
Can't see the wood for the trees? How do learner attitudes affect idiom usage?

Andrew TIDMARSH

Abstract

As well as being highly numerous and frequently-used, idioms play key linguistic and pragmatic roles in English, yet L2 learners routinely avoid using them. While research has focused on developing new teaching techniques, the potential impact of learners' opinions about idioms has been ignored. This paper reports a study of advanced proficiency learners' attitudes towards idioms carried out using a learning priorities survey and interviews. Background information about idiom proficiency was acquired using a short meanings test. Findings showed that learners consciously avoided using idioms to escape categorisation as high-proficiency users, but also because they thought the expressions as important exclusively for professionals, such as interpreters and businesspeople. Non-figurative idiom substitutions were commonly misjudged as semantically identical, so learners were also unconcerned about learning idioms for receptive purposes. In line with these findings, knowledge and reported use of high-frequency idioms was found to be generally low. These findings demonstrate that it is highly counterproductive to delay or severely limit the teaching of idioms at lower proficiency levels, since learners develop attitudes that dissuade them from using the expressions. Pedagogical implications are discussed and suggestions are given for teachers on helping learners form realistic beliefs about idioms to promote greater usage.

1. Introduction

Compared to other areas of research, the past 20 years have not produced a

wealth of studies into the teaching of idioms (Andreou & Galantomos, 2008; Liu, 2003; Cooper, 1999). In addition, the limited research that has been carried out has largely followed the assumption that since idioms are difficult to learn and teach, avoidance is best addressed using improved instructional techniques. However, this angle of attack fails to take into consideration the attitudes of learners, and the cumulative effect of years of English instruction on how they view idioms. To understand exactly why learner attitudes need to be investigated, a brief review of idiom function and teaching is necessary.

Generally defined as syntactically fixed, multi-word figurative expressions, idioms present a challenge to learners not just because of their semantic opacity. They are also exceedingly numerous, with recent editions of dictionaries containing between 6000 and 10,000 items (Ayto, 2016; Parkinson & Francis, 2006), however, these counts cannot be seen as definitive and only estimates—the number could be much higher (McPherron and Randolph, 2014). Idioms are also used extremely frequently, with items of figurative language use occurring between 4 and 6.7 times per minute in speech (Pollio, Barlow, Fine & Pollio, 1977, Corts & Meyers, 2002).

What is more, idioms play key roles in the language. Unlike non-figurative wordings, these expressions are semantically very rich, making them difficult or impossible to paraphrase adequately (McCarthy, 1998; McPherron & Randolph, 2014; Gibbs, 1994, p.124). Idioms also play important pragmatic roles in evaluating, paraphrasing, placing emphasis, directing discussion and talking about language itself (Simpson & Mendis, 2003; McCarthy, 1998; Littlemore, 2001). On top of this, the core meaning of utterances regularly hangs upon a single idiom (Cooper, 1998).

However, when considering L2 learners, idioms have been seen mostly in terms of raising the quality of language produced (Irujo, 1986b; Cooper, 1999; Schmitt, 2000). This view, combined with the common deferral of idiom teaching until the higher stages of proficiency implies that they are optional extras, rather than central components of the language. Teachers who avoid using idioms in their instruction contribute to this view, as do materials that place idioms in appendices rather than main activities (Andreou & Galantomos, 2008; Cooper, 1998; Irujo, 1986b).

The inconsistency between L1 usage and L2 teaching is reflected in the

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literature on idiom avoidance in that it focuses on the linguistic, cultural and instructional difficulties related to instruction. It is well-understood that idiom-free classrooms (Irujo, 1986a) and poor teaching materials (Irujo, 1986b; Chen & Lai, 2013) hamper students learning contextual limitations (Al-Khawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-momani & Bani-Khair, 2016). Narrow cultural awareness and lack of L1 equivalents (Chen & Lai, 2013) similarly add to the difficulties.

However, while these obstacles may cause discouragement, they are hardly exclusive to learning idioms. Other aspects of English are equally challenging, such as correct use of prepositions, articles, or phrasal verbs. The obstacles stated above do not fully explain idiom avoidance, and if it is not better understood and addressed, promising new teaching methods using cognitive linguistic approaches (Chen & Lai, 2013), etymology and illustrations (Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers, 2007; Boers, Piquer Piriz, Stengers & Eyckmans, 2009) will be rendered less effective in the classroom.

What the literature has not explored is how learner attitudes towards idioms affect usage. Knowing more about students' perceptions is key to a clearer understanding of avoidance and how to address it. The overall view set out in the literature is that idioms occupy a key role in the language and serve several important functions. If students do not share this view, they can hardly be expected to learn or use idioms. This is especially important because, as with vocabulary learning in general, idiom acquisition requires a great deal of self-directed learner effort. It is therefore highly desirable to understand learner attitudes better in order to create a holistic – and more effective – approach to teaching idioms.

1.1 Research Questions

With the preceding discussion in mind, it is clear that two research avenues would benefit from investigation. First of all, it is difficult to judge the extent to which learners know and use idioms without resorting to anecdotal evidence. Taking a measure of the idiom knowledge of a given group is important for validating the study of learner attitudes. If learners happen to have high receptive knowledge of idioms and are frequent users, studying their attitudes is somewhat less valid an endeavour. In addition, this helps us to understand how much or how little prior education and self-directed learning has

prioritised the study of idioms. Knowing this helps instructors understand the effects of current educational practices on idiom knowledge and usage, and is vital in giving context to the study of learner attitudes.

For this initial investigation, it will only be possible to examine idiom knowledge in a relatively small group, but the findings may help to inform more general views connected to idiom teaching, as well as encourage more research elsewhere. For the purposes of this study, “advanced” denotes students who have ordinarily completed their formal English education, and have reached a proficiency level that allows them to undertake postgraduate study abroad in an English-speaking country.

Secondly, while researchers have noted several linguistic, cultural and instructional reasons for idiom avoidance, little has been said about how student attitudes have an effect. What is behind this reluctance to use idioms? How do advanced learners think about idioms? Understanding the attitudes students have about idioms may help to re-frame teaching approaches where this is necessary.

Thus, the two research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ1: What idioms do advanced students of English know, and what idioms do they use?

RQ2: What attitudes of these advanced learners contribute to a common reluctance to use idioms?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

A total of 73 Chinese postgraduate students at a large university in the North of England took part in this research. All had gained the equivalent of at least 6.5 in the IELTS test prior to commencing their studies. For the purposes of this investigation, this proficiency level will serve to represent the “advanced students” mentioned in RQ1. Six of these participants were subsequently recruited for interviews and are referred to using their initials.

As the first part of the study would focus on idiom knowledge and use, and the eventual test used only a small set of idioms, it was important that a

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reasonably large sample group take part. Although a convenience sample, this had the advantage of offering a large number of participants, from a variety of locations across China with different educational backgrounds.

2.2 Idiom knowledge test

To measure idiom knowledge, a short meaning test was devised (see Appendix A). Based on an exercise used by Boers, Eyckmans and Stengers (2007), three possible meanings were prepared for each idiom in the test, so that the true meaning and two distractors were presented to students. The stimulus idiom was given without contextual information and without a complete sentence. For example, one question read, "what is the figurative meaning of 'come into play?' ", with the answers, 'interrupt a game in progress', 'become available at a convenient moment' and 'start to influence things'. This format was chosen to try and ensure that participants could only select the correct answer by already knowing the idiom's meaning, or guessing the answer. Additionally, to measure receptive and productive knowledge, regardless of answers given for meanings, participants were asked if they had previously heard or read each idiom, and if they had used them. The receptive knowledge question was intended to serve the additional purpose of potentially indicating to what extent participants had guessed the meaning of each idiom. The idiom test was presented in four different orders to guard against potential sequence effects, or students copying each other.

The purpose of the test was to evaluate the receptive knowledge for common idioms. Rather than chose idioms instinctively thought to be common, frequency data was sought. Simpson and Mendis' (2003) list of idioms used four or more times in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (hereafter MICASE) was chosen. From the top ten idioms in this list, eight were eventually used after piloting, ensuring that similar idioms were only used once.

It is important to note here that Simpson and Mendis (2003) did not claim to have analysed all of the idioms in the corpus, but were confident that the list was representative of idiom usage overall in their particular research context of American universities. Despite this, the use of idioms from this study recommended itself for two reasons.

Firstly, the English education of the sample group was likely to have taken a strong academic slant, either in preparing for MA study in the UK, or for university examinations. Secondly, idioms taken from a U.S. based corpus were preferred owing to the prevalence of American as the dialect of choice in most English teaching materials and exported English language media. Consequently, it was hoped that the list would provide idioms that would be reasonably recognisable for the sample group.

2.3 Questionnaire

Following the idiom knowledge test, a short questionnaire was presented to capture views about attitudes towards the importance of idiom knowledge and use (see Appendix A). The information gathered could then be correlated with the results of the idiom test, and qualitative data from interviews. Furthermore, the wide scope of questioning was intended to help identify areas to explore in more detail during interviews.

The response format was varied throughout the questionnaire, to combat against respondents giving the same answer every time, and the first of the attitudes questions was deliberately placed at the very start of the questionnaire, before the idiom knowledge test itself. This was a ranking task designed to elicit information about learner priorities. The placement was intended to combat against respondents being influenced by the test or other questions, and thus capture a less biased view of learner priorities. In the attitudes section, a Likert scale was used for responses but with four possible answers instead of five. The omission of a mid-point here was intended to help elicit more definite responses.

2.4 Test review and piloting

Before piloting, the idiom test was checked by two experienced researchers to refine the distractors and ensure native speaker agreement on the given meanings. Answers were revised, especially with regard to maintaining a uniform length. Alterations were also made to the test and questionnaire to ensure it could be easily understood by non-native speakers.

Both idiom test and questionnaire were then piloted in sequence by four participants similar to those from the main sample to check the instructions,

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timing and comprehensibility. Between pilots, alterations were made as a result of observations and feedback, before settling on the final result.

As participants would answer the questionnaire at the end of a class, a realistic limit of ten minutes was decided upon for completion. The final pilot used this time limit but due to the participant tiring after around eight minutes, and remarked that the size of the idiom test was daunting, it was decided to reduce the idioms on the test to eight items. This would help ensure that respondents with a lower English proficiency relative to others could also finish in time.

2.5 Procedure: Idiom test and questionnaire

The idiom test and questionnaire were presented together as a paper-based task (see Appendix A) at the end of class, so were unable to search the Internet for answers. Each group was observed to check for collaboration. Where this occurred, test sections were marked and excluded from data analysis. 32 additional participants were recruited by piloting respondents, who were asked to administer the same procedure face-to-face, without allowing use of reference materials. After exclusions due to collaboration or non-completion, tests and questionnaires from 73 participants were deemed acceptable for use.

2.6 Interviews

Using the data collected using the questionnaire, issues were identified that could be best investigated using interviews with students. This allowed qualitative data to complement information gathered from the test and questionnaire. An interview schedule based on a semi-structured format was then devised (see Appendix B). Questions focused on the overall low priority that is generally given to idioms by students individually, and by educational institutions. Questions also concentrated on exploring examples of idiom usage and the difficulties that this might entail, as well as the motivations behind learning specific idioms.

2.7 Ethical considerations

Before administering the questionnaire, it was explained to participants that involvement was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Scripts did not ask for

identifying information, and it was made clear that return of completed materials constituted consent to participate. In the case of interviews, it was explained that all data collected would be anonymised, and so quotes that appear are marked by a participant's initials.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Results of the idiom meaning test with self-reported prior reception and production for each idiom.

Idiom	Correct%	Heard / Read%	Used%
what the hell	90.4	93.2	34.2
other side of the coin	78.1	79.5	49.3
the big picture	64.4	47.9	17.8
knee-jerk	47.9	9.6	2.7
come into play	46.6	37.0	5.5
bottom line	45.2	60.3	27.4
down the line	43.8	16.4	5.5
on the right track	41.1	47.9	21.9

3.1 (RQ1) What idioms do advanced students of English know, and what idioms do they use?

The idiom test results indicate that only two items were particularly well-known to participants: *what the hell* and *other side of the coin*. This is not surprising since *what the hell* is regularly used in Western media, and *other side of the coin* is routinely used in academic writing classes. For *bottom line* and *on the right track*, more participants indicated receptive knowledge than knew the correct meaning, following the natural progression of reception to acquisition. However, for *the big picture* and *come into play*, more participants identified the meaning than indicated receptive knowledge, which suggests a high amount of successful guesswork, perhaps due to less convincing distractors. This pattern is repeated with *knee-jerk* and *down the line*. Although their meanings were correctly identified by around 45% of participants, only between 10–15%

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reported prior encounters, making them the least-recognised idioms.

Since these are some of the most frequently used idioms, it might be expected that acquisition would be higher for these advanced proficiency learners. Yet the inconsistent levels of receptive knowledge suggest that prior study for most participants has not included systematic coverage of common idioms. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the results also indicate a low level of idiom usage, except with the most well-known items. To understand the reasons for this, let us examine learner attitudes.

3.2 (RQ2) What attitudes of these advanced learners contribute to a common reluctance to use idioms?

Table 2. Learner priorities, where 1 is the highest priority, and 6 is the lowest.

Average ranking	
Improving Fluency	2.0
Improving pronunciation	2.2
Improving Intonation	2.6
Eliminating Gram. Errors	3.5
Using Idioms	3.6
Using Slang	3.9

3.2.1 Other priorities are more important

Results from the learning priorities task revealed that participants thought it better to focus on almost every other area of learning English rather than acquiring idioms. Learners placed heavy importance upon fluency, pronunciation and intonation, which ranked no lower than 2.6 on average. Using idioms was placed fifth out of six, with an average ranking of 3.6, and only slang was prioritised less. This is consistent with what might be expected after formal education which does not place great importance on learning idioms. This finding also highlights a flaw in the view that idioms are best left to be learned and added on at higher proficiency levels, as according to the

priorities recorded here, learners have not been prompted to shift their learning focus yet.

Table 3. Personal importance of learning idioms for reception and production.

How important is it for you personally to memorise idioms...	so you can understand NS better?	so you can use them?
	(%,)	(%)
Very important	16.4	9.6
Important	41.1	31.5
Slightly important	38.4	47.9
Not important	5.5	12.3

3.2.2 Reception more important than production

The de-prioritisation of using idioms is clarified by how participants viewed memorising them. Learners saw this as more important for understanding native speakers than using themselves, with 57% classing idioms as very important or important to learn for reception, compared with only 41% for production purposes. It is worth adding at this point that while all respondents were at the time studying abroad in the UK, 20 of the 73 stated that they had also previously lived abroad in an English-speaking country for more than six months. Compared with learners who do not travel abroad, it might be expected that these respondents would have more of an understanding of the importance and value of idioms, and therefore desire to use them.

3.2.3 Preference for non-figurative alternatives

From here, interview findings help to give a clearer picture of why learners view idiom use to be unimportant, and three main reasons were found. First of all, informants saw idioms as unnecessary in speech and writing because, in their view, it was easier to use plain, non-figurative English to express themselves. This was the most common reason given for non-use of idioms. As one informant put it:

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'Even if you want to use them you could use other sentences to explain but it would cost more words... you could explain in a simple way instead of using a phrase you don't know.' [SY]

Similarly, informants often stated that they did not worry about understanding idioms in their daily life because native speakers routinely switched to 'foreigner talk' in interactions, grading down their language and simplifying where necessary. As one informant put it, it was easier to make a face and signal that more explanation was needed than take the time to learn common idioms.

While the drive to avoid breakdowns in communication here is laudable, the swift move to sideline idioms reveals a great deal about how learners view them. Either learners do not understand the important roles that idioms play in communication, especially in conveying specific meanings, or they understand but choose not to use or learn idioms. The expressions are seen as optional because the non-figurative versions are seen as semantically identical. However, as the literature has demonstrated, this is not the case.

3.2.4 Lack of contextual awareness

The second reason for idiom avoidance was the fear of using them in the wrong context. Informants commonly reported that they would only use an idiom if they were sure that they could do it correctly, and while they demonstrated a good understanding of how context is critical when using idioms, most were reluctant to take the first step and experiment with using them:

'Sometimes I can't get the right meaning of these things so if I use them wrongly, it would be a joke.' [XZ]

As might be expected, prior idiom study had typically involved rote learning in preparation for tests, and so little attention had been paid to contextual information. Sometimes, the L1 played a part in causing confusion. It was mentioned that teachers would frequently give Chinese idioms as the equivalents for English idioms, despite the fact that the meanings diverged,

often significantly in some cases. Learners also reported that they had not been in a position to practise using these idioms, noting that practice was key to becoming comfortable with each expression.

3.2.5 It's not for me

The last main reason for idiom avoidance was the idea that idioms would sound out-of-place in the language use of learners. As one informant put it:

'I think, if some people can use idiom freely and correctly, maybe her, his or her English proficiency may reach to a higher level, rather than... just medium... I don't think I'm in that level so... I'm afraid to use them.' [SY]

Clearly, this informant did not want to use idioms because she was not a native speaker. This reasoning was founded on the management of other people's expectations - she knew that people would not expect her to sound like a native speaker, so she deliberately avoided this. Here, a connection is made between idiom use and higher proficiency, but not wanting to signal to others their 'membership' of this 'club', idiom use is avoided. Similarly, other informants suggested that learning idioms would only be beneficial to those aiming to work in certain environments, such as international business, or translation and interpretation.

3.2.6 Connection with slang

There is also some evidence that learners linked idioms to slang. As has been seen previously, both were the least prioritised in the ranking activity. In interviews, informants often mentioned that idioms were a way of adding humour to conversations, which, while sometimes true, does not demonstrate adequate understanding of the pragmatic roles idioms fulfil. Additionally, one informant was unclear as to the difference between idioms and slang. If learners do make this connection, then it is likely that they would not use idioms for the same reason that many do not use slang - to avoid causing offence.

3.3 Misunderstanding the role of idioms

These findings demonstrate that there is a clear disconnect between what is

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known about the role of idioms in the language and what learners think of them. As a consequence of having focused on other areas of language for so long, idiom avoidance by this point has been normalised. This is exacerbated by the erroneous views that using simpler, non-figurative alternatives is an unproblematic strategy, and that idioms should only be used by certain groups of L2 speakers.

The long-term role of the language classroom in developing these views cannot be ignored. As idioms are figurative and therefore seen as difficult to teach, it might be thought that the most logical and effective approach is to only teach them to advanced proficiency learners. However, this only serves to make idiom learning more problematic in the long term. By not teaching the expressions at every level of proficiency, learners easily develop the view that idioms are unimportant. So by the time they reach advanced proficiency, idiom acquisition is actually even more difficult because the learners do not think it is necessary. At this point, the only way forward is convincing learners that they need to learn and use idioms.

The experience of one informant demonstrates how this can occur. Repeated exposure to natural English in extra-curricular group activities had highlighted to the learner how crucial idioms were in producing native-like speech. This made her eager to learn and use idioms so that she could feel comfortable in groups of native speakers. However, as the majority of learners will not experience the need for idioms in the same way, adjustments in the language classroom are in order.

3.4 Pedagogical implications and suggestions for teaching

These findings have demonstrated that learner attitudes and beliefs are highly problematic in that they strongly disincline learners from using idioms. The fact that advanced learners hold these views at the very time that instructors generally believe they should focus on idioms is a cause for concern. There are, therefore, important implications for teachers, because the language classroom is a key factor in the creation of these beliefs.

Based on these findings, teachers should seriously re-evaluate the strategy of delaying or completely avoiding the teaching of idioms. In the short term, this may be an easy approach to take, but it is ultimately self-defeating as it not

only leaves less time for learners to acquire idioms, but also serves to convince them that they are not important to use at all. Furthermore, excluding these expressions from instruction is a highly damaging approach when it continues over a long period. If learners ultimately believe that idioms are reserved only for certain groups of language users, then serious questions must be asked about how this approach is helpful or effective.

The findings also demonstrate that learners may commonly undergo years of formal language education without adequately understanding the linguistic and pragmatic importance of idioms. A key step in rectifying the belief that idioms are unnecessary is developing learners' understanding of the significant pragmatic functions they play, and the value that they add to language. It is not enough to teach more idioms or simply raise awareness as they are encountered: the role of idioms is significant enough to merit full and explicit attention in the classroom, just as much as grammar or pronunciation does.

While teachers may be unable to affect the coverage of idioms in course textbooks or curricula, they are far from powerless to effect change. There are a few simple approaches that may be applied immediately that can help learners to form more positive attitudes about idioms. Teachers can quickly introduce idioms into classes by using them in feedback, explanations and instructions. This will easily increase students' exposure to idioms in class. Teachers may introduce two or three idioms at a time, consciously incorporate these into their usage, before adding more. Over time, this could easily lead to students learning a substantial number of idioms, and would crucially allow them to acquire contextual awareness, a key factor in enabling production.

Materials also require serious review if learners are to gain sufficient exposures to idioms to aid acquisition. Unfortunately, traditional commercially-produced materials, such as audio recordings for listening exercises are not generally representative of natural, idiom-filled English. This presents a clear need to use supplementary materials. TV chat shows, sports programmes and discussion-based formats found on video sharing sites for example are excellent sources of idiom-rich conversation. Using these kinds of materials as a matter of course is essential if learners are to build an accurate view of how idioms are naturally used. Whether using such materials for explicit idiom instruction or for a different language focus, teachers must resist the urge to

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gloss over idioms used, and address them as worthy of learner attention.

In terms of explicit teaching, corpus-driven research now leaves teachers with very little excuse for not covering frequently-used idioms in class. Studies like that of Simpson and Mendis (2003) can be used to identify which idioms can substitute for other non-figurative language that they already teach. This approach avoids adding to the teaching burden, and offers a neat way for teachers to insert idioms into existing materials. For example, when teaching paragraph writing, the non-figurative *in summary* could be switched with *when all said and done* or *in any event*. Teaching idioms in such cases where contextual constraints are very well-defined should significantly reduce students' anxiety about usage, and should lead to increased production over time.

These suggestions can help teachers to ensure students develop positive attitudes towards using idioms and assist them in explicit instruction of the expressions. However, eventually students themselves must take overall responsibility for improving their command of common idioms, especially with regard to understanding contextual limitations. Learners should therefore be encouraged to continue to obtain the most exposure possible to idiom-filled English, either through media, or interaction with L1 speakers. Again, these methods will help learners understand the contextual constraints, and keep developing as idiom users.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that learner attitudes have a strong negative effect on idiom use at the stage of advanced proficiency. Learners commonly misunderstood the value and function of idioms in English, often erroneously perceiving non-figurative paraphrases to be semantically equivalent. Worryingly, it was also found that learners saw themselves as unqualified to use idioms, viewing them as the sole preserve of specialised professions. Overall, learners viewed idiom use as unnecessary. Furthermore, although participants saw receptive knowledge as more important, they demonstrated low familiarity with most high-frequency idioms when tested.

As previous research has taken it for granted that avoidance is tied to the

complexities involved in truly acquiring these expressions, these new findings suggest that better instructional techniques by themselves will be ineffective in raising idiom production. The findings also call into question the common assumption that idiom learning should only be tackled by high proficiency learners. Far from making the acquisition process smoother, delayed instruction only makes it harder because in the meantime, learners have become idiom-averse. Although more time must be devoted to explicit teaching of idioms, this will not be sufficient to avoid such attitudes. In order that teachers foster learners who accurately understand the value and pragmatic roles of idioms, it is imperative that the expressions are normalised in teaching materials and the classroom at every level.

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Appendix A

Survey and Idiom Meaning Test

Idiom use and learning strategies questionnaire

An idiom is a fixed group of words with a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each individual word. For example, 'kick the bucket' means 'to die'. So nobody kicks anything, and no bucket is involved.

This questionnaire is designed to find out how knowledgeable you are about idioms, how you learn them and your attitudes towards them. Thank you for your help!

Learning priorities

- Q. 1 Which of the following six areas should an advanced learner of English like yourself focus on to become more like a native speaker?
Please rank in order of importance, with 1 being the most important, and 6 being the least important.
- | |
|--------------------------------|
| Improving intonation |
| Improving pronunciation |
| Using slang |
| Using idioms |
| Eliminating grammatical errors |
| Improving fluency |

Idioms Quiz

For the following examples, please select the correct meaning. Please also tick the appropriate box if you have heard or read the idiom before today, and whether you have used it.

- Q. 2 What is the figurative meaning of '**bottom line**'?
- | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| – the last part of a project | Heard or read | YES <input type="checkbox"/> | NO <input type="checkbox"/> |
| – the most important factor | Used myself | YES <input type="checkbox"/> | NO <input type="checkbox"/> |
| – an honest evaluation | | | |

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Q. 3	What is the figurative meaning of 'the big picture' ? – the general overview of a situation – the most popular description of events – a convincing explanation of a situation	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. 4	What is the figurative meaning of 'come into play' ? – interrupt a game in progress – become available at a convenient moment – start to influence things	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. 5	What is the figurative meaning of 'what the hell' ? – I understand completely – What happened – Could you repeat that	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. 6	What is the figurative meaning of 'down the line' ? – starts in the middle – at an elementary level – at a later stage	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. 7	What is the figurative meaning of 'the other side of the coin' ? – the opposite view of a situation – the alternative method of paying – an unbalanced viewpoint	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. 8	What is the figurative meaning of 'on the right track' ? – following a course likely to result in success – giving a detailed explanation – taking the most direct route to success	Heard or read	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
		Used myself	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Q. 9	What is the figurative meaning of 'knee-jerk'?	Heard or read		
	– quick and painful	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
	– spontaneous and unthinking	Used myself		
	– false and incomprehensible	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Attitudes

Q. 10 At which education level were you directly taught the most idioms as part of the curriculum? Please tick ONE box.

- Primary School
- Junior High/Middle School
- High School
- University – Undergraduate

Q.11 Thinking about the idiom teaching in question 10(above), how useful has that been to you for living and studying abroad this year? Please circle your answer.

Not useful A little useful Useful Very useful

Q. 12 In what situations have you encountered new idioms in the past 6 months? Please tick all those that apply.

- lectures
- talking with native speakers
- watching TV/films
- listening to music
- academic reading
- language support classes
- listening to the radio
- non-academic reading

Can't see the wood for the trees? How do learner attitudes affect idiom usage?

Q. 13 How important is it for you personally to memorise idioms so you can understand native speakers more easily? Please circle your answer.

very important important slightly important not important

Q. 14 How important is it for you personally to memorise idioms so that you can use them in speech? Please circle your answer.

very important important slightly important not important

Q. 15 What is your nationality?

Q. 16 What is your first language?

Q. 17 Have you lived in an English speaking country (before studying abroad this year) for more than six months?

YES

NO

Appendix B

Interview Schedule Sample

Introductory Questions

Here are some common idioms. [Show idioms listed below.]

Q. 1 Can you tell me some idioms that you know?

Attitudes

RANKING TASK – introduce from questionnaire; explain your choices.

Q. 2 Why are idioms not prioritised? [if not already explained].

(REFERRING TO examples identified from Q1 LIST)

Q. 3 Do you use these? Which ones?

Q. 4 Is it important for you to use idioms in speech or writing?

Optional Qs

- a. Why?
- b. Why don't you use some idioms?
- c. What prevents you from using them?

Q. 5 If you were in control of English education in your country, would you put idioms in the curriculum? What, how, when would you teach them?

What happens at school/university?

Q. 6 Can you tell me about the kinds of idioms you remember being taught either at university or school? Could you give me some examples?

Optional

How were these idioms taught to you? How did you learn them? Did you need to memorise them? How did you do that?

Q. 7 How useful has that teaching been for understanding native speakers?

Optional

How useful has it been for adding idioms to your speech or writing?

Q. 8 Can you tell me about a time when you had trouble in communication because of idioms? [NB. Do not press for detail as difficult. Opt for probe in task.]

Q. 9 Tell me about the process of learning to use the idioms that you use now.
or What makes you want to use an idiom?

Did you use any specific strategies? How do you remember them?

Can't see the wood for the trees? How do learner attitudes affect idiom usage?

IDIOM EXAMPLES LIST

carrot and stick

the promise of reward combined with the threat of punishment

draw a line between

set a limit of what you are willing to do or accept

on target

succeeding in hitting or achieving the thing aimed at

thumbs up

an indication of satisfaction

out the door

discarded

rule of thumb

a broadly accurate guide or principle

take something at face value

to accept someone or something just as it appears

flog something to death

to discuss a particular subject so many times that it is not interesting any more