

Difficulties in Acquiring Idiomatic Competence in A Foreign Language

 Usmonova Dilbar Ibragimovna

PhD researcher at the Department of Theory and Methodology, Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers National Research University, Uzbekistan

Received: 18 August 2026; **Accepted:** 15 September 2026; **Published:** 07 October 2026

Abstract: The article deals with the issues based on analyzing the major linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and pedagogical difficulties encountered by EFL learners in developing idiomatic competence. Most learners can explain a grammar rule more confidently than they can use let the cat out of the bag at the right moment. Idiomatic competence—the ability to notice, interpret, and produce conventional figurative phrases in ways that sound natural to proficient speakers—lags behind other parts of language study, even among students who score well on exams. This article looks at why that gap is so persistent. Idioms are not a single problem. Some are hard to spot, some are hard to interpret, some are easy to understand on the page and still clumsy in speech, and many are socially risky: the phrase is known, the situation is not. The discussion argues that textbooks often sell meaning and hide use; that first-language idiom systems both help and interfere; and that fear of sounding ridiculous keeps many competent students silent. So, idioms will not become easy, but they become teachable once we stop treating them as decorative extras and start teaching noticing, restriction of form, and social fit as parts of the same competence.

Keywords: Idiomatic competence; formulaic language; EFL/ESL; figurative meaning; L1 transfer; register; noticing; phraseology.

Introduction: Idiomatic expressions constitute an important part of everyday communication. Native and proficient speakers regularly use expressions such as break the ice, hit the nail on the head, under the weather, spill the beans, and a piece of cake. Such expressions allow speakers to communicate ideas economically and expressively while also demonstrating familiarity with the linguistic and cultural conventions of a speech community.

Knowledge of individual words and grammatical structures alone does not necessarily enable learners to understand idiomatic language. A learner may know the meanings of break and ice separately but still fail to understand the figurative meaning of break the ice. This characteristic makes idiomatic expressions particularly demanding for learners of English as a

foreign language.

Ask a group of intermediate students what a piece of cake means and many will smile and say “easy.” Ask the same group to use the phrase in a short conversation about an exam they have not yet taken, and the room often goes quiet. That pause is the real subject of this paper. Idiomatic competence is not the same as knowing a gloss. It is the rather unglamorous ability to recognize that a string of ordinary words is doing figurative work, to recover a conventional meaning fast enough for conversation, to keep the wording close to what speakers actually say, and to judge whether the phrase belongs in this room, with this person, in this tone.

Teachers have known for a long time that idioms sit awkwardly in the syllabus. They look like vocabulary,

behave like mini-texts, and punish the learner who treats them as free syntax. A student who has never heard bite the bullet can invent a brave story about dentistry. A student who has memorized the story may still say *bite a bullet or drop the idiom into a formal complaint where it sounds cheap. None of this means idioms are ornamental. Corpus work on English has made it hard to pretend that fluent speech is assembled word by word. Everyday talk leans on chunks: collocations, speech formulae, and the smaller set of true idioms that textbooks love because they are picturesque (Wray, 2002; Schmitt, 2010). Learners who lack those chunks can be grammatically impressive and still sound as if they are translating.

The difficulty is easy to moralize and harder to describe. It is not that students are lazy, and it is not that idioms are “illogical.” Many are partly motivated: once you see the image in spill the beans, you can hold the meaning. The trouble is that motivation does not tell you which words are fixed, how far you may joke with the image, or whether a news presenter would ever say it. First-language knowledge cuts both ways. A Russian speaker who knows вешать лапшу на уши will look for an English partner and may land on a phrase that is close in spirit and wrong in company. An Uzbek or English-medium learner with few home idioms in daily use may have no strategy at all except the dictionary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Idiom research split, for years, into two conversations that did not listen to each other. Psycholinguists asked how the mind reaches a figurative meaning: through the literal reading first, or through a stored whole. Classroom researchers asked how to present kick the bucket without a groan. The two questions are linked. If an idiom is stored as a unit, teaching it as a puzzle of separate words is working against memory. If some idioms stay transparent, teaching every item as an arbitrary lump wastes the image that learners could use.

Gibbs and colleagues showed that speakers often access figurative meanings quickly and that transparency is a matter of degree, not a yes–no tag (Gibbs, 1994). Cieřlicka’s work with second-language users complicated the picture. Learners, unlike many native speakers, frequently keep the literal reading active; the familiar words do not step aside (Cieřlicka,

2006). That finding explains a very ordinary classroom moment: the student who understands every word in it’s raining cats and dogs and still looks at the window. Liontas (2002, 2015) has argued for years that idiomatic competence deserves its own space in the curriculum because comprehension, production, and pragmatic control do not arrive together. His classroom studies keep returning to the same complaint from students: they meet idioms in stories, not in the messy turn-taking where those idioms actually live.

Irujo’s older papers remain useful because they are honest about transfer. Learners look for a match in the first language. When the match is close in image and use, they get a free ride. When the match is close in image and different in wording, they produce calques. When there is no match, they fall back on literal translation or avoidance (Irujo, 1986). Cooper (1999) watched students think aloud while reading idioms and found a mixed bag of strategies—guessing from context, using the first language, analyzing parts—none of them reliable on their own. Later pedagogical work has tried to make those strategies less random: raising awareness of formulaic language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008), using etymological notes and pictures where the image still helps, and spacing encounters so that a phrase is not met once in Unit 4 and never again.

Phraseology supplies the wider frame. Wray (2002) treated formulaic sequences as a solution to processing pressure: speakers store wholes so that they can spend attention on stance and timing. Schmitt (2010) and Nation (2013) placed multiword items inside vocabulary knowledge, with the unwelcome implication that “knowing a word” includes its company. For idioms this means that a gloss is only one box on a longer checklist: spoken form, written form, constraints on variation, typical collocates, register, and frequency. Frequency is the unkind part. Many textbook idioms are rare in general corpora; many frequent spoken formulae never look “idiomatic” enough to be taught. Students therefore study paint the town red and miss I’m afraid and there you go, which do more daily work.

What the literature does not support is the cheerful idea that exposure alone will do the job for classroom learners. Incidental learning of idioms does occur, but slowly, and it favors items that are guessed correctly

the first time (Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013). Without some push to notice the phrase as a phrase, the eyes slide over it. Without a chance to say it, the item stays receptive. Without talk about who uses it, the item becomes a joke in the wrong room. That is the state of the argument the table below tries to make practical.

ANALYTICAL TABLE AND DISCUSSION

1. Six places where idiomatic competence breaks

Table 1 is deliberately plain. It does not rank learner types or promise that one activity repairs a profile. It only separates problems that teachers often fold into the single sentence “they don’t know idioms.”

Table 1.

Where idiomatic competence usually fails, and what is worth trying first

Where the difficulty sits	What learners typically do	Why it happens	What usually helps more than a list
Seeing that it is an idiom	Read kick the bucket as a literal accident; miss it’s raining cats and dogs as a unit	Compositional reading is the default; many idioms look like ordinary syntax	Noticing tasks: mark odd literal pictures; contrast a literal and a figurative context side by side
Getting the meaning	Guess from one word (spill the beans → something about food); map L1 idiom word-for-word	Opacity varies; L1 equivalents rarely match image and use (English once in a blue moon vs. Russian раз в сто лет)	Image plus situation, not only a synonym; compare L1 and L2 pictures of the same idea
Form and frozenness	Produce *kick the pail, *spill some beans, *by the night	Learners treat slots as free; they have not stored the preferred lexical company	Dictogloss and reconstruction; highlight the locked words; accept only small, attested variation
When and with whom	Use piece of cake in a formal essay; miss that break a leg is a wish, not a threat	Textbooks give meaning, seldom register, humor, or speaker stance	Short authentic clips; ask who would say this, to whom, and whether it would sound warm or rude
Hearing it in real time	Understand the idiom on paper, miss it in speech because it is reduced and unstressed	Formulaic sequences are often spoken as one beat; classroom listening is too clean	Repeated listening of the same chunk in messy audio; shadowing the whole phrase
Daring to use it	Avoid idioms altogether, or overuse a handful (at the end of the day in every paragraph)	Fear of sounding wrong; limited productive repertoire; teaching that prizes accuracy over voice	Low-stakes role play with one target idiom; feedback on fit, not only on form

2. Discussion

The table makes an uncomfortable point: a student can “know” an idiom in Monday’s quiz and still fail it on Thursday for a different reason. Monday tested the

gloss. Thursday needed the spoken shape and a sense of audience. If we keep testing only the gloss, we will keep announcing progress that conversation does not confirm.

L1 is not the villain of the piece, and it is not a reliable friend. Teachers who ban the first language in idiom work throw away a useful contrast. Putting once in a blue moon next to a home-language equivalent, and then asking what does not travel—the image, the time scale, the joke—does more than a ban. The same is true of register. University students writing term papers are often punished for spoken idioms they were praised for in speaking class. That is not hypocrisy so much as unfinished teaching. The phrase was taught as meaning; it was not taught as a choice.

There is also a human difficulty that research mentions less than teachers see. Idioms expose the learner. Get a rule wrong and you still sound like a student. Get an idiom wrong and you can sound comic. Many adults would rather sound stiff than funny by accident. A classroom that treats every error as public entertainment makes that calculation worse. Small groups, one target phrase, and feedback that says “this is the right idea in the wrong room” give people a way back in.

None of this requires a new method with a trademark. It requires slower work on fewer items, recycled in listening and speaking, with the fixed words marked and the social question asked out loud. The literature already points there. The habit that needs breaking is the chapter-final box of ten colorful idioms, glossed, tested, and forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Idiomatic competence stays difficult because it is several competences wearing one name. Learners must notice a phrase, recover a conventional meaning, keep the wording stable, hear it when it is reduced, and judge whether it belongs in the talk they are in. Research on processing, transfer, and formulaic language explains why lists and single glosses do not carry those jobs. Teaching that treats idioms as optional decoration will continue to produce students who can translate kick the bucket and never say anything like it. Teaching that picks fewer phrases, returns to them, contrasts them with the first language, and talks about fit will not make idioms easy. It will make failure more informative: we will know whether the problem was the image, the form, the ear, or the nerve. That is a smaller claim than a revolution in method, and it is one a working classroom can use.

REFERENCES

1. Boers, F., & Lindstromberg, S. (2008). Cognitive linguistic approaches to teaching vocabulary and phraseology. Mouton de Gruyter.
2. Cieřlicka, A. (2006). Literal salience in on-line processing of idiomatic expressions by second language learners. *Second Language Research*, 22(2), 115–144. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0267658306sr263oa>
3. Cooper, T. C. (1999). Processing of idioms by L2 learners of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(2), 233–262. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587719>
4. Gibbs, R. W., Jr. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Irujo, S. (1986). Don't put your leg in your mouth: Transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(2), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586545>
6. Liontas, J. I. (2002). Context and idiom understanding in second languages. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 2, 155–185.
7. Liontas, J. I. (2015). Developing idiomatic competence in the ESOL classroom: A pragmatic account. *TESOL Journal*, 6(4), 621–658.
8. Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
9. Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Webb, S., Newton, J., & Chang, A. (2013). Incidental learning of collocation. *Language Learning*, 63(1), 91–120.
11. Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge University Press.