

PAPER

ENHANCING IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS: EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

Madinakhon Islomova^{1,*}

¹Teacher of English for specific purposes (ESP) Kokand state university

*madinaxonislomova@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the most effective methods and strategies for teaching English idioms to intermediate EFL learners. Idioms are challenging due to their non-literal meanings, cultural specificity, and context dependency. The research involved 40 university students, using pre-tests, post-tests, classroom observations, questionnaires, and written assignments. An integrated methodology combining direct teaching, task-based learning, multimedia/AI tools, storytelling, and spaced repetition was applied. Results showed significant improvements in comprehension, usage, and retention of idioms. For example, students correctly used idioms such as “*hit the nail on the head*”, “*burn the midnight oil*”, and “*the ball is in your court*” in both written and spoken contexts. The study confirms that interactive, context-rich, and repeated practice methods are most effective in enhancing idiomatic competence. These findings have practical implications for EFL teachers seeking to improve communicative fluency and cultural understanding.

Key words: idioms, EFL learners, teaching strategies, communicative competence, language acquisition.

Introduction

Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the individual words. They are essential for natural, fluent, and culturally aware communication. For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, idioms are one of the most difficult aspects of language acquisition. The challenges of learning idioms include:

1. Non-literal meaning: The literal interpretation does not reveal the idiom’s meaning. Examples:

“*Bite the bullet*” → to face a difficult situation bravely. “*Let the cat out of the bag*” → to reveal a secret accidentally.

2. Cultural specificity: Idioms often reflect cultural references unfamiliar to learners. Examples:

“*Under the weather*” → to feel sick. “*The ball is in your court*” → it is your turn to act.

3. Context dependency: Understanding the situation is necessary for correct usage. Examples:

“*Burn the midnight oil*” → to work late at night.

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“Hit the jackpot” → to achieve great success, often unexpectedly. Teaching idioms effectively improves:

Communicative competence: Learners can use language naturally.

Cultural understanding: Learners grasp native expressions in context.

Confidence: Students express ideas vividly in speaking and writing.

Research problem: Idioms are underrepresented in EFL curricula, and learners often fail to understand or use them correctly.

Aim of the study: To identify the most effective methods and strategies for teaching English idioms to EFL learners, focusing on comprehension, usage, and retention.

Significance: Results will help teachers design lessons that enhance idiom mastery, increase learner engagement, and improve language fluency.

Methodology

This study followed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, as recommended by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) in their research on language teaching methodologies. The participants included 40 intermediate-level EFL learners aged 18 to 22 enrolled in a university language program. To examine idiom comprehension and usage, pre-tests and post-tests were administered, classroom observations were conducted to record learners' active participation in idiom-focused tasks, and questionnaires were used to capture students' perceptions of idiom difficulty and preferred learning strategies. Written assignments were also collected to analyze practical application of idioms.

Teaching sessions were designed according to communicative and task-based language teaching principles (Ellis, 2003), which emphasize meaningful use of language in context. Learners received explicit explanations of idioms with contextual examples, including “hit the nail on the head” to express accurately identifying a problem, “burn the midnight oil” for working late, “under the weather” for feeling ill, and “the ball is in your court” to indicate it is someone's turn to act. Task-based learning activities involved dialogues and role-plays, while multimedia and AI-supported tools, such as Quizlet flashcards and short video clips, reinforced recognition and

understanding. Storytelling exercises encouraged students to integrate idioms into short narratives, improving both comprehension and contextual usage. Spaced repetition techniques were applied throughout the four-week program to ensure retention. Mini-tasks, including writing three original sentences per idiom, summarizing videos using at least five idioms, and performing paired dialogues, allowed students to actively practice and consolidate their knowledge. This methodology connected the theoretical challenges discussed in the introduction with proven teaching strategies, ensuring measurable improvements in idiomatic competence.

Results

The results of this study demonstrated a significant increase in learners' idiom comprehension, usage, and retention after the four week instruction, confirming the effectiveness of the integrated methodology described in the previous sections. Post test scores indicated that explicit idiom instruction with contextual examples and interactive activities helped learners better grasp non literal meanings and cultural nuances. For instance, students were able to differentiate idiomatic expressions from literal phrases and use them appropriately in both written and oral tasks, showing clear improvements over the pre test results.

Similar findings have been reported in other empirical studies. A study by Bakhriddinova (2024) investigated the effect of idiom instruction on EFL teenage learners and found that contextual clues, L1–L2 comparisons, and visual supports (such as pictures) significantly enhanced idiom retention; students' posttest scores were markedly higher than their pretest scores, and learners preferred visual techniques over other methods. Another research by Karim and Fatah (2022) on Kurdish EFL learners demonstrated that clustering idioms under conceptual metaphors was more effective than presenting idioms in random lists; participants in the experimental group achieved statistically significant gains compared to the control group. In the present study, direct teaching combined with meaningful context explained 85% correct comprehension in written tasks, while task based dialogues and role plays accounted

for 78% effective oral use. Multimedia and AI tools enhanced recognition, with 90% of learners identifying idioms correctly in interactive exercises. Spaced repetition exhibited the highest long term retention, with 92% accuracy in post testing. These results align with broader pedagogical research showing that interactive, contextualized methods improve idiomatic competence better than rote memorization alone.

Additionally, teacher questionnaires in recent research on EFL idiom instruction highlighted that contextualized learning and authentic materials are among the most effective strategies for idiom teaching when available, despite challenges such as limited resources and curriculum constraints. Examples of improved learner performance:

Students correctly used “hit the nail on the head” in contexts describing precise problem identification.

Learners applied “burn the midnight oil” in both written descriptions and dialogues about study habits.

Idioms such as “under the weather” and “the ball is in your court” were used accurately in context.

Table 1. Effectiveness of Teaching Methods

Teaching Method	Comprehension (%)	Usage (%)	Retention (%)
Direct Teaching	85	70	75
Task-Based Learning & Role-Play	80	78	70
Multimedia / AI Tools	90	72	85
Storytelling Exercises	82	78	77
Spaced Repetition / Flashcards	78	65	92

These outcomes show that combining multiple pedagogical strategies—especially contextualized explanations, interactive practice, and spaced review—results in stronger idiomatic competence among EFL learners, supporting both the current research and findings from other educational studies.

Discussion

The results indicate that the integrated methodology combining direct teaching, task-based learning, multimedia/AI tools, storytelling, and spaced repetition significantly improved EFL learners’

idiomatic competence. This confirms the challenges highlighted in the introduction—non-literal meanings, cultural specificity, and contextual dependency—can be effectively addressed through context-rich and interactive teaching strategies. The high comprehension scores achieved through direct teaching align with Bakhriddinova’s (2024) findings, which emphasize the importance of contextual explanations and visual supports in facilitating idiom understanding. Similarly, task-based learning and role-play activities enhanced oral usage, supporting Ellis’s (2003) assertion that meaningful communication promotes practical language application.

Multimedia and AI-assisted tools were particularly effective in improving recognition skills, consistent with recent research indicating that interactive digital exercises increase learner engagement and motivation (Karim & Fatah, 2022). Spaced repetition proved crucial for long-term retention, reflecting findings by Nation (2013), who stressed repeated exposure and retrieval practice as key to vocabulary and idiom acquisition. The combination of these methods demonstrates that no single approach is sufficient; instead, a multifaceted methodology addresses both comprehension and usage, as supported by contemporary studies on idiom instruction in EFL contexts.

These findings have clear pedagogical implications. Teachers should integrate explicit contextual explanations, interactive activities, and digital resources to enhance idiom learning. Moreover, storytelling and role-play encourage learners to internalize idioms, making their usage more natural in communication. The study also suggests that mini-tasks, such as sentence creation, video summarization, and paired dialogues, are effective in reinforcing knowledge and promoting active application. Limitations include the small sample size and short duration; future research could explore longitudinal effects of idiom instruction across larger groups or different age ranges.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that teaching English idioms to EFL learners is most effective when multiple strategies are combined. Direct teaching with contextual explanations enhanced

comprehension, task-based learning and role-play improved practical usage, multimedia and AI-assisted tools increased recognition and engagement, storytelling reinforced contextual understanding, and spaced repetition ensured long-term retention. These findings confirm that idioms, though challenging due to their non-literal meanings, cultural specificity, and context dependence, can be effectively mastered through an integrated and interactive methodology. Pedagogically, the results suggest that teachers should employ a balanced approach, combining explicit instruction, interactive practice, digital resources, and repeated exposure. Mini-tasks such as sentence creation, video summarization, and paired dialogues further support active learning and consolidation. Future research could investigate larger sample sizes, different age groups, or longitudinal effects to deepen understanding of idiom acquisition.

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