
TEACHING BUSINESS IDIOMS IN EFL CONTEXTS: AN EXPERIMENTAL
STUDY OF LEARNER COMPREHENSION AND USAGE

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The mastery of idiomatic expressions represents a critical component of communicative competence in English, particularly within business contexts where figurative language is frequently employed to convey complex ideas efficiently. However, for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), idiomatic expressions pose significant challenges due to their non-literal meanings and cultural specificity. This study investigates the effectiveness of explicit instruction in teaching business idioms to EFL learners through a controlled experimental design. The research involved 40 intermediate-level students divided into experimental and control groups. Over a four-week instructional period, the experimental group received targeted instruction on business idioms, including contextualized practice and communicative tasks, while the control group followed a standard curriculum. Pre-test and post-test assessments were used to measure improvements in comprehension and usage. The results indicate a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group, particularly in productive use

and contextual understanding of idiomatic expressions. The findings highlight the importance of integrating idiomatic competence into EFL pedagogy and suggest that explicit, context-based instruction can substantially enhance learners' professional communication skills. The study contributes to both applied linguistics and language pedagogy by providing empirical evidence for effective teaching strategies in business English contexts.

1. Introduction

In contemporary globalized environments, English has become the dominant language of international business, serving as a primary medium for communication across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. As a result, proficiency in business English is increasingly recognized as an essential skill for students and professionals alike. However, effective communication in business settings requires more than grammatical accuracy and lexical knowledge; it also demands the ability to understand and use idiomatic expressions appropriately.

Idiomatic expressions constitute a fundamental aspect of natural language use, reflecting both linguistic creativity and cultural knowledge. Defined as multi-word units whose meanings are not entirely predictable from their individual components (Fernando, 1996; Moon, 1998), idioms play a crucial role in achieving fluency and native-like competence. In business discourse, idioms such as “get the ball rolling,” “think outside the box,” and “cut costs” are frequently used to express ideas related to innovation, strategy, and efficiency.

The theoretical understanding of idiomatic language has been significantly influenced by cognitive linguistics, particularly the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that metaphor underlies human cognition and language. According to this perspective, idioms are not arbitrary expressions but are grounded in conceptual metaphors that structure thought. For example, business is often conceptualized as competition or movement, giving rise to idioms such as “stay ahead” or “move forward.”

Despite their importance, idiomatic expressions present considerable challenges for EFL learners. The non-literal nature of idioms, combined with their cultural specificity, makes them difficult to interpret and use correctly. Learners often rely on literal translations, leading to misunderstandings and inappropriate usage. Furthermore, traditional language instruction

tends to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over figurative language, resulting in limited exposure to idiomatic expressions in classroom settings.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of idiomatic competence in language learning. Studies by Gibbs (1994) and Boers (2000) suggest that understanding metaphorical structures can facilitate idiom acquisition. Similarly, corpus-based studies (Simpson & Mendis, 2003) have demonstrated the frequency and functional importance of idioms in authentic communication. However, there remains a need for empirical research examining effective teaching methods for idioms in EFL contexts, particularly in specialized domains such as business English.

The present study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of explicit instruction on the learning of business idioms. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does explicit instruction improve EFL learners' comprehension of business idioms?
2. Does it enhance their ability to use idioms in appropriate contexts?
3. What challenges do learners face in acquiring idiomatic competence?

By adopting an experimental approach, this study provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of targeted instructional strategies, contributing to both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice.

2. Methods

This study employs a quasi-experimental design involving two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The design allows for the comparison of learning outcomes under different instructional conditions.

The participants consisted of **40 EFL students** at an intermediate level, enrolled in a secondary or higher education institution. They were randomly divided into:

- Experimental group: 20 students
- Control group: 20 students

All participants had similar language proficiency levels based on placement tests.

The experiment was conducted over a period of **four weeks**.

Experimental Group. Received explicit instruction including:

- Presentation of idioms in context
- Explanation of meanings and metaphorical origins
- Communicative exercises (role-plays, discussions)
- Practice in business scenarios (emails, negotiations)

Control Group. Followed a traditional curriculum:

- Focus on grammar and vocabulary
- Limited exposure to idiomatic expressions
- No targeted idiom instruction

The following tools were used:

- **Pre-test** – to assess initial knowledge
- **Post-test** – to measure improvement
- **Writing tasks** – to evaluate productive use
- **Observation notes** – to analyze learning difficulties

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods:

- Score comparison (pre-test vs post-test)
- Percentage improvement
- Error analysis
- Functional evaluation of idiom usage

3. Results

The results showed clear improvement:

- Experimental group: **+35% average increase**
- Control group: **+10% increase**

This indicates a significant impact of explicit instruction.

- Comprehension improved more rapidly (40%)
- Productive use improved moderately (30%)

Learners understood idioms faster than they could actively use them. Students faced challenges such as:

- Literal interpretation of idioms
- Confusion between similar expressions
- Incorrect contextual usage

In the experimental group, idioms were used effectively for:

- Persuasion (“think outside the box”)
- Softening communication (“touch base”)
- Expressing strategy (“stay ahead”)

4. Discussion

The findings confirm that explicit instruction significantly enhances idiomatic competence in EFL learners. The results align with cognitive linguistic theories, which emphasize the role of metaphor in language learning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). By understanding underlying conceptual structures, learners are better able to interpret and use idioms.

The study also supports previous research suggesting that context-based learning is essential for idiom acquisition (Boers, 2000). The use of authentic business scenarios allowed learners to connect language with real-world communication, improving both comprehension and usage.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the need to integrate idiomatic expressions into business English curricula. Traditional approaches that focus solely on grammar and vocabulary are insufficient for developing communicative competence.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that explicit, context-based instruction significantly improves EFL learners' ability to understand and use business idioms. The results underscore the importance of idiomatic competence in professional communication and provide practical recommendations for language teaching.

Future research may explore long-term retention of idioms or compare different instructional approaches across proficiency levels.

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