they may sound very old-fashioned and odd today. For instance, the idiom as stiff / straight as a ramrod (to sit or stand with a very straight and stiff back) is not frequently used today.

### 1.1.3. Types of idioms

Three types of idioms can be distinguished: pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms as cited in Luca (2023):

- Pure idioms: they are always nonliteral. These idioms are seen as being ambiguous (for example, to spill the beans has nothing to do with the beans).
- Semi-idioms: they may consist of one or more literal components as well as ones with non-literal subsense. Consequently, this kind of expression is seen as largely opaque (for example, “foot the bill” simply means “pay”).
- Literal idioms: do not give much room for change or are always the same.

### 1.1.4. Idioms' Forms

According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2010), idioms can take the following forms:

1. Verb+ object/complement (and/ or adverbial)
2. Prepositional phrase
3. Compound
4. Simile (as +adjective +as, or like +noun)
5. Binomial (word + and + word)
6. Trinomial (word + word + and + word)
7. Whole clause or sentence

Number	Example	Meaning
1	kill two birds with one stone	produce two useful results by just doing one action
2	in the blink of an eye	in an extremely short time
3	a bone of contention	something which people argue and disagree over
4	as dry as a bone	very dry indeed
5	rough and ready	crude and lacking sophistication
6	cool, calm and collected	relaxed, in control, not nervous
7	to cut a long short story	to tell the main points, but not all the fine details

### 1.1.5. Fixed aspects of idioms

According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2010), most idioms are fixed in their form and cannot be changed or varied. The grammar or the vocabulary can be varied slightly, as follows:

Variation	Example
Occasionally an idiom in the active voice can be used in the passive.	Governments Ministers always <b>pass the buck</b> if they are challenged about poverty. (blame somebody else / refuse to accept responsibility)  The buck <b>has been passed</b> from Minister to Minister. No one seems prepared to accept the responsibility.
Some verb-based idioms also have non-compound forms.	There is too much <b>buck-passing</b> in government nowadays. No one accepts the blame for anything.
One or more words in the idiom can be varied.	Stop <b>acting the fool/goat!</b> (stop acting stupidly)

### 1.1.6. How can idioms be used?

Many idioms are quite informal which means they should be used carefully. They are important for understanding what we read from English fiction, newspapers, magazines or understand TV shows, films, and songs. Idioms are also used for humour or to comment on themselves, other people and situations. Moreover, people who use idioms in everyday conversations or informal writing sound more natural and fluent. Nonetheless, idioms should not be overused.

### 1.1.7. What are idioms used for?

- **For emphasis**, e.g. The singer's second album sank like a stone. (failed completely)
- **To agree with a previous speaker**, e.g. A: Did you notice how Lisa started listening when you said her name? B: Yes, that certainly made her prick her ears up. (start listening carefully)
- **To comment on people**,

e.g. Did you hear Tom has been invited for dinner with the prime minister? He's certainly gone up in the world! (gained a better social position – or more money – than before)

- **To comment on a situation**,

e.g. The new finance minister wants to knock the economy into shape. (take action to get something into a good condition)

- **To make an anecdote more interesting**,

e.g. It was just one disaster after another today, a sort of domino effect. (when something, usually bad, happens and causes a series of other things to happen)

- **To catch the reader's eye**. Idioms – particularly those with strong images – are often used in headlines, advertising slogans and the names of small businesses. The writer may play with the idiom or make a pun (a joke involving a play on words) in order to create a special effect,

e.g. a debt of dishonour instead of the usual debt of honour. (a debt that you owe someone for moral rather than financial reasons)

- **To indicate membership of a particular group**,

e.g. surfers drop in on someone, meaning to get on a wave another surfer is already on.

### 1.1.8. Some English Idioms and their Meanings with some Examples

The following examples of English idioms were taken from different sources including the Internet.

- a) **"Sb is getting above himself/herself"** → Someone has begun to think they are better or more important than they really are.

e.g. He played once for the local team, and then he started getting above himself.

- b) **"Absence makes the heart grow fonder"** → Being away from someone you love makes you love them more.

- c) **"Hold all the aces"** → To have all the advantages in a situation

e.g. Don't make the mistake of assuming that the interviewers hold all the aces; they are probably under as much

pressure as you.

- d) **"Birds of a feather flock together"** → People who have similar interests tend to spend time together.
- e) **"kill two birds with one stone"** → To achieve two things with one action
- f) **"Give me a break!"** → I don't really believe that!

e.g. A: It took me almost an hour to finish.

B: Oh, give me a break, there's no way it took that long.

- g) **"Give sb a break"** → To stop criticising or blaming someone

e.g. Give the kid a break, he's doing his best!

- h) **"Don't waste your breath"** or **"Save your breath"** → Don't say anything because it will be useless.

e.g. Don't waste your time making excuses - I understand you.

- i) **"Go the whole hog"** → To do something in a complete and thorough way

e.g. I decided to go to the whole hog and continue my path.

- j) **"Have a hide like a rhinoceros"** → not to be affected by people's criticism or suggestions

e.g. A politician has to have a hide like a rhinoceros or stop reading the newspaper.

- k) **"Be full of holes"** → To have many faults e.g. He said that many of the theories about air pollution are full of holes.

- l) **"Do your homework"** → To find out about a subject before you have to deal with it e.g. TV presenters have to do their homework on the people they interview.

- m) **"People who live in glass houses (shouldn't throw stones)"** → You should not criticize other people when you have equally bad faults. e.g. I don't think you have any right to complain - people who live in glass houses, after all.

## 1.2. Teaching English Idioms

From the researcher's perspective, there are many ways for teaching and learning English idioms. First of all, there are numerous pertinent dictionaries that offer learners a variety of frequently used idioms. Second, idioms can be taught and learnt due to the Internet through movies, podcasts, sports and many other programmes. More importantly, idioms can be taught in class through dialogues, role-plays and different types of exercises, as follows:

### 1.2.1. Conversations and dialogues

When students listen or watch conversations and dialogues including idioms, this is going to give them the opportunity and courage to make use of those idioms and incorporate them in conversations and dialogues of their choice.

### 1.2.2. Exercises

There exist a great number of exercises on English idioms. Here are some examples of exercises mentioned in McCarthy and O'Dell (2010) and in other references:

- Complete each of these idioms.
- Match the beginning of each idiom on the left with its ending on the right.
- Put the words in the right order and make sentences.

- Which of the idioms meaning “.....” do these pictures make you think of?
- Combine the words in the box in order to make five expressions meaning “.....” .
- Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?
- Correct the mistakes in these idioms.
- Complete each of these idioms with one word.
- Complete each sentence with a different idiom which refers to “.....” .
- In each of these conversations, the second speaker uses an idiom to repeat what the first speaker says. Complete the idioms.
- Complete the crossword.
- Rewrite the underlined part of each sentence with an idiom.
- Write a sentence or a couple for each of these idioms to show their meaning.

## 2. Rationale

The researcher has been teaching English since 1994 and has taught English in the Department of English Language at University of Ghardaia since 2021. Since then, she has noticed that the majority of students she has taught ignore what idioms are. For example, whenever she explains a topic or an idea and refers to an idiom, she finds out that the students have no idea about it and are not interested in idioms. The students claimed that they do not study English idioms. This has motivated the researcher to investigate whether teachers, mainly part-time ones incorporate idioms in the Oral Expression sessions for fostering the first year Licence students’ speaking skill or not.

## 3. Methodology

This research was conducted at the department of English Language at University of Ghardaia. The study is qualitative in nature.

### - The Sample

The sample includes seven part-time teachers holding a Master degree in Didactics of Foreign Languages. Most of them teach English in private schools besides devoting some hours to the Department of English Language at University of Ghardaia. It should be noted that the teachers are aged between 24 to 30. Some of them have begun teaching English in private schools since they graduated in a Licence (Bachelor) degree.

### - Oral Expression Module

The Oral Expression module for first year Licence has as its main objectives the following:

- improving the students’ speaking skill in communicative English situations
- training students to recognise sounds in English speech
- enabling students to speak English in various real-life situations and understanding spoken English on TV and in other situations.

This module combines both “oral expression” and “listening comprehension”, and the topics are as follows:

#### 1. Oral Expression

- Introducing yourself and others
- Discussing reasons for choosing English as an option
- Expressing ideas and opinions clearly
- Using proper forms of language to perform social functions in various contexts
- Formal discussions (Meetings, job interview, etc.)
- Describing and comparing people, places, things and habits

## 2. Listening Comprehension

- Listening to identify main ideas and important details of spoken texts (dialogue, monologue, conversation, etc.)
- Listening to understand the speaker's purpose and attitude
- Listening for intonation
- Listening for making predictions, inferences and generalizations
- Listening for appropriate uses of collocations and idiomatic expressions
- Listening for topics
- Listening for personal opinions

### - Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role is to approach the topic herself. She conducted the interviews and analysed the findings about incorporating idioms in the Oral Expression session for fostering the students' speaking skill.

### - Instrument

For approaching this topic, the researcher selected to conduct semi-structured interviews with teachers, which suits the present study.

## 3.1. Data Collection Tools

For this study, one main instrument was used, the interview. In fact, a semi-structured interview was selected. Seven part-time teachers were involved in the interview and asked the same questions. The latter included seven direct questions, as follows:

1. How do you find teaching oral expression?
2. Are students involved in the oral tasks and activities? Is it individual, pair or group work?
3. What kind of activities do you use in these sessions?
4. Since it is a foreign language, have you tried to introduce some expressions related to native speakers such as idioms?
5. How do you teach idioms, then? Through texts? Conversations?
6. Do you select idioms depending on the topic of the lessons?
7. Do you encourage your students to practise them? If yes, how do they use them?

## 3.2. Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis was selected to suit this study, and the aim was to detect how the incorporation of idioms in the Oral Expression sessions foster the students' speaking skill. After meeting the teachers separately and depending on their schedule, the researcher asked the questions and the answers were as follows:

**Question 1:** How do you find teaching oral expression?

All the teachers mentioned that they find teaching oral expression interesting, important and challenging at the same time.

**Question 2:** Are students involved in the oral tasks and activities? Is it individual, pair or group work?

All the participants said that their students are involved in the oral tasks activities individually and in pair and



group works.

**Question 3:** What kinds of activities do you use in these sessions?

All the respondents said that they use the following: ‘Listen and repeat’, ‘Listen and answer’, ‘Listen and complete’, ‘dialogues’, ‘roleplays’, ‘monologues’, ‘topic discussion’ and so on.

**Question 4:** Since it is a foreign language, have you tried to introduce some expressions related to native speakers such as idioms?

Five of the teachers do not concentrate on teaching and implementing English idioms, whereas two of them sometimes teach them.

**Question 5:** How do you teach idioms, then? Through texts? Conversations?

The two respondents said that they introduce and teach idioms through making the students listen to conversations read by them or said by native speakers, and they sometimes present examples including specific idioms.

**Question 6:** Do you select idioms depending on the topic of the lessons?

The two teachers said that they select idioms related to the topics presented in the lessons, and they sometimes add other ones suggested by students at the end of the session, if possible.

**Question 7:** Do you encourage your students to practise them? If yes, how do they use them?

The two teachers answered ‘yes’ and mentioned that the students practise using idioms in dialogues in the classroom.

### 3.3. Discussion of the Findings

Following the analysis, all teachers find the module of Oral Expression interesting, important but challenging, and this is logical since developing the students’ speaking skill is demanding and time consuming. Moreover, all the teachers involve their students in the tasks and activities, and this is very promising. The students must be involved in all tasks and activities so as to be motivated and encouraged to speak. The teachers also mentioned that the variety of tasks and activities they use in the Oral Expression sessions are important, and they concentrate not only on speaking but also on listening which helps students foster their speaking skill. Despite the effort being made to develop the students’ speaking skill, only two teachers introduce and teach idioms and present them through conversations, texts and even examples. The remaining teachers were not concerned with questions 5, 6 and 7 since they do not incorporate English idioms in their Oral Expression sessions.

These findings reveal the awareness of the two teachers who incorporate English idioms in their sessions, while it reveals the lack of awareness of the remaining teachers who make the great majority and who do not teach idioms and ignore the cultural aspect in teaching languages and the importance of incorporating English idioms in fostering first year Licence students’ speaking skill.

### Conclusion

Fostering the students’ speaking skill in the department of English language require awareness on the part of both teachers and students. To this end, teachers should involve the students in a number of diversified tasks and activities that assist them to achieve this goal. Among the language aspects that are important in spoken English and communication is the one of idioms. In fact, native speakers use idioms in their daily life conversations, which necessitates their use in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Teachers are required to incorporate English idioms in their programmes. Nowadays, idioms can be found on the Internet whether in the form of dictionaries or videos extracted from films, and so on. Teachers can resort to artificial intelligence tools to help them look for idioms used in many topics. Idioms are part of the English speaking countries culture, so teachers

should consider the cultural aspect in teaching and incorporating idioms. To conclude, teachers should be more aware of the importance of incorporating English idioms in the Oral Expression sessions, for teaching/learning English idioms:

- is beneficial to acquiring more English language vocabularies and improving language proficiency.
- fosters and develops the students' intercultural communicative competence in the English language.
- strengthens the students' comprehension and use of the English language.
- means teaching and learning culture, in the main.

### Recommendations

- Incorporating idioms is one means to foster for students' speaking skill.
- Encouraging and motivating those students to speak and practise what they learn is promising.
- Teachers, part-time or full-time, must work collaboratively to assist EFL university students improve their speaking skill.
- Part-time teachers should attend full-time ones in order to gain some teaching skills and strategies.
- Part-time teachers should plan their lessons based on the syllabus.

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