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## **NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS' USE OF ENGLISH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS: A SYNTACTIC AND PRAGMATIC STUDY**

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### **١. Introduction**

Non-native speakers of English often lack the ability to understand and produce English idiomatic expressions appropriately and in an adequate amount. This adequate and appropriate use of idiomatic expressions is common in the average native speakers daily life and thus considered to be a distinctive feature which characterizes English native speakers (Dixon, ١٩٥١: ٣) cited in (Al-Lami, ٢٠٠٦: ١).

This study aims to assess and analyze the native and non-native speakers competence and use of the English idiomatic expressions. Also, it aims at showing that idiomatic use is highly needed in the teaching materials taught to the non-native speakers. Idiomatic expressions should be taught to such students, and particularly the common ones that are frequently used because they are so significant in the process of communication

This study hypothesizes the following:

- ١- The native speakers use idiomatic expressions spontaneously and daily whereas non-native speakers use them scarcely.
- ٢- Thenon-nativespeakersencounterproblemsin comprehending and producing the idiomatic expressions. Such problems may be attributed to some syntactic and pragmatic reasons.
- ٣- Some non-native speakers are not proficient enough when they directly encounter idiomatic expressions which may reflect some deficits in their educational backgrounds.

The procedures used in this study are as follows:

- ١- Giving a theoretical background on idioms and idiomatic expressions in the perspective of form and meaning. i.e.: syntax and pragmatics.
- ٢- Investigating through written tests how native speakers comprehend and produce idiomatic expressions compared to the non-native speakers.
- ٣- Analyzing the results of the test to reach at the appropriate conclusions and recommendations

It is hoped that this study would be a contribution to a better realization of the importance of idiomatic use in achieving a better proficiency of the target language, i.e. English for the non-native speakers of English who are learners, teachers, translators and users of English at their own.

## ٢. LITERATURE REVIEW

### ٢.١. *Introduction*

Fromkin et al. (٢٠٠٣:٢٠٥) states that "knowing a language includes knowing the morphemes, simple words, compound words, and their meaning." This requires, among other things "knowing fixed phrases, consisting of more than one word, with meanings that cannot be inferred from the meanings of the individual words." To know a language, one must be familiar with the idiomatic expressions used within that language. Being a speaker of English or specialized in studies concerned with the English language one must recognize, as such, such expressions that are used in the English language to be considered knowledgeable enough in English. Therefore, it is a lack of competence for the foreign language learner or non-native speaker if s/he were not to use idiomatic expressions while communicating whether in ordinary speech or during academic speaking or writing. This is due to the high

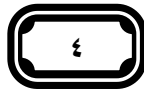
importance and significance of idiomatic expressions in the English language.

## ٢.٢. *Definitions of Idiomatic Expressions*

Strassler (١٩٨٢: ١٣) indicates that an idiom is considered a part of speech peculiar to a people or country, i.e., peculiar to their own language or tongue. Whereas, Crystal (٢٠٠٣: ٢٢٥) defines 'Idiomatic Expressions' as a term that refers to a sequence of words which are semantically and syntactically constrained, as such they function as a single unit. From the point of view of semantics, the meanings of the individual words that constitute an idiom does not produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. From the point of view of syntax, the words do not allow variability as found in other contexts. For example: 'it's raining cats and dogs' does not allow 'it's raining a cat and a dog' or 'it's raining dogs and cats'. Some linguists view idioms as readymade utterances and the alternative term to idioms is 'habitual collocations'.

O'Dell & McCarthy (٢٠١٠: ٦) further add that an idiomatic expression is a fixed combination of words, which carries a meaning that is usually difficult to guess or figure out from the meaning of each individual word within the expression. So, for example, if one says 'I put my foot in it yesterday and asked my teacher if she was married'. If the hearer did not know the meaning of the idiom 'put my foot in it' then s/he would often be unable to guess that it carries the meaning 'saying something accidentally which upsets or embarrasses someone'. This is because the expression carries a non-literal or idiomatic meaning, which is uneasy to figure out from the constituent words.

It is worthy to mention here that O'Dell & McCarthy's definition of the term 'idiom' is what will be mostly adopted throughout this study.



### ٢.٣. *The Types of Idiomatic Expressions*

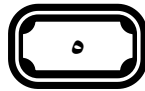
Hockett (١٩٥٨: ٣١٠-٨) cited in Strassler (١٩٨٢: ٢٧) mentions six different types of idiomatic expressions. He lists the following:

١. Substitutes: which include personal pronouns and numerals. Hockett indicates that the pronoun 'he', for example, has a new idiomatic value in new contexts because it refers to different persons. He also views that 'I, you, and he' refer to the same idiom if they refer to the same person. The same goes to numerals, according to Hockett, for example:

- (a). How old are you? Three
- (b). What's the time? Three
- (c). What page is that on? Three

So, Hockett considers 'three' in the examples above as three different idioms because they can be shifted to refer to different language items.

٢. Proper Names are also dealt with in a similar way. So, in naming a person or a place, we are creating new idioms, because, for example, 'George' and 'Elizabeth' can resemble or denote a wide range of different persons. However, Strassler points that there is an error with this definition by Hockett. The error is that Hockett includes in this definition abstract nouns also, such as 'liberty' and 'happiness', while in actual practice, these abstract nouns are found to be inapplicable to the term 'idiom' because they cannot be used to denote shifted language elements or different labeled language items.
٣. Abbreviations, where the part is used to refer to the whole. For example, letters are used to stand for a name such as 'UNESCO' or using the first syllable of a polylexemic word such as 'eco' for 'economics'. Also the use of half-quotations, such as 'to be or not to be...' and zero anaphora 'You take



the red cloth and I'll take the yellow'. According to Hockett all of these abbreviations are 'idiomatic'

٤. English Phrasal Compounds, where 'White House' is an example of idiomaticity.
٥. Figures of Speech, such as homonymy, synonymy and polysemy, which are according to Hockett idiomatic examples. Cowie (٢٠٠٩: ٢٥) defines 'homonymy' as two or more words with the same spelling and sound but having different meanings. For example, the word 'race' referring to the exact meaning of the action 'running' and having another meaning which is 'the nation of a people'. Added to that, Cowie defines 'polysemy' is when a the same word has various different meanings. For example, 'mate' referring to a number of various meanings which are 'a friend or fellow worker', 'British general form of address', and 'a partner in marriage'.
٦. Slang expressions.

O'Dell & McCarthy (٢٠١٠: ٢٢-٣٢) lists similes, binomials, proverbs, euphemisms, clichés and fixed statements as examples of individual types of idioms as well as adding idioms from other languages as another example of idiom types. Similes are defined as expressions that compare two things and which always include the words 'as' or 'like'. Similes are used to make user's spoken or written language more colorful and make comparisons more powerful. For example, 'My sister is as thin as a rake' meaning 'extremely thin' or 'Her skin is as smooth as silk' meaning 'extremely smooth' or 'My new dress fits like a glove' meaning 'fits extremely well'. Similes are learned as whole phrases they are often not possible to change the words within the simile expression. For example, it is not possible or accurate to say 'thin as a stick' or 'thin as a pole'. However, where change of words within a simile is possible usually the

meaning of that simile also changes. For example, 'My mouth was as dry as bone.' differs in meaning from the simile used in this following example 'Her presentation was as dry as dust and we were all bored'. The first simile within these two examples carries the meaning 'extremely dry/ or thirsty' while the next example or simile carries the meaning 'extremely boring'.

However, in this study the concentration is on the most frequent type of these expressions which is 'idioms' and 'idiomatic expressions'.

#### ٢.٤. *Features of Idiomatic Expressions*

Wright (١٩٩٩: ٧) highlights that idiomatic expressions carry these two basic features: they are fixed, recognizable by the native speakers and you are inapplicable to make them up by yourself. The second feature is that idioms contain metaphorical language that is non-literal. These two features are the two basic ones according to Wright. As for example, 'piles' is used literally in 'Piles of rubbish are all over the place' while it is used metaphorically or idiomatically in 'she's got piles of money'.

O'Dell & McCarthy (٢٠١٠: ٦) show idioms to be a sort of formulaic language as one feature of idiomatic expressions. So, similar to wright, they include idioms being formulaic, that is 'fixed expressions' as one feature. They say that learning idioms and understanding them as units rather than as single or individual words is considered their formulaic language feature. Idioms have a feature of being based upon everyday ideas and things, as for example: ' Me and my friend just don't see eye to eye' and are quite informal. Having a fixed word order that cannot change in any way is another feature of idiomatic expressions that is recalled by O'Dell & McCarthy. For example, one cannot say 'sound and safe' instead of the actual expression, which is 'safe and sound'.

Ayto (٢٠٠٩: preface) lists 'semantic opaqueness' as a feature of idiomatic expressions. The other feature he lists is that the component words of these expressions are firmly fixed and there is, in most cases, little way of changing them. So, unlike non-idiomatic phrases, idioms do not have grammatical possibilities. For example, verbal idioms cannot be passivized. For example, you can say 'John kicked the bucket' but not 'The bucket was kicked by John'. Also, key words within an idiomatic expression cannot be changed or substituted. So, the expression 'rare as hen's teeth' can be altered into 'scarce as hen's teeth' or 'rare like hen's teeth' but it cannot be changed into 'rare as chickens' teeth'.

### ***٢.٥. Importance of Idiomatic Expressions to Language Users***

Idioms include all areas of life. Idioms include medical areas, there are color idioms, such as 'a black look' or 'be in the black', food idioms 'piece of cake', business idioms, money idioms, animal idioms and body idioms, such as 'armed to teeth' meaning 'heavily armed with deadly weapons'. (Maftonn and Mazloomi, ٢٠٠٩:١-٢٢٥)

Idioms or idiomatic expressions are used in formal, informal speech and in writing. They are a part of media, standard speech in business and an essential element in education. Idiomatic expressions are part of the average native speakers vocabulary. They are an important part of native speakers language and considered to be mutually shared knowledge among English native speakers. Thus it is important for the non-native speakers of English to be acquainted to the use of idiomatic expressions because it is an important part of their mastery of the English language. Idiomatic use is believed to broaden peoples' comprehension and understanding in all the linguistic aspects of life. Idiomatic use is believed to increase

peoples' manipulation of language. As a result, idiomatic use ought to be a part of the second-language learners (L<sub>2</sub>) vocabulary. Students of English who effectively communicate using idiomatic expressions show a better understanding of English and they have an ability to "communicate on a deeper level of the language'. (Ambrose, ٢٠٠٨: ١٨٠)

L<sub>2</sub> students can gain more vocabulary through the use of idiomatic expressions, gain a better understanding of the language, achieve more proficiency while using the L<sub>2</sub> or second language and sound more like native speakers because idiomatic usage is considered more natural. As it is stated by Laflin quoted by Ambrose (٢٠٠٨: ١٨٣) "if you keep an open mind and play your cards right, your proficiency in English will soon be something to crow about". It is necessary, therefore, that L<sub>2</sub> learners should be acquainted with the use of idiomatic expressions.

Many language specialists pinpoint that knowledge of idioms, that is the ability to comprehend and use them appropriately and adequately is extremely important and considered to be as an indicator of L<sub>2</sub> fluency and a sign of L<sub>2</sub> communicative competence. The ability to produce and comprehend idioms is termed as "figurative competence". Figurative competence, or the sufficient knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in a second/foreign language requires certain skills and includes the ability to produce and use idioms when engaging in communication, whether spoken or written. Thus adequate idiom knowledge leads to better L<sub>2</sub> fluency making second/foreign language learners more L<sub>2</sub> proficient. (Andreou and Galantomos, ٢٠٠٨: ١٨-٢٠)



### ٣. SYNTACTIC AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF IDIOMS

Going back through history, the interest of linguists has been on the formal side of language, that is the focus and concentration was based on the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic part of language rather than on its functional, i.e., pragmatic side. The manipulation of the speaker and language user of the language communicated was not focused on the knowledge of pragmatics which has a great deal to do with the production and understanding of utterances. As pragmatics is defined by Stranzy (٢٠٠٥: ٨٦٩) cited by Al-Jumaily (٢٠١١: ٥) as the 'relationship between signs and their users'.

Fromkin et al. (٢٠٠٣: ٢٠٦-٢٠٧) specifies that idioms have a structure that is similar to ordinary phrases. However, they differ in that they are frozen in form and do not allow change in word order. In other words, they do not accept other word combinations. For example, 'He put his foot in his mouth' carries the same structure as 'He put his watch in his pocket'. Nevertheless, some idioms are composed of words that are movable.

#### ٣.١ *Syntactic Forms of Idiomatic Expressions*

Tallerman (١٩٩٨:١) mentions that syntax refers to sentence construction and to the syntactic side of the language. On the other hand the grammar of the language, according to Tallerman, includes its syntax, its sound system, its organization and so on.

Syntax traditionally refers to the study of the rules that govern the way in which words are joined to form sentences in a language. Alternatively, it is defined as the study of the rules that govern the arrangement of sentence sequences (avoiding the use of the concept 'word'). (Crystal, ٢٠٠٣: ٤٥١)

Idiomatic Expressions require agreement, which has its features, which are gender, number and person. Gender agreement refers to masculine agreeing with masculine and feminine agreeing with feminine. Number agreement refers to singular and plural, for example 'a new car' (singular) and 'new cars' (plural). Person refers to the three persons, where 'I take', 'you take', and 's/he takes'. (Spencer et. al., ٢٠٠١: ١٩٣-١٩٤).

Cowie et.al. (١٩٨٣: xi) state that idiomatic expressions are categorized under two major syntactic forms, phrase idioms and clause idioms. Both these two major headings enclose several sub categories. Cowie et.al. (ibid: xi) exemplifies the most common clause idioms, as listed below:

١. Verb + Complement. For example 'go berserk'.
٢. Verb + Direct Object. For example 'ease somebody's conscience/mind'.
٣. Verb + Direct Object + Complement. For example 'paint the town red'.
٤. Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object. For example 'do somebody credit'.
٥. Verb + Direct Object + Adjunct. For example 'take something amiss'.

The most common phrase patterns are exemplified by the examples below:

١. Noun Phrase. For example 'a crashing bore'.
٢. Adjective Phrase. For example 'free with one's money'
٣. Prepositional Phrase. For example 'in the nick of time'
٤. Adverbial Phrase. For example 'as often as not'.

### ٣.٢ *Pragmatic Aspects of Idiomatic Expressions*

Pragmatics, in modern linguistics, refers to the study of language from the view of its users, especially of the language choices they make, language constraints the users face when

interacting, and language choice effects on other interlocutors while communicating. (Crystal, ٢٠٠٣: ٣٦٤)

Pragmatics is defined by Yule (١٩٩٦: ١٣٣) as "the study of speaker meaning as distinct from word or sentence meaning. Yule (ibid: ٣) gives a wider definition to pragmatics as the study of communicated speech rather than what is said. That is, pragmatics is the study of communicated meaning and the analysis of what is meant by people while communicating during a conversation. Thus, pragmatics is the study of the speaker's meaning.

### ٣.٣ *Idiomatic Expressions and Speech Acts*

Speech acts, as defined by Fromkin et al. (٢٠٠٣:٥٩٥), are the actions or intents achieved by the speaker when using language in context. Speech acts further refer to the meaning that is inferred by hearers. For example, when someone utters 'There is a bear behind you', what is intended or said is to 'warn' the hearer in certain contexts but in other contexts it just may be a 'statement of fact' and nothing more. Speech acts are defined by Yule (١٩٩٦: ١٣٤) as "An action performed by the use of an utterance to communicate".

Speech Act theory by Austin refers to the idea that the speakers when communicating are doing something rather than reporting something. Strassler (١٩٨٢: ١٢٦ -١٢٨) mentions that Speech Act Theory can be extended to idiomatic expressions. For example, 'you were grinding your own axe' reports the same event as 'you were trying to gain personal profit' but, according to Strassler, the speaker in both sentences is not performing the same act. In the first example, the speaker is just making a statement about gaining personal profit. Whereas, in the second example the speaker is making a statement and establishing a social relationship with the hearer. Not every speaker is able to

use idiomatic expressions and this use depends on the social relation between the speaker and listener.

Fromkin et al. (٢٠٠٣: ٢١٤) points out that language is used to do things like making promises, issuing warning, swearing testimony or offering congratulations. The theory of speech acts by Austin describes how this is done. When saying, for instance 'I warn you there is a snake in the closet', one is not only saying something or just stating a fact but actually 'warning' the hearer or hearers. Verbs such as 'warn', 'promise' and 'bet' are performative verbs that are used in a sentence to do something extra and above the statement. These sentences are known as performative sentences. Since "every utterance is some kind of speech act."

### ٣.٤ *Idiomatic Expressions and Culture*

Ward Goodenough (١٩٥٧) cited in Hudson (١٩٩٦:٧١) defines culture as socially acquired knowledge. He specifies that culture is "what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage." In other words, culture is a peoples' generally learned knowledge. As Hudson further indicates, such definition includes language as a part of a peoples' culture in which language is "also taken to be a kind of knowledge."

Idiomatic Expressions carry many cultural values that are found embedded in them. For example, cultural beliefs in the future and that it is better, generated from the belief in progress. The value that more is better generated from the belief in accumulation of goods and wage inflammation. The cultural belief in equality, nonetheless because in reality things are not found equal, one finds conflicts among these cultural values and as such conflicts in the idiomatic expressions that are associated with them. (Lakoff and Johnson, ٢٠٠٣: ٢٢-٢٣)

## ٤. DATA ANALYSIS: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF TEST RESULTS

The knowledge of idiomatic expressions is culture-bound. There is a difference between native English speakers knowledge and awareness of idioms and non-native speakers knowledge of the same idioms. to verify the above information, the researcher conducts a test. The test consists of idiomatic expression, fifteen within the first question, fifteen within the second question and ten in the final question. Subjects are asked to underline the idiomatic phrase in each sentence, identify the meaning of these idiomatic expressions and to clarify how familiar they are with these idioms. subjects are also asked to explain whether it was the syntactic or pragmatic aspects of the idioms that assisted them to recognize the appropriate idiom and its meaning. The test was distributed among native English speakers and non-native English speakers of different educational backgrounds to compare between native and non-native knowledge of idiomatic expressions.

### ٤.١ *Test Objectives*

١. Comparing between native English speakers' scores and non-native English speakers results to study the differences in both native and non-native abilities in recognizing the appropriate and accurate meaning of idiomatic expressions.
٢. Studying whether the hypothesis that native speakers are more capable at recognizing and distinguishing idiomatic meaning accurately is justifiable or not.
٣. Studying reasons and causes for such a difference in both native and non-native aptitudes in idiomatic knowledge.
٤. Suggesting solutions for such problematic issues.

### ٤.٢ *The Results*

The data present in the test has been taken from 'Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms' by John Ayto (٢٠٠٩). The idioms

used in the test have been selected to show the differences between native speakers ability to recognize such idiomatic expressions, their ability to arrive at the accurate meanings and the manner in which they were able to guess the idiomatic expressions appropriate meanings. Such results are compared to the non-native speakers ability to recognize and arrive at accurate and appropriate meanings of idioms. In addition, the manner in which they do so whether pragmatic aspects are helpful or syntactic aspects. Twelve native speakers from England have been asked to answer the test. Six native speaker testees are Bachelor degree graduates and the other six native speakers are secondary school graduates. The second sample of testees resemble twelve non-native speakers. The twelve non-native speakers are chosen to sample six carriers of Ph.D. Degrees in the English language and linguistics and six non-native speakers carrying an M.A. in the English language and linguistics. The six non-native Ph.D. and six M.A. carriers are further chosen to sample two from each specialization in Literature, Linguistics, and Methodology.

Six testees from Tikreet University, one testee from Baghdad University and three testees from various Lebanese Universities have been questioned within the non-native speakers' test. Native speakers whom were questioned were high-school graduates as well as bachelor degree holders. Non-native speakers whom have been questioned within this test used in the study have been Master degree holders as well as Ph.D. holders of English specialized Arabic native speakers. The difference here in the educational degree was chosen to balance between native and non-native abilities and control of the English language and try to balance between both testees (natives and non-natives) aptitude and capabilities. The test constitutes of three parts or three main questions. The first and

second part are composed of fifteen multiple choice questions aimed at questioning the testees abilities at identifying the appropriate idiom meaning. The second part also adds the questioning of the testees familiarity with the idioms used within the test, whether the testees are familiar, quite familiar or unfamiliar. The third and final part or question is composed of ten sub-questions with the request to underline the appropriate idiom and questions the testees basis of choice in choice of idiom. i.e., the testee when choosing to underline the idiom based their choice on syntactic or pragmatic aspects. The first and second question make up a sum of thirty marks each and the final part takes forty marks to make up a sum of a hundred points as a total mark for the whole test.

The tables below show the results for both of the subjects (Native speakers (See Appendix A) and Non-native speakers)

<b>Native-Native Speakers of English</b>					
<b>Specialization</b>	<b>Testee Number</b>	<b>Total Score</b>	<b>Question One Score</b>	<b>Question Two Score</b>	<b>Question Three Score</b>
<b>PH.D. - Literature</b>	١.	٧١%	١٨	٢١	٣٢
	٢.	٤٧%	١٨	١٩	١٠
<b>PH.D. - Linguistics</b>	١.	٥١%	١٨	١٩	١٤
	٢.	٦٣%	١٤	١٩	٣٠
<b>PH.D. - Methodology</b>	١.	٦٢%	١٨	١٢	٣٢

	٢.	٣٤%	١٠	٤	٢٠
<b>M.A. - Literature</b>	١.	٦٥%	١٤	١٩	٣٢
	٢.	٥٨%	٢٠	١٣	٢٥
<b>M.A. - Linguistics</b>	١.	٤٧%	١٦	٦	٢٥
	٢.	٥٥%	١٤	١٥	٢٦
<b>M.A. - Methodology</b>	١.	٣٤%	١٦	٧	١١
	٢.	٢٥%	١٠	٣	١٢

**Table ١: The Results according to the Specialization of Non-Native English Speakers**

<b>Native Speakers of English</b>					
<b>Specialization</b>	<b>Testee Number</b>	<b>Total Score</b>	<b>Question One</b>	<b>Question Two</b>	<b>Question Three</b>
<b>Bachelors' Degree Graduates</b>	١.	٦١%	١٨	٢٤	١٩
	٢.	٦٢%	٢٠	٢٣	١٩



	٣.	٦٦%	٢٠	٢٦	٢٠
	٤.	٦٤%	٢٠	٢٤	٢٠
	٥.	٦٣%	٢٠	٢٣	١٩
	٦.	٦٤%	١٨	٢٦	٢٠
<b>Secondary School Graduates</b>	١.	٦٦%	٢٢	٢٤	٢٠
	٢.	٦١%	١٨	٢٤	١٩
	٣.	٦٣%	١٨	٢٦	١٩
	٤.	٦٦%	٢٠	٢٦	٢٠
	٥.	٦٠%	١٨	٢٤	١٨
	٦.	٦٢%	١٨	٢٤	٢٠

**Table ٢: The Results according to the Specialization of  
Native English Speakers**

### ٤.٣ Discussion

Table (١) represents the scores of non-native English speakers of an Arabic background with a Ph.D. and M.A. in the English Language and Linguistics. Table (٢) represents the scores of the native speakers of English holding a Secondary school degree and Bachelors' degree in various specializations, from Engineering to Computer Science, and so on. The comparison between the native English speakers' scores and

non-native English speakers scores show that native English speakers are relatively better at answering the questions regarding idiomatic expression. In other words, native speakers holding a lesser degree than Arabic Ph.D. and M.A graduates in the English language and linguistics are more capable at recognizing idiomatic meanings. However, the average scores, here, within this table are not much of a difference. The reasonable argument is that the native speakers left part three of the test sample unanswered or only partly answered the question by only identifying the idiomatic expression leaving the rest of the questions of part three unanswered which made them receive a lesser score than expected or deserved.

According to the test, the cultural background of Arab testees influences their responses to the meaning of idiomatic expressions. For example, all non-native speakers of English except one referred to the meaning of the idiom 'Looked me in the eye' to mean 'looked at me directly to convince me that she was telling the truth' affected by the Arabic culture of the same sentence, where 'looking someone in the eye' is intended to convince others of her/his sincerity and honesty. While all the native speakers got this answer correct by giving the appropriate meaning to the idiom which is 'look at someone directly without showing any emotions'. As can be seen, culture has an influence on subjects ability to recognize the appropriate meanings of idiomatic expressions. Also familiarity of idioms has an influence on the testees' realization of meaning, where logically speaking familiar idioms are recognized more than unfamiliar ones by both the native and non-native speakers. That is, even the non-native speakers cannot identify the meaning of idioms with which they are unfamiliar, similar to the non-native speakers in this area.

The Arab testees whom are the non-native subjects in this study are more able to identify idiom meaning based on the pragmatic aspects of these idioms more than their ability to recognize meaning depending on syntactic aspects. This can be attributed to pragmatics which deals with the speakers' intended meaning. So, according to the maxims of conversation, especially the maxim of relation the subjects expect that the idiom within the sentence is intended to be relevant and the speaker who uses such an idiom attempts to communicate with optimal relevance. As such, they attempt to figure out the meaning of an idiom from the rest of the sentence and suggest a relevant interpretation that explains the meaning of the rest of the sentence. So, when the subject attempts to explain the meaning of the idiomatic expression 'have a go at someone' used in the sentence 'Look the chairman is having a go at someone' s/he assumes relevance and expects the idiom to mean 'criticizing someone strongly without good reason' (See Appendix A) .

However, one cannot rely as much on syntactic aspects of idiomatic expressions because relying on syntactic aspects does not help in realizing the speaker's intended meaning as much as pragmatic aspects which all revolve around intended meaning. Pragmatics is involved with context. So, by depending on the context, the testee is more capable of retrieving and figuring the meaning of sentences within the relevant context than sentences that are used out of context. As such, figuring the meaning of idiomatic expressions used in sentences that clarify meaning enables or assists the subjects to realize and figure out the appropriate meaning of the idiom used within that sentence. For instance, figuring the meaning of the idiom 'get your feet wet' used in sentence (١١) of question one 'The teacher advised George to stop being a lazy person and to try and get his feet

wet' by relying on the context 'teacher' and 'lazy', one can figure the meaning of the idiom to mean 'start doing something' and so on. So, even though idioms are not compositional, one can figure out meaning and guess the meaning of some idiomatic expression based on context, the maxim of relevance, guessing metaphorical meaning based on previous knowledge, etc.

Moreover, it is more difficult to figure idiomatic meaning based on syntactic aspects because the syntax of idioms is not regular. That is idiomatic expressions do not follow the normal rules of syntax and are syntactically irregular. This prohibits the subjects from recognizing meaning depending on the syntax of idioms only. So, the subject best arrives at accurate idiom meaning by analyzing and decoding the idiom and its parts in order to comprehend and understand its meaning. So, by analyzing the sentence 'look the chairman is having a go at someone' based on cases where a chairman has a go at someone, one may suggest the meaning 'criticize someone without good reason'.

The features of idiomatic expressions also help or hinder from grasping the meaning. Analyzable idioms, in which the meaning is retrieved from analyzing the literal meaning of its words are found easier to figure out. That is transparency of idioms helps in figuring out the accurate and relevant meaning, such as 'go under the knife' in sentence (١٣) 'She will go under the knife tomorrow' to mean 'Be operated on in surgery', where the constituent words help testees guess the appropriate meaning, 'under' and 'knife'. There are opaque idioms; however, where it is difficult to figure out meaning from the composed words with the idiomatic expressions, such as 'open the floodgates' where it is hard to guess the meaning to refer to 'allowing free expression of emotions,...'. Whereas, 'stop dragging your feet' is transparent and allows testees to suggest

meaning based on its composing words. As such they figured out meaning easily and arrived at its relevant meaning 'acting slowly because you lack eagerness and interest' as in sentence (١٠) in part one. (See Appendix A).

## ٥. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCHES

### ٥.١ *General Conclusions*

The current study has generally reached the following conclusions:

١. Idiomatic expressions are culturally-bound and are related to historical backgrounds.
٢. Idiomatic expression have certain features. They resist syntactic variation, their meaning cannot be retrieved from the meanings of the sum of words that compose them, and so on.
٣. There are many types to idiomatic expression, some are pure idioms, some may be phrasal verbs and so on.
٤. Idiomatic expression have a figurative meaning that is different from the literal meanings of its composing words within the expression.
٥. Idiomatic expressions have a relation with context and their meanings are found to be easier to figure out when used in context.
٦. Some non-native speakers may imprecisely guess a different meaning to idiomatic expressions effected by their own cultural background.

### ٥.٢ *Recommendations*

١. Idiomatic expressions are used on a daily basis by native English speakers and that is why idiomatic expressions ought to be included in EFL teaching materials and should not be neglected.

٢. English student need to be taught about the culture of English speakers and cultural differences as well as differences in culturally-bound knowledge ought to be given notice in English language classrooms.
٣. Exposure to native speaker communication through actual contact with native English speakers should be attempted.
٤. Attempts to increase student communicative practice should be regarded and increased.
٥. Concentration on pragmatic competence, speaker intended meaning and context should be given attention and noticed.
٦. Exposing students and the English language learners to idioms and idiomatic expressions to try and familiarize English learners with such important expressions ought to taken at hand.

### ٥.٣ *Suggestions for Further Research*

١. A theoretical study could be carried out to investigate the relation between speech acts and idiomatic expressions, especially illocutionary speech acts.
٢. A study could be done to study frequent idiomatic expressions and those used on a daily basis. This is to investigate the relation between frequency of idiomatic expression, their familiarity to non-native Iraqi English learners and learners' recognition to such idioms compared to infrequent idioms.
٣. A study could be carried out to study frequently used idiomatic expressions by native English speakers.

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(Appendix A)

**TEST**

**Name:** .....

**Certificate:** .....

**Major (specialization):** .....

**Place of Work/study:** .....

Dear Sir/ Madam,

This is a test dedicated to check your ability to recognize the uses of idiomatic expressions. We hope you cooperate with us so as to achieve the requirements of the study entitled "Native and Nonnative Speakers' Use of English Idiomatic Expressions: A Syntactic and Pragmatic Study". Thank You.

**PART ١**

Please read the following idiomatic expressions and select the appropriate meaning it carries.

١. Sarah looked me in the eye.
  - a) Looked at me directly without showing any emotions.
  - b) Looked at me directly to convince me that she was telling the truth.
  - c) Looked at me directly to convince me that she was telling the truth when in fact she was lying
  - d) Looked at me directly although she preferred to avoid my eyes
٢. You should try to find your own feet
  - a) Gain experience and confidence in a new situation
  - b) Discover and make use of one's abilities
  - c) Become able to act by oneself independently
  - d) Achieve a settled outlook and purpose in life
٣. Don't just waste time sitting on the fence
  - a) Not being able to make up your mind

- b) Not making any choices between two opposing possibilities because they may harm your position
  - c) Not making any choices between two opposing possibilities in order to delay a continuous process
  - d) Not telling one's opinion in order not to take sides
٤. You need to have a field day
- a) Enjoy yourself by doing something that gives you great pleasure
  - b) Participate in some special occasion
  - c) Take advantage of the current situation that seems profitable for others also
  - d) Take advantage of a situation that is difficult or upsetting for others.
٥. He/she is flying the flag
- a) Stating his/her opinion clearly
  - b) Openly supporting someone
  - c) Representing a group, country, party at some special occasion
  - d) To attend a meeting or event just to show people that you have attended
٦. Throughout this event, we shall open the floodgates
- a) Allow free expression of emotions, criticism or activities that have been prevented.
  - b) Release a great force of destruction or rebellion held under control
  - c) Cause many people to do a particular thing they had not been able to do previously
٧. Look, the chairman is having a go at someone
- a) Criticizing someone strongly without good reason
  - b) Attacking someone physically
  - c) Use or try something after someone else has done it first



- d) Try to stop a criminal from doing or escaping from crime.
٨. You should try to go out on a limb
- Not to be afraid of risk taking
  - Be put in a weak situation without any support
  - Intentionally do something risky that puts you in a weak situation
  - Be put in a risky situation without any people present
٩. John is going against the grain with this one
- Going against general custom and natural tendency
  - Conflicting with his own ideas and principles and therefore is difficult to accept
  - Intentionally doing something that is disapproved of
  - Unintentionally doing something that is disapproved of.
١٠. Get a move on, you are dragging your feet.
- Acting slowly because you lack interest or eagerness
  - Refusing to do something because it is laborious
  - Delay making a decision that is important to others to cause them problems
  - Delay making a decision important to others to annoy them only.
١١. The teacher advised George to stop being a lazy person and to try and get his feet wet.
- Get into water
  - Walk in the room
  - Start doing something
  - Help me doing this
١٢. In black and white, you are no longer the chairman.
- The black list
  - Looks black and white
  - In between
  - Officially

١٣. She will go under the knife tomorrow.  
a) Breath one's last breath  
b) Draw one's blood  
c) Fall ill  
d) Be operated on in surgery
١٤. I adore my cousin, we always see eye to eye.  
a) Hold the same opinion  
b) Very eager to look at  
c) Have good taste in  
d) looks with great happiness
١٥. This test doesn't bother me. It's a piece of cake  
a) A task easily accomplished  
b) Not easily accomplished  
c) A task that puts you in trouble  
d) A task that makes you very happy

#### PART ٢.

Please write the meaning of the idioms in the table below (paraphrase their meaning) and please tick how familiar you are with these idiomatic expressions.

Idiom	Meaning	Familiarity with the Idiom		
		I am unfamiliar with it and have never heard it before	I am quite familiar with it and relatively know it	I am familiar with this idiom and have frequently heard it before
١. Be a devil				
٢. Die like a dog				
٣. Under her thumb				
٤. Head over heels in love				
٥. Pull one's leg				
٦. Pay an arm and a leg for something				

٧. A needle in a haystack				
٨. Born yesterday				
٩. He calls a spade a spade				
١٠. The black sheep				
١١. Sticky fingers				
١٢. Put the screws on				
١٣. Not a snowball's chance in hell				
١٤. Get a grip				
١٥. He dug his own grave				

PART ٢:

Please fill in the table below with the required information.

Sentence	Underline the Idiom	What is the meaning of the idiom?	If you are certain that your meaning is accurate what assists you to recognize it? Is it the syntactic or the pragmatic aspect?
١. This political scandal brought the president to his knees			
٢. The pediatrician decided to put the injured animal to sleep.			
٣. Flex your muscles as			

much as you like, you don't threaten me.			
٤. She was left to pick up the pieces after her husband's bankruptcy			
٥. When an earthquake happens, one should sit tight hiding under a table.			
٦. You've made my day, it's a lovely present.			
٧. I'm blowing hot and cold on the idea of a trip to India this summer			
٨. Alan made a clean sweep during the tennis finals.			
٩. Enough! Beating your breast about the matter won't make things better			
١٠. She has the upper hand in her marriage.			

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