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# العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية ومدى
## تأثير اللغة العربية في تعلمها

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**ملخص البحث.** يبين هذا البحث مدى أهمية تدريس وتعلم العبارات الاصطلاحية في اللغـة الإنجليزية بالرغم من أن هذا المجال لم ينل قسطا وافيا من الاهتمام لـدى البـاحثين فـي تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية. كما أن هذا الموضوع قد لاقى إهمالا أيضا لدى بعـض المترجمين الذين يقومون عادة بنقل العبارات الاصطلاحيــــة الإنجليزيــة إلــى العربيــة باستعمال تعابير غير اصطلاحية وذلك بسبب تأثرهم باللغة الأولى (العربية). كان الـهدف من هذا البحث هو أولا: معرفة مدى إلمام طلبة تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية فـي اسـتعمال وفهم العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية من خلال اختبار ترجمة قام الباحثون بتصميمـــها لهذا الغرض. وكان الهدف الآخر من هذا البحث هو معرفة مدى تأثير اللغة العربية فـي دقة ترجمة هذه التعابير إلى اللغة العربية. وقد تم تفسير نتائج هذا البحث في ضوء تداخـل وتأثير اللغة العربية في عملية الترجمة، كما قام الباحثون بعرض بعض التوصيات التــي من شأنها تحسين تعلم العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية.

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positive transfer and to the fact the English idioms not only have their semantic counterparts in Arabic but are also identically worded.

A serious question is raised here which is why students are incapable of using English idioms correctly. The answer is that they may lack pragmatic competence which is contrasted to grammatical competence. According to Thomas [9, p.92], "grammatical competence consists of "abstract" or decontextalized knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax, semantics etc., whereas pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context." She goes on to point out that if an L1 speaker perceives the purpose of an L2 utterance as other than the L2 speaker intended pragmatic failure has occurred; the utterance failed to achieve the speaker's goal.

In the context of language learning, one cause of pragmalinguistic failure is pragmalinguistic transfer, the use of speech act strategies, formulas or idioms when interacting with members of L2 speech community [10]. This transfer has been addressed in a number of speech act/event studies [11-15].

In addition to the influence of negative transfer, students opted for the use of other strategies; paraphrasing the idiom due to a lack of familiarity with it or giving its literal meaning. For instance some students failed to produce the idiom "to hold one's tongue" and instead they used "kept silent".

In light of the foregoing, it is recommended that the study of English lexicon in general and idioms and conventionalized forms in particular be given due attention and presented and taught systematically to students due to the essential role they play in communication [16].

Another recommendation is that the data on best and least known idioms can also provide a basis for deciding which idioms to teach. "Infrequent, highly colloquial idioms with difficult vocabulary should be avoided because students will obviously have difficulty producing them correctly" [17, p.6].

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paraphrases "to sell water in the water quarter," and 18% used the paraphrase "to sell things in the wrong place." The former is due to transfer from Arabic since in Arabic there is an expression to the same effect. Forty percent gave no answer. Fourteen percent correctly used the idiom "to hold one's tongue," and 52% provided a literal meaning and failed to provide the idiom; they used expressions such as "said nothing," "didn't say anything," and "kept silent"; 18% gave no answer. The idiom "to look for a needle in a haystack" was correctly used by only 14% of the subjects, and 38% used the idiom incorrectly due to transfer from Arabic such as "to look for a needle in a pile of hay (straw)," "to look for a nail (pin) in a pile of hay (straw)" and 40% gave no answer. Only 12% correctly used the idiom "to let the cat out of the bag," and 48% gave the literal meaning of the idiom such as "to tell (other) people's secrets" and "can't keep secrets," and "to reveal other people's secrets." Twelve percent incorrectly worded the idiom "to take (put) the cat out of the bag." And 20% gave no answer. The idiom "to take to one's legs" was used correctly by 12% of the subjects; 46% used paraphrases such as "fled," "ran away," and "left quickly" and "gave their legs to wind"; the latter is due to transfer from Arabic; 14% used the idiom incorrectly "took to their feet" and 16% gave no answer.

Ten percent used correctly the idiom "to have one's hands full"; 30% used an expression which is widely used in Arabic "to have no time to scratch one's head." Twenty-eight percent failed to produce the idiom and gave its literal meaning "he is very busy," "he has no time to do anything." And 22% gave no answer.

The idiom "to cut one's coat according to one's cloth" was correctly used by only 8% of the subjects and 28% provided the literal meaning of the idiom, "balance your income and your expenses," or "live according to your income" that's within your own means and 48% gave no answer.

Finally, only 6% used correctly the idiom "to cast pearls before swine." 12% worded the idiom incorrectly "to cast pearls in front of swine," "show (give) pearls to swine" and 16% of the subjects used the idiom in its Arabic form "put the jewel (pearl) in (around) a dog's neck," and 50% gave no answer.

## Summary and Conclusion

A quick look at the results undoubtedly indicate students' poor competence in the use of idioms. Students did extremely poorly especially in the translation of different idioms, where the percentage of correct responses ranged from 26% to 6%. In the translation of idioms, negative transfer has been shown to play a significant role. The idioms "blood is thicker than water," and "to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth," were translated "blood never becomes water," and "to be born with a gold (golden) spoon in one's mouth," respectively. In translating the identical idioms, the percentage of correct responses was remarkably higher and ranged from 84% to 36%. Identical idioms were the easiest to translate. This is perhaps due to

**Table 3. Percentage of correct responses for different idioms.**

| Idiom | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1. to call a spade a spade | 26% |
| 2. to go under the hammer | 24% |
| 3. it goes without saying | 22% |
| 4. to beat around the bush | 22% |
| 5. to cost an arm and a leg | 20% |
| 6. to live from hand to mouth | 20% |
| 7. to make a mountain out of a molehill | 18% |
| 8. to carry coals to Newcastle | 16% |
| 9. to hold one's tongue | 14% |
| 10. to look for a needle in a haystack (bundle of hay) | 14% |
| 11. to let the cat out of the bag | 12% |
| 12. to take to one's legs | 12% |
| 13. to have one's hands full | 10% |
| 14. to cut one's coat according to one's cloth | 8% |
| 15. to cast pearls before swine | 6% |

Unlike the identical and similar idioms, a relatively high percentage of the subjects tended not to answer the different idioms and left them blank. Forty-two percent failed to provide the idiom "to call a spade a spade" but gave a paraphrase of it such as "to call the blind blind," and to "call the devil devil in his face," and "to call a bad person a bad person," and "to call a person by his real name," and "to tell the truth." Twenty four percent gave no answer. The idiom "to go under the hammer" was correctly used by 24%, and 26% used "on (in) auction (sale)" and 38% gave no answer.

Twenty-two percent of the subjects correctly used the idiom, "it goes without saying"; however 26% used a paraphrase such as "it is known (obvious)" and 16% used "it is said" and 22% gave no answer. The idiom "to beat around the bush" was correctly used by 22% of the subjects, and 24% worded the idiom incorrectly by using forms such as "to go (to walk), to turn around the bush" and 14% provided the literal meaning of the idiom such as "it is not direct (straightforward) or (clear)" and 32% provided no answer. Twenty percent correctly used the idiom, "to cost an arm and a leg," and 52% used a paraphrase such as "too much," "a lot of money," and "all he has got"; 16% gave no answer. The idiom "to live from hand to mouth" was correctly used by only 20%, and 14% incorrectly worded the idiom "to live between hand and mouth" and "to live a hand to mouth life"; 26% used a paraphrase which is due to transfer from Arabic such as "to live day by day," and to "live step by step"; 22% provided no answer.

Eighteen percent correctly used the idiom "to make a mountain out of a molehill," and 40% incorrectly worded the idiom by saying "to make a mountain of a (small) hill," and 14% provided the literal meaning of the idiom by saying "to make little things big ones," and "to make something out of nothing," or "to make an issue of trivial matters." Twenty percent gave no answer. The idiom "to carry coals to NewCastle" was correctly used by only 16%; 16% used the following

sheep's clothing" was correctly used by 40% of the subjects; however 24% used "a wolf in sheep's coat or cloth," and 18% used, "a wolf in the skin (clothing) of a sheep" and 12% used "a wolf in a sheep's clothes." Thirty-eight percent correctly used the idiom "to show one's teeth" and 26% used "to show one's anger" instead; 10% used "showed his white teeth" and 8% paraphrased the idiom by saying 'to show hostility." The idiom "a drop in the bucket" was used correctly by 34%, and 38% made a mistake by substituting the indefinite article for the definite article in the idiom "a drop in a bucket"; 24% used "a drop in the sea" analogous to the Arabic expression. The idiom "in one ear and out the other," was correctly used by 30%; 28% used "to enter one ear and to go from the other" and 20% used "to go (pass) from one ear to the other" respectively; these are analogous to the Arabic forms. Twenty-eight percent correctly used the idiom "with his tail between his legs," and 36% paraphrased the idiom by saying "with failure (disappointment)," and 16% used "a tail between (in) his legs." The idiom "to throw dust in (someone's) eyes" was correctly used by only 26%, and 30% used "to spread dust (ash) in the eyes," and 28% used "to throw ash (sand) in the eyes." In the equivalent Arabic expression the word ash is most commonly used.

Only twenty-four percent correctly used the idiom "to fish in troubled waters," and 42%, used "to fish in dirty (bad) water," and 18% used "to hunt in dirty water"; in Arabic there is only one verb for the English verbs "to fish," "and to hun." The idiom "to wash other people's linen in public" was used correctly by 22%, and 34% used "to tell (reveal) others' secrets," and 18% used "to spread people's secrets"; both of which are paraphrases of the English idiom. The idiom "a matter of life and death," was used correctly by 20%; 64% however used "a matter of life or death" which is a direct translation of the equivalent Arabic idiom. Only 18% of the subjects correctly used the idiom "to back the wrong horse"; 30% used "to bet on the wrong horse" and 14% used to "gamble on the wrong horse"; these two expressions are used in Arabic, and finally 22% simply substituted to support" for "to back" and used "to support the wrong horse". The idiom "to lose one's head" was correctly used by 18% of the subjects and 40% used "to lose one's control," and 26% used "to lose one's balance," both being a paraphrase of the idiom "to lose one's head."

Finally only 16% used correctly the idiom "to kill two birds with one stone," and 40% used "to catch two birds with one stone," and 26% used "to hunt (hit) two birds with one stone." The low percentage of the correct rendering of this idiom is due to transfer from Arabic which does not use the verb "to kill" but rather the verb "to hit" or "to catch" in the equivalent Arabic idiom.

As shown in Table 3, the correct translation of idioms which were different in Arabic and English was relatively low, and ranged from 26% for the idiom "to call a spade a spade" to 6% for the idiom "to cast pearls before swine."

The idiom "to turn over a new leaf" was used correctly by 46%; 24% and 16% failed to use the correct idiom but rather used "to start a new life," and "open a new page" respectively, which are commonly used in Arabic. Again 46% used the idiom "to catch (their) breath," and 38% used "to take their breath," and 8% used a literal translation "to take a rest." Forty percent correctly used the idiom "to try one's luck," and 20% used "to see his luck," and 18% used "to try his chance (fortune) which are parallel to the forms used in Arabic. With regard to the idiom "to wash one's hands of something," 40% used it correctly and 30% used "to wash one's hands (from) the problem (the case)," and 14% used expressions to this effect: "neglected the matter" and "didn't pay attention," which are similar to the Arabic expression.

"To live and let live" was used correctly by only 38%, whereas 46% used "live and let people (others) live," and this is due to transfer from Arabic. Finally, the idiom "to take up arms" was correctly used by 36%; 32% and 18% used the incorrect idioms to carry arms (weapons) and "to hold arms" respectively.

A quick look at Table 2 shows that the percentages of correct responses for similar idioms ranged from 48% for "blood is thicker than water" to 16% for the idiom "to kill two birds with one stone." Twenty-eight percent of the subjects failed to use the required idiom "blood is thicker than water," and translated it literally by saying "blood never becomes water" in addition 14% translated it by saying "blood is not water" both of which are used in Arabic.

**Table 2. Percentage of correct responses for similar idioms.**

| | Idiom | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | blood is thicker than water | 48% |
| 2. | to build castles in the air | 46% |
| 3. | to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth | 44% |
| 4. | a wolf in sheep's clothing | 40% |
| 5. | to show one's teeth | 38% |
| 6. | a drop in the bucket | 34% |
| 7. | in one ear and out the other | 30% |
| 8. | with one's tail between one's legs | 28% |
| 9. | to throw dust in (someone's) eyes | 26% |
| 10. | to fish in troubled waters | 24% |
| 11. | to wash one's dirty linen in public | 22% |
| 12. | a matter of life and death | 20% |
| 13. | to back the wrong horse | 18% |
| 14. | to lose one's head | 18% |
| 15. | to kill two birds with one stone | 16% |

"To build castles in the air" was correctly used by 46% and 22% used "to build palaces in the air" the latter is analogous to the idiom used in Jordanian Arabic, and 18% used "to build dreams in the air." Forty-four percent of the subjects correctly used the idiom "to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth," and 42% incorrectly produced the idiom "to be born with a golden (gold) spoon in his mouth; the use of the latter is due to negative transfer from Arabic. The idiom "a wolf in

## Discussion of Results

With regard to idioms which were identical in English and Arabic, the correct translation of idioms was relatively high and ranged from 84% for the idiom "to be between two fires" to 36% for the idiom "to take up arms," as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Percentage of correct responses for identical idioms.**

| | Idioms | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | to be between two fires | 84% |
| 2. | to play the game | 84% |
| 3. | on the tip of one's tongue | 82% |
| 4. | to read between the lines | 78% |
| 5. | From the bottom of one's heart | 78% |
| 6. | to be all ears | 60% |
| 7. | to burn the bridges behind him | 56% |
| 8. | a man of his word | 56% |
| 9. | to tighten one's belt | 50% |
| 10. | to turn over a new leaf | 46% |
| 11. | to catch one's breath | 46% |
| 12. | to try one's luck | 40% |
| 13. | to wash one's hands of something | 40% |
| 14. | to live and let live | 38% |
| 15. | to take up arms | 36% |

The percentage of correct responses for the idiom " to play the game" was also 84%. Ten percent opted for the use of the meaning of the idiom: "do as they do," "treat them as they treat you," and "deal with them as they deal with you." Eighty-two percent of the respondents used the idiom "on the tip of one's tongue," correctly, and 12% used incorrect forms such as "at the tip of my tongue," and "on (at) the top of my tongue" and similar forms. "To read between the lines" was correctly used by 78%, and 10% used under (through) the lines, and 8% used the literal meaning of the idiom "the hidden meaning." Again 78% of the subjects correctly used the idiom "from the bottom of (my) heart" whereas 16% used other forms due to transfer from Arabic such as "from my deep heart" or "the depth of my heart." The idiom "to be all ears" was used correctly by 60% of the sample, and 32% used literal language to substitute the intended meaning such as : "listened carefully" or "listened attentively." Fifty-six percent of the subjects correctly used the idiom "to burn the bridges behind him," and 8% used the idiom incorrectly "to burn bridges behind himself, and 18% used literal language such as "damaged (broke off) relations with others. Again 56% used the idiom "a man of his word" correctly; and 28% used literal language such as "keeps (respects) his word" and "respects his promise" which are used in Arabic. Fifty percent used the idiom "to tighten one's belt" correctly, and 26% used "to fasten their belts" triggered off by the expression used by motorists, and 12% used a literal translation "to fix (tie) one's belt."

and collocations, are, however, some of the topics that are grouped under the lexicon.

According to Jackson, the essential feature of an idiom is its non-literal metaphorical meaning. The meaning of an idiom is not the sum of the meaning of its parts or its constituents. A learner has to learn the meaning of an idiom over and above the meaning of the words that make it up.

Another characteristic of idioms is that they are fixed expressions. An idiom like "a storm in a teacup" is fixed. We can not make either of the nouns plural, nor can we alter the sequence of the words, nor transform it in any other way" [7, p.106].

Phrasal verbs are similar to idioms in the fixedness feature. The consist of sequences of words, which have to be considered as single lexemes. When we hear the phrasal verb "put off," we understand it as a single semantic unit, and it has a single verb word equivalent which is postpone.

Although there is no consensus as to the exact definition of collocation, one factor common to these definitions is the interrelationship between one lexeme and another and how they combine to form a collection. Benson, Benson and Ilson [8] state that "in English as in any other language there are many fixed, identifiable, non idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called recurrent combinations, fixed combinations or collocations." They give the example of murder and its collocations: commit, investigate, and witness. It is immediately recognized that the verb to commit is more closely associated with murder than the other two verbs.

## Objectives and Methods

This study aims to find out to what extent English majors and translation majors have mastered the use of English idioms; second, it aims to find out whether identical and similar idioms lend themselves more easily to translation from Arabic into English than the different ones or not. For this purpose, a 45-item test was developed by the researchers (15 identical, 15 similar, and 15 different). Each item consisted of an Arabic sentence containing the idiom and an English translation of the sentence with the idiom missing. Subjects were asked to supply the English idiom which is equivalent to the Arabic one.

Subsequent to administering the test, subjects' responses for each item were listed, analyzed and categorized to find out the percentage of correct responses for each item. The sample of the study consisted of sixty students, 30 of whom were enrolled in the M.A. translation program at Yarmouk University, and the others were English seniors for the first semester 1997-1998.

four correspondence categories described by Awwad [5, p. 66] in a descending order
of difficulty.

a.      Idioms with no correspondence between expression and functions;
        expressions and functions are language specific.

b.      Idioms with corresponding functions in both language but with completely
        different expressions.

c.      Idioms with corresponding functions in both languages, but with slightly
        different expressions.

d.      Idioms with corresponding functions and expressions in both languages.

One of the goals of Awwad [5] was to establish a general theoretical
framework of model for dealing with various problematic aspects of idioms in
translation. His findings indicate that: (a) when expressions and functions
correspond, the resulting translation will be correct as long as the translate is a
native speaker of the source language and has a near native competence in the target
language; (b) when functions correspond but structures differs slightly, it requires
translators to pay more attention to the areas of difference in expression between the
source language and the target language; (c) when expressions and functions differ
both languages, it requires translators to pay more attention to areas of difference
between both languages and finally; (d) when expressions and functions differ in
both languages. The translator's task becomes most difficult because it requires a
deep understanding and awareness of the native and second languages culture and
ways of life.

Awwad's findings tie in well with the findings of our study. This is evident in
the fact that the identical idioms (equivalent to Awwad's first category of idioms) are
the easiest to translate, whereas different idioms (equivalent to Awwad's last
category) are the most difficult to translate.

For the most part, idioms are usually introduced into the English language
classroom on a random basis, selected by the teacher from lists of unrelated idiom
items. The idioms are, therefore, usually not integrated into the context-sensitive
environments of the language curriculum, but are often introduced as a time-filler at
the end of the hour or end of a unit.

The use of idioms takes on a significant part of cultural expression. They
are normally used in a myriad of daily situations, and therefore must be taught as
part of the fabric of the foreign target language. Moreover, the use of idioms must be
regarded as part and parcel of the concept of communicative competence. As a
matter of fact, Canale and Swain's research on L2 learning and teaching has been
extended to include learner's pragmatic knowledge, which in turn includes, what we
would, like to call "idiomatic competence" [6].

It is worthwhile to define the scope of lexicon and its relationship to idioms,
phrasal verbs and collocations. According to Doroszewski (cited in [7, p. 241]) the
lexicon investigates words as regards their meaning and use. Idioms, phrasal verbs

Furthermore, since "real life language" utilizes idioms, they must play an integral part in syllabus design.

Idioms are difficult to learn  and teach for many reasons. The main reason, McPartland believes,  is  that idioms are not literal: they do not mean what they say. The easiest  are those which have exact counterparts in the learner's mother tongue, and the most difficult ones are those which have no counterparts and whose meaning cannot  be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents. In her article on learning  and teaching idioms Irujo [2] agrees with McPartland that second language idioms are very difficult to  learn because they aren't literal and do not mean what they say. In additions she attributes the difficulty of idioms to the following:

First: Idioms are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners. Native  speakers  tend  to  use  simple,  concrete, everyday vocabualry when they address second language learners.

Second: Idioms vary in formality from slang and  colloquialisms to those which can be  used in formal situations. If learners try to rely on their first language to  help them use them in  their  second language, they will be successful in only a very few instances. In  most cases this strategy will produce an incorrect and often comical form .

Third: Many second language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate  them  to  the "other  expressions" section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises for learning them.

In  an  article on the use of idioms by Russian students, Kabakchy [3] pinpointed  one  factor  responsible for learning idioms which is how accessible they are  to  students. According  to  Kabakchy idioms can be classified into four groups. First, idioms which have exact Russian counterparts, and these are  the easiest; second, idioms which have semantic counterparts in Russian  but are differently worded;  third, idioms  which have no counterparts in Russian, although their meaning  can be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents. These are easier than  those in group two where language interference can be expected; fourth, idioms which have no counterparts  in Russian and their meaning can't be derived from the conjoined meaning of their  constituents, and these are the most difficult ones.

Irujo [4] investigated whether second language  learners use knowledge of their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in  the second language. Subjects were  12 Venezuelan  advanced learners of English. Results showed identical idioms were  the easiest to comprehend and produce, while similar idioms were comprehended almost as well but showed interference from Spanish. The study also showed that the most difficult idioms to  comprehend and produce were the different idioms which showed less interference than similar idioms.

Awwad [5] offers a framework  that predicts degrees of difficulty of translating an idiom  from one  language  into another. This framework, we feel, is useful not only to  translators, but also to foreign language teachers. Following are

# The Acquisition of Idioms: Transfer or What?

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**Abstract.** The acquisition of idioms has thus far been a neglected variable in the EFL environment. Learner's poor competence of English idioms can be attributed to the fact the study of lexis in general and idioms in particular was relegated to a minor position in contrast to syntax which received a paramount attention in both the structural and T.G.G paradigms. Overlooking the teaching of English idioms has resulted in student's lack of comprehension and in improper use of these idioms by both intermediate and advanced EFL learners. The problem manifests itself even more in translation, where some translators tend to use non-idiomatic expressions because of their lack of knowledge of these idioms and because of transfer from $L_1$.

This study aims to find out to what extent English major students have mastered English idioms. For this purpose a 45- item test (15 identical, 15 similar and 15 different) was developed by the researchers. Learners were later asked to translate the idioms from Arabic into English. The sample of the study consisted of 60 students, 30 of them enrolled in the M.A. translation program and the others are English seniors. It also aims to find out whether the type of idioms makes a difference as to the accuracy of translating them from Arabic into English. Finally, findings of the study will be reported and discussed in light of the interference theory and recommendations will be made for proper learning of English idioms.

## Introduction

Although not much has been written on conventionalized language forms, especially idioms, this does not de-emphasize their merit and importance in everyday communication. The use of idioms and idiomatic English are both characteristic of advanced EFL learners. It seems that due attention is not given to the learning of idioms, and students' competence in these forms needs to the developed further not only on the recognition level but also on the production level. In his article on idioms McPartland [1] states the important role idioms play in second language learning. He asserts that every language learner needs to develop competence in them since they are used by native speakers in spoken and written mode.