

## **The Performance of Iranian EFL Learners in Producing and Recognizing Idiom-Containing Sentences**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate how Iranian EFL learners performed in producing sentences containing idioms and whether they had any problems in producing such sentences. This query, subsequently, raised the question of whether idioms influenced the participants' grammaticality judgment on idiom-containing sentences. For this purpose, firstly, the writings of 24 learners were investigated for a period of one term and the problematic features of idioms were detected; proportionately, grammatical errors outnumbered the others. Secondly, 35 participants were tested on a 40-item grammaticality judgment test containing 10 items for each sentence type – with-idiom grammatical, with-idiom ungrammatical, without-idiom grammatical, and without-idiom ungrammatical sentences. Comparing the mean scores and the results of the paired-samples t-tests indicated that idiomaticity might influence the grammaticality judgment of EFL learners. Some implications of the research results are provided at the end.

**Keywords:** idiom, idiomatic expressions, problematic features, EFL learner, grammaticality judgment

## 1. Introduction

The use of language is a matter of choice. According to grammarians, language involves choice from “among many possibilities that are restricted only by whether they are good grammar or not” (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992, p. 53). On the other hand, there are a large number of semi-pre-constructed phrases, available to the language user. These phrases constitute single choices (Sinclair, 1991). One such pre-fabricated expression is idiom. In dealing with idioms, a foreign language (FL) user faces Hobson’s choice, as the idiom goes. That is to say, the language user is under restrictions in using idioms and has very little choice in substituting or changing the order of the individual words that make the idiom. With non-idiomatic standard English, the FL user does not face restrictions as such.

An idiom, according to the relevant entry in Macmillan English dictionary for advanced learners (Rundell & Fox, 2007), is “an expression whose meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words” (p. 710). For example, ‘to have your feet on the ground’ is an idiom meaning ‘to be sensible’. However, research in psycholinguistics (Gibbs, 1993) and in applied linguistics (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Kövecses & Szabo, 1996) has shown that many idioms are not as arbitrary as they are traditionally believed to be. In many cases, learners can actually use the lexical components of unfamiliar idioms rather successfully to “guess” their meaning.

In this paper, ‘idiom’ and ‘idiomatic expression’ are interchangeably used to refer to the same concept under study, as defined above in the preceding paragraph, for the sake of discussion. However, there might be other different interpretations, definitions, or differentiations between these two terms from different perspectives.

### 1.1 Significance of using idioms

Idiomatic expressions, frequently used by languages in the world, mostly have socio-cultural, historical, or political origins. Although many similar expressions can be found across languages, many more do not coincide

exactly in their linguistic or semantic meaning and use (see Laufer, 2000; Liontas, 2001; Zarei & Koosha, 2003).

Idiomatic usage is so common in English that it can be difficult to speak and write without using idioms (Seidl & McMordie, 1978). Since idioms are frequently utilized in spoken and written English, language learners must make an effort to master idioms, though complete mastery may be nearly impossible (Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986b; McCarthy, O’Keeffe, & Walsh, 2010).

An analysis by Pollio, Barlow, Fine, and Pollio (1977) found that “most English speakers utter...about 7,000 idioms per week” (p. 140). Then, mastery of a second language (L2) may indeed “depend in part on how well learners comprehend initially and produce eventually the idioms encountered in everyday language” (Cooper, 1999, p. 234). Thus, with regard to the studies reviewed, language learners may learn grammar and acquire sufficient vocabulary to communicate, but they cannot dispense with a working knowledge of such idiomatic expressions as *to put out*, *to get along*, *in a nutshell*, and hundreds of others. Without a knowledge of idiomatic expressions, language learners’ spoken and written English will remain stilted and foreign-sounding (Watson, 1998). Besides, the learners’ reading rate will be appreciably slower and their comprehension will suffer. Therefore, as Irujo (1986b) states, learning and teaching idioms must be regarded as an integral part of vocabulary learning and teaching.

Because English is so highly idiomatic and figurative, idiomatic expressions make up the heart of the language, giving it color, feeling, charm, and precision (Adkins, 1968). Idioms are generally a pervasive feature of many languages and English particularly seems to be rich in such multi-word lexemes (Anglin, 1993; Cornelia, 1999; Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990). Therefore, being competent in understanding and using idioms is in fact paramount to having a good command of the depth of vocabulary (Milton, 2009). Also, knowledge of idioms correlates highly with vocabulary breadth (McGavigan, 2009).

## 1.2 Fixedness of idioms

One characteristic or criterion of idiomatic language is 'fixedness': the degree to which an idiom 'is frozen as a sequence of words' (Moon, 1997, p. 44). When an expression violates the syntactic rules of contemporary English, we very probably conclude that it is an idiom. Consider the definite article in *kick the bucket*. It has the function of indicating that an item has already been mentioned. In this idiom, the condition of using a definite article has not been fulfilled (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2005). Therefore, we conclude that it is an idiom. As another example, passive constructions cannot be formed on idioms; the expression *have other fish to fry* means *to have something to do that is more important or profitable*. As a result, it could not be used as *the other fish is to be fried*.

Carter, Goddard, Reah, Sanger, and Bowring (2001) provide some examples of erroneous translations into English by people for whom English is not a first language. The following examples have been taken from their work:

1. On the menu of a Swiss restaurant: *Our wines leave you nothing to hope for*.
2. On the door of a Moscow hotel room: If this is your first visit to the USSR, *you are welcome to it*.

In the first example, 'hope' is synonymous with 'desire'. Unfortunately, 'leaves nothing to be desired' means the opposite of 'nothing to hope for'. A translator, not fluent in English and not working with a thesaurus, could easily fall into trap. Likewise, in the second example, 'you are welcome' and 'you are welcome to it' have more or less opposite meanings. An inexperienced user of the language would have no way of knowing this (pp. 92-3). The two examples of erroneous translations into English, presented above, might be relevant since they illustrate how the presence of an idiom in a sentence might influence the production of sentences by EFL learners or even might sometimes alter their intended meanings.

### 1.3 Grammar and tense

Linguists, according to Roberts (1999), look at *grammar* as an object of study that is usually considered synonymous with inflection and syntax, which together determine how words combine into sentences. Syntax has to do with the sequence and occurrence of words in sentences, and inflection with the ‘shape’ that words take as determined by grammatical rules. English is not highly inflected, but there are instances in which the concept becomes evident. For example, *I go, you go, we go*, and *they go* contrast with: *he/she/it goes....*

Roberts (1999) goes on to say that “inflection cannot be ignored when determining the grammaticality of a sentence” (p. 144). To give an example, (standard) English requires ‘agreement’ between subject and verb, so that a sentence like *\*She go to work by train*, though well formed in sequence, is ungrammatical because of the absence of inflection. Therefore, inflection shows that the subject, *she*, and the verb, *go*, ‘belong together’, or agree. However, grammar, as a sequence of inflection and syntax, is considered “more narrowly by today’s linguists than in the past, and is separated from questions of style or rhetoric” (Roberts, 1999, p. 144).

According to Gramley and Pätzold (1992), tense is the obligatory category of the verb in the finite VP (verb phrase). All the verbs of the language except the modals – *can, might, should, etc* – have an inflectional (s) in the third person present singular, such as *he studies*, but not *\*he shoulds study*. It serves to mark the subject and the predicator as belonging together through concord or agreement in person and number – grammatical, notional, and by proximity.

There is little doubt that “tense is related to time. However, the relationship is definitely not one-to-one” (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992, p. 142). Furthermore, tenses might have different functions in terms of referring to or describing the time of an action or state. For instance, a sentence with *future tense* might refer to *present*, or a sentence with *present progressive tense* might refer to future, and so on. The present research does not tackle these issues, however. It merely focuses on tense

in terms of the realization of time or “the relationship between the form of the verb and the time of the action or state it describes” (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p. 376), i.e. what we face in grammar books under the name of past tense, present tense, present progressive, and the like.

#### **1.4 Empirical evidence on learning idioms**

Because of the unpredictability of figurative meaning, idioms are a stumbling block and present a learning problem for L2/FL learners (Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986a; Lontas, 2001; McCarthy, O’Keeffe, & Walsh, 2010). And, the other aspects of idioms, such as syntactic and lexical features, are as unpredictable as the figurative meaning. Likewise, they often create problems for the learners. Upon confronting such problems, some learners might consequently avoid using idioms altogether (Laufer, 2000).

Laufer (2000) investigated whether avoidance of L2 (English) idioms is determined by the degree of similarity to their L1 (Hebrew) counterparts. Four degrees of similarity were established through a three-dimensional framework for L1 and L2 comparison. The framework consisted of conceptual, formal, and distributional dimensions. The four degrees of idiom similarity between the languages included total formal similarity, partial formal similarity, lack of formal similarity, and distributional similarity. Distributional similarity includes idioms in English that did not have idiomatic counterparts in Hebrew. Fifty six university students majoring in English were tested on 20 items (5 per each type), elicited by a fill-in translation task. The totals of idiomatic and non-idiomatic responses were compared for each student as well as for each type. The results showed that L2 idioms were not avoided as a category. L2 proficiency was an avoidance-inducing factor. More specifically, the research showed that not all L2 idioms were avoided, especially if they had L1 equivalents or could be expressed in different words that were still idiomatic in L1. However, L2 learners avoided English idioms that were only partially translatable into L1 or that were non-idiomatic in L1.

Learners with different proficiency levels encounter some problems with their vocabulary including idioms – an integral part of the vocabulary – particularly in their production (Carter, 1998; Cooper, 1999; Laufer, 2000; McCarthy, O’Keeffe & Walsh, 2010). One reason for this might be that learners usually try to learn words individually without paying much attention to the interrelations formed by the words (Carter, 1998).

In a study on the probable effect of different contexts on learning idioms as well as the interaction between learning idioms in different contexts and EFL learners’ language proficiency, Atai and Akbarian (2003) found that exposure to idioms in multiple contexts would result in more effective learning of the different aspects of idioms, such as the syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic features, and so on.

In spite of the fact that language learners have serious problems with the production of idiomatically correct language, such complex lexemes have not usually been a major focus of study (Zarei & Koosha, 2003; Agustín Llach, 2011). Moreover, studies as to which aspect(s) of idioms might be more problematic for FL learners to master seem to be relatively scarce (see Agustín Llach, 2011). Therefore, this provided the motivation for launching a study to answer this question (the first objective of the study). The search for an appropriate answer to this question, in turn, led to seeking a response to our second research question. More specifically, the research questions are:

1. What are the problematic areas of using English idioms for Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant difference between the grammaticality judgment of the same EFL learners on the sentences containing idioms and those without idioms?

Each research question above comprised one separate phase, conducted in a different semester. Accordingly, we report each phase of the study separately.

### Phase 1

The first research question intends to answer what the problematic areas of using English idioms for Iranian EFL learners are. This section provides the methodology and the results of the first part of the study.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants in the first phase of this research included 24 male and female undergraduate students at the University of Qom, Iran. They were selected from a pool of 36 students who were majoring in teaching English as a foreign language. The students were given a TOEFL English language proficiency test. The (pBT) grammar and reading section of January 2004 version (*TOEFL ACTUAL TESTS*, 2005, pp. 25 – 35) was used. The respondents ( $n = 24$ ), falling within the range of two standard deviations above and two standard deviations below the mean of 65.5, were selected as the final sample of the participants for the study. This was done to exclude the respondents falling in the third standard deviation below and above the mean, i.e. extreme corners. Proficiency level was not a focal point in either of the two phases of the study. The respondents, however, had passed equal number of courses and were all majoring in teaching English as a foreign language. Moreover, four English instructors of the department considered them as equal in terms of English language proficiency.

### 2.2 Materials

The materials for the study consisted of the students' weekly free writings completed individually (to be considered and corrected by the instructor as part of their homework) and in pairs (for class work to be considered and corrected by all the class). The writing activity was part of the required activities of the course on expressions and idioms, namely 'Karborde Estelahat va Ta'birat'. We worked on two or three lessons containing a number of idioms from a book each session. The students were required to write a passage and use the idioms they learned in those



lessons from the book for the course. The task was intended to fix the meaning and structure of the idioms in the minds of the learners. Therefore, the materials included a whole-semester collection of the students' writings, including stories, jokes, memories, letters, and so on, containing idioms they had just learned. As mentioned above, the writings had been carried out individually or in pairs. This was roughly translated into 300 pages of students' free writing with an average of 250 printed words on each page. It is worth noting that the researcher was the same instructor in the two phases.

### 2.3 Procedure

The students' writings in a class, that was intended for teaching idiomatic expressions, were carefully investigated for a period of one semester. Pair work was dealt with in the classroom and the students' individual weekly free writings were collected, corrected, and returned to them to consider instructor's corrections. Then, the students were asked about the problematic areas of their writings and of why they had committed the mistakes and what they had meant to convey. Based on this feedback and the context, probable corrections were offered. Instances of sentences and pieces of writing, containing the problematic areas of idioms, were extracted from them and listed. The list showed that the students' problems could be classified into a number of categories. Appendix 1 shows a sample of each type of error.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The students' problems and errors were classified in three broad areas or categories, with some further subcategories. The classification, as offered, is intended as a guideline for properly dealing with idiomatic language in teaching. Much further investigation is needed to further establish the idea of classification as such. Agustín Llach (2011) describes a number of error taxonomies, especially lexical errors, and mentions a number of pitfalls or limitations with them. Therefore, we went for our own classification of the errors and avoided basing our

investigation onto any other taxonomy of errors by other researchers. Firstly, for Meara (1984, cited in Agustín Llach, 2011, p. 90) “taxonomies on their own have little predictive and explanatory power, and offer no explicit instructional solutions”. Furthermore, according to Agustín Llach, each taxonomy development has its own criteria, procedures, and decisions to meet the specific goals and needs of each researcher that might be different from those of others. Taxonomies are of post hoc nature, designed after the errors have been analyzed. This, therefore, makes it difficult to apply them to other collected data.

Table 1. Problems of Iranian learners with English idioms

	Semantic errors		Structural errors			Lexical errors	
	Semantic	Collocational	Word order, unusual combinations of words	Syntactic errors	Grammatical errors		Omission, addition and substitution of lexemes
					Intra-sentential	Inter-sentential	
Frequency of errors	40	2	43	14	38	11	5
% of errors	26.14	1.37	28.10	9.15	24.84	7.19	3.27
% of errors	27.45		69.28			3.27	

Total number of errors: 153

The boundaries between the categories in this classification might be less clear-cut and the categories might overlap. For example, some errors might belong to both word order and grammatical errors. Besides, there would most probably be errors of two or more categories simultaneously occurring in the use of an idiomatic expression in a sentence or a piece of writing. Therefore, the purpose in classifying and visualizing the errors

as such is to make the learners aware of the problems they are and/or might be facing, whether an idiomatic chunk is subject to one error or more. This sensitive and critical look at the learning and teaching of idioms might well help the FL learners in mastering the different aspects of 'the words in combination', i.e. idiomatic language.

As it is noticed in Table 1, semantic errors comprise a large portion of the errors detected by this small-scale study in phase one. This type of errors and the proportion of such errors is expected since learning to use idioms in the right context by the FL learners calls for time and steady work. That is, vocabulary acquisition in general and acquiring idioms in particular must be incremental (McCarthy, O'Keeffe, & Walsh, 2010; McGavigan, 2009; Milton, 20009; Schmitt, 2010). Thus, it is clearly impossible to gain immediate mastery of knowledge of idioms simultaneously. It takes time and effort (Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986b; Agustín Llach, 2011). Lexical errors, though comprising a small proportion of the total errors, are worth considering as well (Agustín Llach, 2011). Surprisingly enough, structural errors outnumber semantic ones more than doubly. That is, the number of structural errors is almost three times that of semantic errors. The results on structural errors might go well in line with the observations uttered by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005). This might suggest reconsidering the materials for teaching idioms in FL learning situations. As Atai and Akbarian (2003) suggest, providing exposure to idioms in multiple contexts might be one way of effectively learning the different aspects of idioms, such as those listed in the table above. And among the subcategories of the suggested classification, the grammatical errors are more in proportion to those observed in other subcategories. They comprise 32.03% of the total errors. The problems related to the grammar of the fixed expressions in general and the grammar of fixedness in idioms in particular are also confirmed by other researchers in the field (e.g. Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005; Zarei & Koosha, 2003). There were a large proportion of grammatical errors in our participants' free writings. This phenomenon provided the impetus for doing phase two of the study. However, not all

aspects of grammatical errors were investigated since they might not be accommodated within one single study. Only one small feature of grammar was selected for the study. Other researchers might be interested to cover the other aspects.

### **Phase 2**

The second phase of the research was conducted in the following semester (i.e. coming after the first phase). This phase was especially designed to narrow down the investigation to one particular area, i.e. grammar in sentences wherein idioms were embedded. To limit the scope of the study and to make it as manageable as possible in the second phase, only *tense* as one feature of grammar was selected to study.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Participants**

The participants in phase two of the research were 35 male and female undergraduate students at the University of Qom, Iran. These participants were juniors (5<sup>th</sup> semester), majoring in English literature. In fact, there were three groups of students at the university, each consisting of 28 or more students. In order to select a sample group with fairly similar language proficiency level, again the same TOEFL English language proficiency test was given to all the three groups of students. To select the final participants for the study, 35 students scoring two standard deviations above and two standard deviations below the mean of 67.4 were selected from among the students in the three groups. Language proficiency level was not a variable in this study. Therefore, the grammar and reading section of TOEFL test was given to the original pool of the prospective students to merely avoid including students falling at the two extremes in the study.

### **4.2 Materials**

The materials for this phase consisted of a grammaticality judgment test, containing four types of sentences. Each type included ten sentences.

After each sentence, we gave the participants a three-way choice of *OK*, *Not OK*, *Not sure*, avoiding words such as *grammatical* or *acceptable*. Altogether, the test had 40 sentences that were randomly ordered. The four stimulus sentence types are as follows:

1. Ten *grammatical* sentences in which idioms or idiomatic expressions had been used (henceforth *with-idiom grammatical* sentence).
2. Ten *ungrammatical* sentences in which idioms or idiomatic expressions had been used (henceforth *with-idiom ungrammatical* sentence).
3. Ten *grammatical* sentences in which idioms or any other idiomatic expressions had *not* been used (henceforth *without-idiom grammatical* sentence).
4. Ten *ungrammatical* sentences in which idioms or any other idiomatic expressions had *not* been used (henceforth *without-idiom ungrammatical* sentence).

We used these four types of sentences to avoid raising the awareness of the participants to the issue at stake. Had we used only two types (i.e. type two and four that contain the stimulus sentences under the study), the participants would have recognized the focus of the test and their performance would have been influenced as a result. Moreover, using the four types of sentences gives us more freedom of comparing the results together and highlighting the findings further. To distribute the four types of sentences above randomly and to prevent the participants from trying to detect any patterns in their distribution, the sentences were sorted alphabetically, based on the first letter of the first word beginning each sentence. See Appendix 2 for an example of each sentence type.

The 20 stimulus sentences in type two and four comprised our target items, while those in type one and three comprised our non-target items. Therefore, the main focus of the study was on target items while referencing non-target items. Paired-samples t-test was performed to

analyze the data for this reason. Pairing the other sentence types has also been done to emphasize our focal point indirectly. The objective, therefore, was not on non-target items.

The sentences included in the test item types were taken from *NTC's Practice Tests for the TOEFL* (Broukal & Nolan-Woods, 1992) as well as textbooks on teaching idioms authored by Adams and Kuder (1984) and Murphy (1989). Three colleagues in the field consistently confirmed the homogeneity level of all the sentences.

It is worth mentioning here that, in grammatical as well as ungrammatical sentences, the idioms selected for the purpose of the study contained verbs. Since the focus was on *tense*, the ungrammaticality of the sentences without idioms was also observed on the verbs. That is, the verbs in sentence type four were made ungrammatical.

### 4.3 Procedure

The participants received the test in one sitting and they were merely required to decide if the sentences were *OK* or *Not OK* or if they were *Not Sure* of the grammaticality of the sentences. *Not Sure* indicated that the participant did not know whether the sentence was *OK* or *Not OK*. The respondents just read the randomly distributed sentences one by one and circled around one of the three alternatives, i.e. *OK*, *NOT OK*, *NOT SURE*. The instructions given at the beginning of the test were made as clear as possible. Prior to the distribution of the test, an extra example of each of the sentence types was worked on in order to clarify how the participants were to answer the test. The respondents were told *not* to return to the same test item once they answered it since their first impression was of significance and relevance for the purpose of our research. To create consistency in the scores and to reduce the possible commitment of some of the participants and non-commitment of some others, the participants were all made aware of the research purpose of the exercise.

We observed strict procedures in scoring. Only positive evidence of knowledge was counted: *OK* or *Not OK* were treated as correct if they

were appropriate to the sentence type; *Not sure* and *No response* were counted as incorrect in addition to the overtly incorrect answers. Therefore, *OK* was the correct answer for the sentence types *with-idiom grammatical* and *without-idiom grammatical* whereas *Not Ok* was the correct response for sentence types *with-idiom ungrammatical* and *without-idiom ungrammatical*.

### 5. Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, the second research question aimed to answer whether the same EFL learners differed in their grammaticality judgment on the sentences containing idioms and the sentences without idioms. Table 2 displays the results on grammaticality judgment test for the participants based on the sentence types:

Table 2. Results of the participants based on the sentence types

	Sentence type	N	Min	Max	Mean	S D	Variance
1	With-idiom grammatical	35	3	10	6.49	1.853	3.434
2	With-idiom ungrammatical	35	0	9	3.77	2.059	4.240
3	Without-idiom grammatical	35	2	8	5.23	1.573	2.476
4	Without-idiom ungrammatical	35	2	9	5.14	2.116	4.479

The minimum score is zero and the maximum score is 10 on any type of the stimulus sentences. Therefore, the lowest mean is 3.77 whereas the highest mean is 6.49 out of 10. As expected, the respondents scored high on both types of without-idiom sentences (sentence types 3 and 4). Comparably, the mean in the without-idiom grammatical type of sentences (5.23) is a bit higher than the without-idiom ungrammatical ones (5.14). The slight difference between these two types of sentences might be ignored since a paired-samples t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the scores of the participants in the without-idiom grammatical type of sentences ( $M=5.23$ ,  $SD=1.573$ ) and their scores in the without-idiom ungrammatical ones [ $M=5.14$ ,  $SD=2.116$ ,  $t(34)=.209$ ,  $p>.836$ ]. The magnitude of the difference in the means was very small (eta squared=.001). However, as Table 2 reports,

the performance of the participants on the with-idiom grammatical sentences (6.49) is much higher in comparison with their performance on the with-idiom ungrammatical ones (3.77). In order to understand whether the mean difference above is statistically significant, a paired samples t-tests was conducted, showing that there was a statistically significant difference between the scores in the with-idiom grammatical sentences ( $M=6.49$ ,  $SD=1.853$ ) and the scores in the with-idiom ungrammatical ones [ $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=2.059$ ,  $t(34)=6.030$ ,  $p<.000$ ]. The eta squared statistic (.52) indicated a large effect size. Given the homogeneity of the items in the sentence types, as stated earlier, this difference might well be attributed to the embedding of idioms in the second type of sentences that the EFL learners, similar to young children and lower grade pupils (Wallach & Miller, 1988), might find a bit hard to digest. Ungrammaticality plus the embedding of idioms in such sentences might have been a double burden to the language proficiency of the EFL learners at this level. This issue can also be observed in the mean difference between sentence types 2 and 4. The respondents scored much lower on with-idiom ungrammatical sentences (3.77) than without-idiom ungrammatical sentences (5.14). Likewise, a paired-samples t-test reported a statistically significant difference between the scores in with-idiom ungrammatical sentences ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=2.059$ ) and their scores in the without-idiom ungrammatical ones [ $M=5.14$ ,  $SD=2.116$ ,  $t(34)=3.525$ ,  $p<.001$ ]. The eta squared statistic (.27) indicated a medium effect size.

An interestingly different finding might be the high mean score of the respondents on the with-idiom grammatical type of sentences (6.49) standing above all the other means. It is even higher than the mean for the without-idiom grammatical type of sentences (5.23). A paired-samples t-test displayed a statistically significant difference between the scores in the with-idiom grammatical sentences ( $M=6.49$ ,  $SD=1.853$ ) and their scores in the without-idiom grammatical ones [ $M=5.23$ ,  $SD=1.573$ ,  $t(34)=3.510$ ,  $p<.001$ ]. The eta squared statistic (.27) indicated a medium effect size. Juxtaposing the mean scores for the first and the fourth types of sentences and applying the t-test also yielded similar results. Given the



latter two paired-samples t-tests, we can account for the high score of the participants on the first type of sentences and the resultant significant difference between the mean scores in the first type on the one hand and the third and the fourth type of sentences on the other, by suggesting that the difference can probably be attributed to the semantic fitness of the idioms in the context along with the grammaticality of the sentences in the first type (see Laufer, 2000; Lontas, 2001; Zarei & Koosha, 2003, since the results mostly correspond with their observations). The low performance of the participants on ungrammatical sentences embedded with idioms might be attributed to the presence of idioms. However, the participants performed well on grammatical and ungrammatical sentences without idioms.

All in all, the results show that idiomaticity or the use of idiomatic expressions in a sentence might be related to the performance of Iranian EFL learners in recognizing grammatical or ungrammatical sentences or more particularly in grammaticality judgment test. The learners were less able to distinguish the ungrammaticality of the sentences in which idioms had been embedded. Thus, the results obtained in the second phase of the study confirmed the findings in the first phase. This can be emphasized more in relation with the results of the first phase on grammatical errors motivating the second phase.

One wonders as to whether there might be a relationship between the findings in this study and what Wallach and Miller (1988) claim. They found out that although there might be some understanding or usage of a few easy-to-understand or transparent idioms by children under the age of six, significant progressive growth usually occurs in typical children when they are between six to ten years of age. If children learn idioms after they have built a good basis of grammar, then will EFL learners behave similarly? On that basis, one might accordingly suggest that the misapplication of grammatical rules by EFL learners in sentences with idioms or their weak performance on processing sentences containing idioms might be attributed to the presence of idioms in those sentences, especially at the early stages of language learning. As for vocabulary,

McGavigan (2009) suggests that we need a minimum level of vocabulary of about 3,000 words before idiom knowledge is able to develop. This might suggest that learners in L2 acquisition might behave like children in L1 acquisition (Clark, 2003). We need further studies to confirm this tentative conclusion.

There is, therefore, evidence that children learn idioms at a later stage, supposedly after the age of six. In a similar way, our research produces evidence, suggesting that FL learners might, likewise, face less difficulty learning idioms at a later stage of language learning process when they have a good command of the grammatical knowledge. They might have less difficulty understanding transparent idioms and applying grammar; opaque idioms in sentences embedded with idioms might create some trouble in using grammar for the beginning EFL language learners without a solid foundation in grammar.

As to the implications of the research, Swain (1996) has shown that 'pushed output' contributes to improving learners' grammar, and Joe (1995, 1998) has shown that original uses of words lead to retention of these words. Using these scholars' terminology and words, it is suggested, then, that if these two activities are adequately and thoughtfully combined in some exercises and tasks that are intended for learning and teaching vocabulary, the EFL learners might probably approach learning vocabulary in general, and idioms in particular, with more success and ease. As our regular and repeated class activity, this is exactly what we did in the first phase of the study, urging the learners to produce original sentences using idioms repeatedly. Furthermore, the results of this study might specifically be worthy of attention for material developers and FL teachers as well.

This study was limited in many respects. It is suggested, therefore, that the study be replicated with a wider scope in terms of grammar, the number of idiomatic expressions as well as degrees of being idiomatic, recognition and production type of tests, and with reference to different language proficiency levels for FL learners.

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## Appendix A

### ***Semantic errors:***

#### a. Semantic:

- \* ... Ali is a bit mama's boy, at the same time he has a green thumb, everything he did would be accomplished successfully.... (The idiom is normally used for having a natural ability for growing things not for doing other things easily)

#### b. Collocational:

- \* ...also, he was a yes-man ... and always tried to stand on his own two feet. (Being a yes-man does not go with standing on one's own two feet)
- \* At the first term, she had a roommate who was the real pattern of a mama's boy. (Wrongly used here for the girls, it is used for the boys.)

### ***Structural errors:***

#### a. Word order – Unusual combinations of words:

- \* He always stands on his feet, while I prefer to remain as a copycat. ("stand on his own two feet", the error might have been due to negative transfer from L1)
- \* This is a very bad manner that shows the one's Achilles' heel of them. (...their Achilles' heel.)

#### b. Syntactic errors:

- \* I really think you must find a middle ground and you must meet her halfway. (...find middle ground....)

#### c. Grammatical errors:

##### Intra-sentential grammatical errors:

- \* ... I was facing a problem. I explained my problem to the people in charge, but they point one's finger at someone else.... (...pointed their finger at someone else)

##### Inter-sentential grammatical errors:

- \* My brother hit the books when he studies. (hits the ....)

### ***Lexical errors:***

- \* Mina's parents always want her to help her brother a hand but she goofs off. (lend her brother a hand)

### Appendix B

1. With-idiom grammatical sentence: Linda gets depressed easily so her teacher treats her very carefully. He handles her with kid gloves.
2. With-idiom ungrammatical sentence: Paul and his wife is seeing eye to eye. Whatever Paul wants to do, his wife does too.
3. Without-idiom grammatical sentence: Children will walk at about the same age whether or not they are taught by their parents.
4. Without-idiom ungrammatical sentence: Farming now use 10 percent of the earth's land area to produce food.

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