

INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND UTILIZATION OF IDIOMS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH – A CASE STUDY AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This research, conducted at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University, aimed to explore students' perceptions of English idioms and the challenges they face in comprehending and using them in spoken English. The study involved 62 undergraduate students majoring in English, and data collection was carried out through a survey. The findings reveal that the majority of the fourth-year students of English recognize the importance and benefits of idioms in communication. However, these students find English idioms challenging due to several factors, including their figurative nature, limited exposure, and cultural or contextual differences. Additionally, the study identified specific obstacles to effective idiom usage, such as limited vocabulary, difficulty in selecting appropriate idiomatic expressions, and fear of using idioms incorrectly. These findings hold significance for teachers at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University, as they can utilize them to develop targeted and effective teaching methods that enhance students' comprehension and usage of idioms in spoken English.*

Keywords: *Perception, idioms, idiomatic expressions, comprehension, utilization.*

I. Introduction

Idioms (or *idiomatic expressions*) are an integral part of the English language, contributing to effective communication and language proficiency. These expressions, consisting of phrases with figurative meanings beyond their literal interpretation, infuse spoken language with color, depth, and authenticity, enabling individuals to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas in a concise and culturally relevant manner.

For non-native English speakers, mastering idiomatic expressions can be a challenging aspect of language learning. Understanding and utilizing these

expressions requires cultural awareness and contextual comprehension. Idiomatic expressions often have unique meanings that cannot be deduced from the individual words they comprise, making them particularly intriguing subjects of study.

This article aims to investigate students' perception and utilization of idiomatic expressions in spoken English. By exploring this area of language learning, we can gain valuable insights into how students perceive and interpret idiomatic expressions, the challenges they face when incorporating them into their speech, and the strategies they employ to enhance their idiomatic proficiency.

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The study was conducted at Hanoi Open University, involving fourth-year students of English. By focusing on this specific group, the research aims to address three key research questions:

1. How do senior students of English at HOU perceive the importance of idioms in achieving fluency and effective communication skills in spoken English?

2. What are the common challenges faced by senior students of English at HOU in comprehending and using idioms in spoken English?

3. What are the pedagogical implications for teaching idioms at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University?

II. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of idioms

Idioms play a crucial role in language and are commonly employed in a range of settings, such as casual conversations, formal discussions, and written texts. The existing body of literature incorporates definitions of idioms from multiple sources. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “idioms are groups of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own.” [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/idiomatic-expression>]. Nunberg [16] asserts that idioms are often displayed as semantic opacity, where meanings cannot be perceived literally by merely interpreting every single word. According to Crystal [6], idioms can be defined as a linguistic term used in the fields of grammar and lexicology. They refer to a sequence of words that have both semantic and often syntactic restrictions, causing them to function as a single unit. Richards and Schmidt [20] define an idiom as a phrase or expression that operates as a unity and whose meaning cannot be inferred from its individual components. Ghazala [7] regards idioms as fixed terms that

maintain a consistent form and meaning, lacking flexibility, and characterized by metaphorical and indirect language.

These definitions share a common perspective that an idiom’s meaning cannot be inferred from its individual components. In this research, an idiom is defined as an expression where its meaning cannot be deduced by examining its individual words. The definitions mentioned above indicate that the majority of idioms are inflexible, meaning they have predetermined forms and meanings that cannot be altered.

2.2. Typical features of idioms

Gibbs [9] and Cacciari and Tabossi [3] point out that idioms possess distinct syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features that contribute to their unique characteristics and usage. Syntactically, idioms exhibit a fixed structure, adhering to a specific word order and arrangement. Any deviation from this fixed structure can result in a loss or alteration of meaning. Semantically, idioms carry figurative meanings that differ from the literal interpretations of their constituent words. Rather than being compositional, the meaning of an idiom is conventionalized and arbitrary, understood through cultural and linguistic familiarity. Pragmatically, idioms heavily rely on context for interpretation. Factors such as the speaker’s intention, the listener’s background knowledge, and the discourse situation play a significant role in understanding an idiom’s intended meaning. Additionally, idiomatic expressions may exhibit sociolinguistic variation, reflecting regional dialects or cultural nuances.

2.3. The importance of idioms in spoken English

The significance of idiomatic expressions in spoken English lies in

their ability to convey meanings beyond literal interpretation. These commonly used phrases are deeply rooted in the cultural and social context of a language, which can pose challenges for non-native speakers in comprehension and usage. Studies, including those by Cieřlicka [5], have emphasized the importance of idiomatic expressions for achieving native-like fluency and effective communication skills. They contribute to the fluency and naturalness of spoken language (Nattinger & DeCarrico [15]), assisting non-native speakers in sounding more like native speakers by incorporating colloquial and culturally specific language. Idiomatic expressions aid in the seamless flow of conversation, reducing pauses or hesitations (Chen & Baker [4]). Moreover, they add expressiveness and creativity, enabling more vivid and engaging expression of ideas (Boers & Webb [2]), while also enriching language use and making speech more memorable (Pavlenko, 2011). Incorporating idioms allows for effective communication, as they convey messages with greater impact (Laufer & Girsai [12]). Additionally, idiomatic expressions are commonly used by native speakers in everyday conversations (Cieřlicka [5]), and familiarity with them enhances comprehension of native speakers and reduces misunderstandings (Boers & Lindstromberg [1]). Mastery of idiomatic expressions enables learners to interpret the intended meanings behind figurative language (Laufer & Waldman [13]).

2.4. Previous studies on the challenges encountered by EFL learners in comprehending and using idioms

Numerous research studies have been conducted on idioms, with their empirical discoveries being documented in a variety of sources such as textbooks, newspapers, journals, and research papers. The following section provides an explanation of the previous studies that are relevant to the comprehension and utilization of idioms among second language learners.

In a study, Swinney [22] investigated the processing of idiomatic expressions and examined how the context in which idioms appear affects their comprehension. It found that the context plays a significant role in facilitating access to the figurative meanings of idioms.

In another research, Gibbs & Nayak [8] conducted psycholinguistic studies on the syntactic behavior of idioms. The study examined how the syntactic structure of idioms affects their comprehension and highlighted the importance of considering the surrounding context in understanding idiomatic expressions.

Kurnia's [11] investigation on idiomatic expressions in speaking skills revealed that among the students, 13.89% of those classified as "excellent" demonstrated the highest proficiency in idiomatic expressions and speaking skills. The second-best group consisted of 77.78% of students classified as "good," while the remaining 8.33% fell under the "fair" category. From these results, the conclusion drawn was that students who have a better command of idiomatic expressions tend to speak English more naturally compared to those with less proficiency.

Phuong-Bao-Tran Nguyen and colleagues [19] conducted a study to explore the challenges faced by English-major students at a regional public university in southern Vietnam when learning idioms. The research findings indicate that students encounter difficulties in comprehending idiomatic expressions when they lack clear and familiar contexts. Additionally, the study reveals that the most commonly employed strategies by students include guessing the meaning of idioms, acquiring idioms through keywords, and learning from various sources, with a particular emphasis on media. The results highlight that guessing the implied meaning of idioms is the most frequently utilized strategy.

English language learners, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, often encounter difficulties

in comprehending and utilizing idiomatic expressions. These challenges arise due to the figurative nature of idioms, their cultural connotations, and the differences between the literal and intended meanings (Boers & Lindstromberg [1]; Pavlenko [17]). Such difficulties can hinder students' ability to express themselves naturally and understand native speakers in real-life conversations. Schmitt and McCarthy [21] emphasize that idiomatic expressions can be a source of confusion and misunderstanding for language learners, as they often have figurative meanings that cannot be understood through literal interpretation.

McCarthy and Carter [14] argue that idiomatic expressions are often associated with colloquial and informal language use, which can pose challenges for learners more accustomed to formal language structures. Pavlenko [17] emphasizes that idiomatic expressions are cultural markers, reflecting the values, beliefs, and cultural experiences of a community. Learners from different cultural backgrounds may find it challenging to understand idiomatic expressions without adequate knowledge of the culture in which they are used. Pawlak [18] highlights that a lack of exposure to authentic spoken English and the cultural context associated with idioms can make it challenging for learners to understand and use idiomatic expressions effectively.

III. The methodology

3.1. Context of the study

The study was conducted at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. At the time of the study, the participants had completed 7 out of 8 terms in their Bachelor Degree Program in English. Therefore, the participants were supposed to be in an advanced stage of their undergraduate studies, nearing the completion of their bachelor degree program. By this point, they would have acquired a significant amount of knowledge and skills in the English language through their coursework and academic experiences.

3.2. Research method

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the perception and usage of idioms among fourth-year English students at Hanoi Open University. By utilizing a quantitative methodology, the researchers aimed to gather statistical data and numerical information to analyze and understand the participants' perspectives and behaviors related to idiomatic expressions. Quantitative research involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to uncover patterns, correlations, and trends. In this study, the researchers employed a survey questionnaire to quantify the participants' perception and utilization of idioms. The use of a quantitative research approach allows for the systematic collection of data from a large sample size, which can provide a more representative understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

By employing a quantitative research approach in this study, the researchers aimed to obtain measurable data on how fourth-year English students at Hanoi Open University perceive and use idioms. The findings of the study would then be analyzed using statistical techniques to draw meaningful insights and contribute to the existing knowledge in the field of language learning and usage.

3.3. The participants

The participants in this study consisted of 62 individuals who were randomly selected from the fourth-year student population at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. These participants were chosen to represent a diverse and representative sample of students at an advanced stage of their undergraduate studies.

At the time of the study, the participants had completed a significant portion of their Bachelor Degree Program in English. Through their

coursework, these participants had been exposed to a wide range of English language content, including idiomatic expressions, throughout their academic journey. They were expected to possess a relatively high level of competence in understanding and using idiomatic language.

The selection of participants from the fourth-year student population at the Faculty of English ensures that the sample represents individuals who have dedicated several years to the study of English. This allows for insights into the challenges and strategies employed by students who have progressed significantly in their language learning journey.

3.4. Data collection instrument

This study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate the perception and utilization of idioms among fourth-year English students at Hanoi Open University. The aim was to gather numerical data and statistical information to gain insights into how these students perceive and use idiomatic expressions in their English language learning process.

Data collection was conducted through a survey questionnaire specifically designed for the study. The questionnaire consists of 13 questions, comprising both close-ended and open-ended items. The questions were carefully crafted to capture various aspects related to idioms and their usage.

The survey questionnaire was administered electronically via Google form (<https://forms.gle/isTqH1cX9DbHLLFR7>) to the sample of fourth-year English students at Hanoi Open University. The participants were provided with a set time frame to complete the questionnaire at their convenience.

The collected data were then subjected to statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics and inferential

analysis, to identify patterns, trends, and correlations. The quantitative data analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perception and utilization of idioms.

By utilizing a quantitative research approach and employing a well-designed survey questionnaire, this study sought to contribute to the existing knowledge on the perception and usage of idioms among fourth-year English students at Hanoi Open University. The findings of the study have the potential to inform language teaching practices and the development of instructional materials to enhance students' proficiency and competence in using idiomatic expressions in English communication.

IV. Results and discussion

4.1. Students' perceptions of English idioms

Results from the survey show that 88.5% of students are familiar with idiomatic expressions, with 72.1% being very familiar and 16.4% somewhat familiar. All students regard understanding idiomatic expressions as important to communication. Regarding the pros of using idioms in communication, the majority of respondents (65.6%) think it enhances fluency and naturalness, followed by increased understanding of native speakers and adding expressiveness to communication. The findings shed light on the positive perceptions and benefits associated with idioms among undergraduate students of English at HOU.

4.2. Challenges encountered by senior students of English in comprehending and utilizing idiomatic expressions

The results of the survey indicate the widespread difficulties that the students have when it comes to understanding idioms in conversational use. With almost all respondents (98.4 %) admitting to facing challenges, it is evident that idiomatic

expressions pose a significant obstacle for many students. One of the primary challenges identified by the respondents is the difficulty in deciphering the figurative meaning of idioms. Unlike literal language, idioms rely on metaphorical interpretations that may not be apparent. This can result in confusion and misinterpretation among learners. Another challenge mentioned by the students is the lack of exposure to the use of idioms. Idioms are often deeply rooted in a language's history and culture, making them challenging to grasp for non-native speakers who have not been exposed to idiomatic expressions in their daily lives. Cultural or contextual differences also emerged as a significant factor contributing to the challenges in understanding idioms among the participants.

The finding indicates that when it comes to using idioms, the majority of students identified three main difficulties: limited vocabulary, difficulty in choosing a fitting idiomatic expression, and fear of using idioms incorrectly. A high percentage of respondents (75%) indicating limited vocabulary as a challenge emphasizes the importance of vocabulary development as a fundamental aspect in their language learning. The finding that 66.7% of the students reported difficulty in choosing a fitting idiomatic expression suggests the need for explicit instructions on the meaning of idioms and their usage in given contexts. The survey also revealed that 55% of the students expressed their fear of using idioms incorrectly. This fear can hinder the students' confidence and willingness to actively engage with idiomatic expressions.

4.3. Some pedagogical implications for teaching English idioms at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University

The high percentage of participants (60.7%) favoring example uses of idioms in different contexts and sentences aligns with effective learning strategies. The students need to be provided with clear explanations of the meaning, context and example sentences in order to grasp

the meaning and usage of idiomatic expressions. By encountering idioms in various contexts, students can develop a better understanding of how idioms are used and apply them appropriately in different situations. This approach nurtures a natural and intuitive use of the language, fostering the students' overall language proficiency.

Results also show that active learning methods such as repeated practice and exposure, simulated and real-life practice, group discussions are the most popular methods believed to contribute to boosting confidence and using idioms effectively among the students.

Based on the findings, some suggested strategies for effective instructions of idioms can be given as follows:

- Apart from coursebooks, incorporate authentic materials such as podcasts, dialogues or videos that include idioms in natural and realistic contexts, helping the students understand how idioms are used in real-life conversations.

- Use listening exercises that include idiomatic expressions. After playing the audio recordings or videos, let the students discuss the idioms in terms of meaning, usage and context. Then encourage the students to use the idioms in their conversations.

- Provide explicit explanations: Explain the meaning and usage of idioms clearly. Discuss the literal meaning before explaining the figurative meaning. Use simple language and provide examples to ensure comprehension.

- Contextualize idioms: Discuss the situations or contexts in which particular idioms are commonly used. Emphasize that idioms are often informal and more suitable for casual conversations than formal settings.

- Engage students in role-plays and dialogues where they can practice using idioms. Provide them with specific scenarios and encourage them to use

idioms naturally in their conversations. This helps the students understand and use idioms properly in spoken English.

- Plan conversations activities such as discussions and debates where the students are required to incorporate idioms in their opinions or arguments. This provides them with opportunities to practice using idioms naturally in spoken English.

- Provide constructive feedback and error correction when the students use idioms incorrectly or inappropriately. This feedback supports their ongoing learning and development.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, this study explores how fourth year English majors at HOU perceive English idioms and the difficulties that they encounter in understanding and utilizing them in spoken English. The findings indicate that the students generally recognize the importance of idioms and perceive English idioms as challenging in language comprehension and utilization. Overall, the difficulties in understanding idioms arise from various factors, including the figurative nature of idioms, lack of exposure, and cultural or contextual differences. Regarding the obstacles to using idioms effectively, three key issues identified include limited vocabulary, difficulty in choosing a fitting idiomatic expression, and fear of using idioms incorrectly. These findings have important implications for teachers at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University to design targeted instructional approaches to boost the students' understanding and using idioms.

Future research can focus on exploring effective instructional approaches and strategies to enhance the comprehension and utilization of English idioms among students of English at Hanoi Open University. Investigating the impact of different pedagogical techniques can provide valuable insights for teachers at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ NHẬN THỨC VÀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG THÀNH NGỮ TRONG TIẾNG ANH GIAO TIẾP TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC MỞ HÀ NỘI

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện tại Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội, nhằm tìm hiểu về nhận thức của sinh viên về thành ngữ tiếng Anh và những thách thức mà họ gặp phải trong việc hiểu và sử dụng thành ngữ trong tiếng Anh giao tiếp. Nghiên cứu có sự tham gia của 62 sinh viên năm thứ tư chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu phục vụ nghiên cứu được thực hiện thông qua khảo sát. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy phần lớn sinh viên tham gia khảo sát nhận thức được tầm quan trọng và lợi ích của thành ngữ trong giao tiếp. Tuy nhiên, những sinh viên này gặp khó khăn trong việc hiểu thành ngữ do một số yếu tố như nghĩa ẩn dụ của thành ngữ, ít cơ hội tiếp xúc với thành ngữ và sự khác biệt về văn hóa. Bên cạnh đó, nghiên cứu còn xác định những trở ngại chính đối với việc sử dụng thành ngữ hiệu quả, bao gồm vốn từ vựng hạn chế, khó khăn trong việc lựa chọn thành ngữ phù hợp và lo ngại sử dụng thành ngữ không chính xác. Những phát hiện này có ý nghĩa quan trọng đối với giáo viên Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội trong việc phát triển các phương pháp giảng dạy hiệu quả nhằm nâng cao khả năng hiểu và sử dụng thành ngữ của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: nhận thức, thành ngữ, cụm từ mang nghĩa thành ngữ, hiểu, sử dụng.

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