Developing Idiomatic Competence in the ESOL Classroom: A Pragmatic Account

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Building on previous theoretical constructs and empirical findings on idioms, this article advances an integrated theoretical and methodological framework for developing idiomatic competence in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Beginning with a definition of the term *idiomatic competence*, the author then presents a framework of theory and pedagogy not to theorize research findings to date but to advocate for learning idioms in an explicit and systematic way befitting natural use in comprehending and producing idioms effectively and appropriately in actual context-sensitive social situations without violating the conventions of social appropriacy. Throughout the explication of this pragmatic account, a series of insights are offered to help readers reexamine their contexts of teaching and pedagogical practices. It is suggested that for idiom instruction to achieve social immediacy, that is, attain communicative reality and social relevance in everyday discourse, the conditions for optimal idiom learning need to be made compatible with and supportive of the way English language learners learn best. The author concludes with implications for practicing and testing idiomatic competence across the curriculum, even at the tertiary level, in a supportive environment that values active, real-life participation and engagement in English language learning both inside and outside the language class.
doi: 10.1002/tesj.230

From A to Z and every other idiom in between, idioms have their origins in the fabric of human communication. Peculiar to a language, these forms of expression—from the ancient to the most

recent—owe their creation to the inventive workings of human thought and language evolution. They posses extraordinary communicative effectiveness and rhetorical power yet convey complex realities and human behavior with the help of simple but colorful, and very powerful, figures of speech that are to a large extent frozen in time (Cutler, 1982). Each imageable-rich figure, in turn, conveys a meaning that cannot be deduced from the ordinary meanings of the words in it, that is, from the dictionary definitions of the individual words comprising it. The sum total of an idiom's individual parts as in *to + take + the + bull + by + the + horns* does not lead one to the figurative meaning of that idiom (to take decisive action in a difficult situation). Said simply, an idiom does not mean what it literally states. To infer its figurative meaning, reading between the lines becomes obligatory despite the blurred lines from time to time. Understanding this process of idiomatic transition has resulted in a great many empirical investigations and pedagogical discussions.

Despite all the emerging theoretical accounts of idioms to date, little attention has been paid to teaching and learning idioms in the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classroom, anecdotal evidence aside. Developing idiomatic competence among English language learners (ELLs) remains a formidable challenge still. Addressing this challenge, this article advances an integrated theoretical and methodological framework for developing *idiomatic competence* in the ESOL classroom and beyond. Central to this enterprise is the description of how the information presented herein can be translated into specific pedagogic propositions worth pursuing. To this end, I first present ESOL practitioners with valuable insights, which they can then use to reach curricular decisions befitting their particular classroom context. This provides a position from which the consequences of much research effort and interpretation may yet be clarified and translated into best teaching practices. Where appropriate, gaps in research efforts are appraised and discussed. Finally, I summarize the nature of the above into eleven evaluative measures in an effort to validate learners' concerted attempts at developing idiomatic competence, albeit in different frameworks and with different levels of success.

The overall aim of this article, therefore, is not to provide a unitary framework of theory and pedagogy, but rather to ponder the descriptive information deemed pertinent in testing the waters of said pragmatic account. Throughout, it will be argued that, as learners move through higher levels of education and proficiency, instruction must encourage students to learn idioms in a more explicit and systematic way than presently applied if they are to correctly develop idiomatic competence in the English language and culture.

IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE: PROLEGOMANA

Ever since Chomsky's (1965) competence–performance distinction first surfaced in the 1970s, linguists and researchers have labored to define the nature of language acquisition (see, e.g., Campbell & Wales, 1970; R. Ellis, 1985, 1994; Krashen, 1982). According to Canale and Swain (1980), *communicative competence* consists of four major components: (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) discourse competence, and (4) strategic competence.

By extension, *idiomatic competence*—the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort, so defined by Liontas (1999)—may be construed as belonging to *sociolinguistic competence* as offered by both Canale and Swain's (1980) and Bachman's (1990) framework of *language competence* (see also Hymes, 1972; Prabhu, 1987; Savignon, 1972; Widdowson, 1978). Barring a handful of notable metaphoric and figurative competence accounts (Cieślicka & Singleton, 2004; Danesi, 1992; Kecskes & Papp, 2000; Littlemore, 2001, 2010), the absence of an in-depth treatment of idiomatic competence in the professional literature of second language (SL) studies is rather surprising. Idioms, as opposed to metaphors, collocations, phrasal verbs, sayings, irony, sarcasm, lexical bundles, or formulaic/multiword sequences, remain underrepresented in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research. In the absence of firm empirical evidence, researchers instead refer to SL learners with such remarks as "could/should/

would/ought to," and the like. For example, Coulmas (1981, as cited in Cacciari, 1993) considered nonnative speakers working to make sense of idioms via a heuristic model. He posits that (emphases added)

> a possible and sensible assumption a non-native speaker *might make* is that any incomprehensible expression she or he *might run* across *could be* an idiom. He or she *can use* three possible sources of knowledge in order to reduce the range of possible meanings. . . . By using together all these sources, a non-native speaker *might arrive* at the idiomatic meaning "by inference" rather than "by instruction." This knowledge, coupled with an attention toward context, *can help* him or her to arrive at the meaning, or at least at the semantic domain to which the idiom belongs, although it will not be sufficient to tell when and how to use it appropriately. (p. 37)

One cannot entirely disagree with the position taken by Coulmas some 34 years ago, but it may yet be posited that instruction *can* and *does* play a vital role in the development of idiomatic competence in the classroom in that it can provide language learners at different levels of proficiency with long sequences of grade-appropriate, idiom-based instruction, underlying important knowledge of idiomaticity both in comprehension and production. Assumptions alone, however sensible, are not adequate explanations for pedagogical inquiry. Instruction must afford students ample opportunities to encounter idioms in their attempts to approximate, and hopefully master, the target language and culture. Relying solely on *inferences* a nonnative speaker "might make," "might run across," or even "might arrive at" is as counterproductive as putting the cart before the horse.

Central to this goal, these prefatory remarks aside, is the delineation of a viable framework of theory and pedagogy that gives some structure to the key issue it seeks to address: *the development of idiomatic competence*. It is offered here not to speculate on research findings to date but to scaffold future classroom applications and curricular evaluations. In the next section, attention is focused solely on the theoretical component of this framework.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE

To begin, it is worth noting that every time teachers make curricular decisions about idiom content, they are, in fact, making assumptions about how learners learn best. Becoming cognizant of these assumptions is a necessary first step toward critically examining their theoretical orientation in favor of, or against, the systematic teaching and learning of idioms across the curriculum, even at the tertiary level. In turn, such pensive examination helps teachers develop their own explicit ideas on how the kind of learners they are teaching acquire idioms, and ultimately achieve idiomatic competence in the English language and culture. This raising of awareness–consciousness is endeavored in the section that follows next.

What Is Idiomatic Competence?

According to Chomsky (1965), competence consists of mental representations of linguistic rules in the abstract. These rules constitute the speaker-hearer's internal grammar (the forms and structures of language), which is, in turn, implicit rather than explicit. Said implicitness is evident in the intuitions the speaker-hearer has about the grammaticality of a well-formed sentence in a language. Conversely, performance consists of the appropriate use of grammar in the comprehension and production of language.

Extending Chomsky's concepts into idioms, *idiomatic competence*, following Liontas (1999), includes knowledge the speaker-hearer has of what constitutes appropriate and accurate idiomatic language behavior in relation to particular communicative goals. That is, it includes both linguistic (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) and pragmatic (nonlinguistic, paralinguistic, sociolinguistic/functional, discourse, personal/world, intra/intercultural) knowledge. In turn, *idiomatic performance* consists of the actual use of these two types of knowledge in understanding and producing appropriate and accurate idiomatic conduct in diverse social contexts. Two conspicuously similar attributes of performance are involved here. *Idiomatic usage* makes evident the extent to which language users

demonstrate their knowledge of idiomaticity, whereas *idiomatic use* makes evident the extent to which language users demonstrate their ability to use their knowledge of idiomaticity for effective communication in actual social situations. The former can be studied by focusing attention on the extent to which learners have mastered the formal properties of the linguistic systems of idioms; the latter can be studied by examining the ways in which learners employ these properties to interpret and produce culturally appropriate meanings during the production of idiomatic phrases (see, e.g., Cacciari, Padovani, & Corradini, 2007; Caillies & Butcher, 2007; Cieślicka, 2002, 2010, 2015; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Katsarou, 2011; Vespignani, Canal, Molinaro, Fonda, & Cacciari, 2010).

Idiomatization. The relationship between idiomatic usage and idiomatic use is not simply linear. The latter is moderated by the learners' situation-specific learning experiences and, more importantly, by the learners' stage of idiomatic development. Liontas (1999) sees the development of idiomatic competence as the learners' move from the *declarative stage* (declarative idiomatic knowledge or receptive control) through the *associative stage* (controlled idiomatic knowledge or partial control) to the *autonomous stage* (automatic idiomatic knowledge or full control). To reach full control, learners will need to move from the declarative idiomatic knowledge through the controlled idiomatic knowledge to the automatic idiomatic knowledge.

However, to move from one stage or level of control to the next, learners will need to first achieve a fair degree of proceduralization through continuous exposure and systematic study. Expressed another way, declarative idiomatic knowledge becomes slowly proceduralized through organized practice that is embedded in authentic, meaningful interaction, leading to controlled idiomatic knowledge. In turn, controlled idiomatic knowledge can convert into automatic idiomatic knowledge qualitatively over time, as learners move through higher levels of education and proficiency.

And while it cannot be expected that exposure to idiomatic input alone will be sufficient for the development of idiomatic competence, prolonged intentional exposure combined with

structured opportunities for meaningful interactions and outputs can support language learning in general and idiom learning in particular. The goal is for learners to develop a multifaceted idiomatic knowledge system and employ that system efficiently and appropriately, with a minimum of effort, both in the comprehension and production of idioms. This proceduralization move from the declarative through the associative to the autonomous stage is seen as the *process of idiomatization* (Liontas, 1997, 1999).

The process of idiomatization can generally be defined as the process of becoming idiomatized to the target culture—the extent to which learners achieve native-like idiom-language norms and practices over time. The degree to which a learner becomes idiomatized determines the degree to which idiomatic competence is acquired. Said more precisely, there is a direct reciprocal relationship between the process of idiomatization and the degree of idiomatic competence acquired. Yet, becoming idiomatized—even in the classroom setting—is not just a matter of learning and recalling large corpora of idioms, lexical bundles, formulaic language, or collocations (Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, & Maynard, 2008; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nekrasova, 2009; Shin & Nation, 2008; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010; Wray, 2002) but, more so, of acquiring the metaphoric and figurative elements of a different ethnolinguistic community.

In a series of studies, Liontas (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2013, 2015) upholds that idiomatic competence is a dynamic, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon of language acquisition. The development of idiomatic competence is an arduous and cumbersome process that extends over many years. It is an essentially accumulative process and may depend crucially on the nature, type, and range of idioms being learned; the setting(s) in which the learning of idioms takes place; the individual learner and psychological factors; and the idiom-learning tasks learners are asked to perform. Indeed, the nature of the tasks may have a marked influence on learners' choice of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies in that it may predispose learners to use particular strategies to fulfill specific communicative intents (see here Nation & Webb's [2011]

experience, *shared*, *guided*, and *independent tasks*, pp. 636–643). In addition, the conditions for idiom learning must be made concrete. These include, but are not limited to, the type of instruction (implicit/explicit instruction) learners are offered in both formal and informal settings; the variety of idioms and amount of exposure (noticing) targeted; the learning environment of idiom presentation and practice (structured/random) created; the type of experiences (form-oriented/meaning oriented) learners encounter; the modalities, tools, and resources selected for idiom learning; the nature and extent of idiomatic input (naturalistic, interactive, artificial) learners receive while engaging in specific communicative tasks; and, finally, the learning outcomes and curricular goals (mere exposure, familiarity, mastery) engendered.

Unfortunately, idioms have received rather scant attention in SLA research. The research to date has not examined how idioms are learned over time, what the developmental patterns of idiom acquisition are, or how accurately learners of different levels of proficiency perform idioms (see Chiara Levorato, Nesi, & Cacciari, 2004; Stengers, Boers, Housen, & Eyckmans, 2011). To answer these concerns, it will be necessary to first explain how learners obtain information about L2 idioms and, more importantly, how learners discover which idioms serve which functions (Colston & O'Brien, 2000; Drew & Holt, 1998; Gibbs, 2002; Hussey & Katz, 2009; Wray & Perkins, 2000). The goal here should not be solely how learners acquire these functional aspects, as well as the structural and semantic aspects of language, but how they apply these aspects to express nonliteral meaning with minimum communicative effort; that is, how to employ specific idioms in the performance of specific functions such as

> (1) evaluation of people and situations; (2) conveyance of representations of the world in imagery; (3) signaling of congeniality and conflict; (4) recognition of (dis)agreement between interlocutors; (5) appraisals of manners, morals, behavior, and actions; (6) display of affective states (i.e., anger, happiness, joy, and grief); and (7) use of logic to make for coherence in topic and theme. This mastery is a prerequisite to both appropriate and accurate uses of idioms; it requires expanded and systematic idiom practice within a context of authentic language use. Over time, such systematic practice facilitates the development

> of *idiomatic competence*: a dynamic, complex and multifaceted phenomenon of language acquisition. (Liontas, 2008, p. 23)

Not only will learners have to master the functions idioms serve and the means for performing them but, more importantly, they will also have to learn when it is most appropriate to perform a particular idiomatic function and how to encode it for maximum rhetorical effect. They best acquire that tacit "native" skill through the process of learning *how to communicate in idioms* and *with idioms* in the target language. The ability to communicate both effectively and appropriately in context-sensitive situations without violating the conventions of social appropriacy is a requisite condition for successful idiom learning.

Idiom learning. It is hypothesized that the acquisition of idioms is qualitatively different when idioms are learned in a natural environment than when such learning takes place in a formal educational setting. In the former, subconscious informal native-like learning occurs, whereas in the latter conscious learning of idioms and their forms occurs, and greater attention emphasis is placed on mastery of *idiom matter* depending on subject and content area covered. Said another way, informal learning typically takes place in contexts where the input is not consciously structured. It involves implicit knowledge and the primary focus is on message conveyance. Formal learning, on the other hand, occurs in contexts where the idiomatic input is usually carefully organized. It is likely to involve at least some explicit knowledge of idiomaticity and the primary focus is on form (Laufer, 2005; Laufer & Girsai, 2008; Tabossi, Wolf, & Koterle, 2008). It remains an open question and subject to further investigation, however, as to whether the process of idiom acquisition is the same or different in naturalistic or classroom settings.

Respecting the latter, it is helpful to consider a number of separate but related questions: Which type of instruction best complements learners' idiom training? Which type of instruction should be emphasized: implicit instruction, where learners are asked to induce idiomatic functions from examples given to them; or explicit instruction, where learners are given the idiomatic

functions which they then practice using? Should idiomatic functions be presented in isolation or in conjunction with discourse examples?

To date, little research of this sort has actually been done (Alexander, 1987; Cornell, 1999; Correli, 2006; Dong, 2004; Irujo, 1986). Yet, the available literature seems to suggest that both first language (L1) and second language (L2) learners benefit from structured as opposed to a random presentation of idioms. Not only the amount of experience but also the type of experiences learners receive in the classroom affects levels of language proficiency attained. The goal here is to discover the optimal conditions for idiom learning. If instruction is extensive and carefully planned; tailored to the learners' proficiency levels, needs, and interests; and systematized in accordance with accepted pedagogic views on language and culture learning, then it is likely that such a focused instruction can potentially promote the development of idiomatic competence both in comprehension and production, as well as result in substantial gains in idiomatic accuracy. The increased levels of accuracy resulting from such intentional instruction may prove to be long-lasting indeed, provided idioms are not divorced from the communicative needs and authentic sociocultural contexts supporting their use. Above all, instruction of the sort envisaged here needs to be made compatible with and supportive of the way learners learn best by making conscious ad hoc instructional adjustments to individual learner differences as the need arises. In addition, instruction may prove most facilitative when it also matches the learners' learning capacities and preferences. Naturally, allowances will have to be made for variations in learners' learning styles, including their personalities, motivation, expectations, and sociocultural backgrounds, to name but the most important ones.

Consequently, formal instruction needs to take the form of consciousness-raising of idiomatic knowledge and be directed at such explicit knowledge (Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 2001; Picken, 2005). Consciousness-raising, on the one hand, need not involve production in that there is no immediate expectation that learners will be able to produce and use idioms appropriately in communicative output, only to formulate some kind of cognitive

representation of how idioms attain communicative reality and social relevance in everyday discourse. Practice, on the other hand, should be aimed at developing explicit knowledge of idioms and should require learners to display their comprehension of idiomatic input under real operating conditions. Providing opportunities for learners to produce target idioms in similar circumstances to those that prevail in normal communication between and among native speakers may well maximize the benefits derived from structured idiom training. What works best may be some form of combination between formal and informal instruction on idioms. Instruction of this sort is believed to aid the development of idiomatic competence in learners in general and SL learners in particular. A combined form-oriented and meaning-oriented idiom teaching is more beneficial than form-oriented teaching alone, especially if such instruction is linked with opportunities for natural exposure and meaningful idiomatic use.

Moreover, planned instruction needs to provide access to idiomatic language as used in the communicative exchange of meaning. Instruction on idioms and the functions they fulfill in communication can accelerate learning and may result in higher levels of idiomatic competence even if its effects are delayed at first. Instruction combined with structured opportunities to experience idioms in natural settings appears to produce the best results (Liontas, 1997, 2002e, 2006, 2013, 2015). Focusing learners' attention on the forms idioms may take and the meanings (conceptual, functional, social) they convey supports the notion that idioms can be mastered sufficiently if given proper attention in class. In turn, such focused instruction may have a notable effect on accuracy in both planned (controlled performance) and unplanned (spontaneous performance) idiom production. Therefore, attention to both form and meaning may work best.

An idiomatic form can be learned when the focus is on meaning through communication. The best way to facilitate the development of idiomatic competence is through the presentation and practice of a series of discrete idiomatic teaching points. Instruction needs to function as a trigger, or a "hook" of sorts, for subsequent noticing of idioms (selective attention) in the language input (Schmidt, 2001; Stickels & Schwartz, 1987). While this

attention may not result in acquisition of what is taught when it is taught, it may very well pave the way for later acquisition. In general, "conscious noticing" of idiom use, the forms idioms take, and the functions they serve in specific sociocultural contexts not only has the potential to enhance language learning, it can equally affect the quality of participation for different students at different proficiency levels. It also needs to provide learners with the required multimodal technological tools and print and media resources to help them recognize, comprehend, and interpret accurately such features in future idiomatic input (Herrera & White, 2010; Tiersky & Chernoff, 1993; Van Lacker Sidtis, 2003; Verspoor & Lowie, 2003).

Since the development of native-like idiomatic competence requires the memorization of a large set of formulaic chunks and patterns, it is critically important that learners are provided with copious opportunities to engage in interactive input. Simply stated, quality of interactive input is more important than quantity of noninteractive input. Similar to any other type of learning, it is hypothesized that input, shaped through reciprocal interaction, contributes directly and powerfully to idiom acquisition. This assumption is anchored in the belief that idiom acquisition is best facilitated when teachers and learners participate in spontaneous, meaningful interactions that are characteristic of natural learning. Such interactions are seen as dynamic socially transactive learning events because they encourage the development of natural interactive discourse between learners and teacher that places major emphasis on contextual support and equal participation in the negotiation of meaning (what is implicated by what was said and what was meant). The resulting interaction learners experience is believed to affect the idiom-processing mechanisms that impede or enhance the development of idiomatic competence.

For the development of idiomatic competence to proceed efficiently, there needs to be a congruity between the learners' preferred learning strategies and the type of instruction offered. As Prabhu (1987) has stated,

> the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language inputs or maximization of

> planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication. (p. 1)

While Prabhu's advice still has strong intuitive appeal, it is nevertheless less clear how teachers can create optimal conditions for learning idioms in the classroom and, furthermore, how learners are to perform specific idiomatic functions matching those used by native speakers for specific communicative purposes. What is clear, however, is that the pedagogic decisions of what idioms teachers teach and when (content, syllabus, curriculum), how they teach (method or approach preferred) those idioms, and the social interaction they encourage in their classrooms (cooperative/collaborative interaction, anxiety-free or anxiety-filled atmosphere), all have a direct bearing on the development of idiomatic competence, and on participant organization (whole class, group work, or individual work) and social and pedagogic goals (performance of idiomatic functions) realized.

Moreover, the pedagogic decisions teachers make also affect what (combination of) modalities (listening, speaking, reading, or writing) are involved and/or preferred in the learning process, the materials and tools employed (type, length, and source), and, finally, the language outcomes engendered (linguistic or communicative purposes). Whether or not learners will become capable of using their developing idiomatic knowledge system efficiently and aptly, and with a minimum effort, both in the comprehension and production of idioms, depends largely on the roles participants adopt, the nature and range of the learning tasks applied, and the kind of knowledge targeted.

How Is Idiomatic Competence Best Developed?

Although the systematic study of L2 idioms is still nascent, it is possible to identify a number of general propositions believed to facilitate the development of idiomatic competence. To begin, it will be important to take a close look at the variety of idioms and amount of exposure ELLs experience and how they process this information. Expressed differently, it will be important to ascertain the nature and extent of the idiomatic input made available to learners. This is best achieved by investigating the specific

linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, the stimuli learners are exposed to, and the type of feedback they receive. Determining both the stimuli made available to them and the type of feedback they receive can have a direct bearing on the developmental patterns of idiom acquisition, because such determinations provide additional insights into the nature of whether adequate positive reinforcement or correction is needed or whether feedback needs to be direct or indirect. If corrective feedback is indirect, it should be pointed out, because such feedback often supplies learners with added metalinguistic information.

This inevitably raises the thorny question of which idioms should be used for teaching purposes involving idiom frequency. Although it seems reasonable to assume that frequency is a major determinant in the acquisition of idioms, there is no research clearly demonstrating that this is so. Overall, there is little evidence to support the claim that idiom frequency affects idiom acquisition, but there is also little evidence to refute it. Perhaps the safest conclusion presently is that idiom frequency may serve as one confounding factor influencing idiom acquisition, often combining with other pragmatic factors and communicative purposes (N. Ellis, 2008; Liu, 2003, 2011; Martinez & Murphy, 2011; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012).

It is not unreasonable to postulate then that the development of idiomatic competence may be further constrained by individual learner factors (e.g., age, sex, social class, sociocultural background, motivation), and the knowledge used both in comprehension and production of L2 idioms. It is further posited that psychological factors (e.g., learning style, personality, and learners' attitudes and beliefs) influence learning outcomes and the level of idiomatic proficiency ultimately achieved. The resulting competence is, therefore, the result of a combination of factors. Both individual learner and psychological factors are important and contribute to differing degrees in different learners. These factors are important for both theory building in SLA research in general and for language pedagogy in particular. Unfortunately, here too, there has been very limited research to support these notions. Consequently, there is a pressing need for research to explore how these factors are brought about, and what effect, if

any, they have on the development of idiomatic competence, either individually or as a group.

This is best achieved by teachers helping learners explore their own preferences while also scaffolding their own teaching approach accordingly to suit the requirements of a particular idiom-learning task. This may be referred to as *idiom training.* Idiom training becomes meaningful if the idiom-learning tasks pose a reasonable challenge to the learners; that is, they are neither too difficult nor too easy. Said simply, the most meaningful idiom-learning tasks are those that are directly based on learners' communicative needs and interests. Time and again, interest in learning idioms is maximized if learners are able to determine their own learning objectives, chose their own ways of achieving these, and assess their own progress. Involving learners in decision making tends to lead to improved motivation, resulting in increased productivity. It also leads to a greater desire to excel and a more positive attitude to acquiring idioms in natural contexts.

Such attitude is best nurtured within an organized framework of instructional units displaying natural language use. Topics, therefore, cannot be arbitrary or trivial in nature. Rather, they need to be substantive and tailored to the learners' level of linguistic and psychological–emotional maturity. Learners need to engage in purposeful, real-life activities, tasks, and projects, not mind-numbing, fill-in-the-blank exercises or tedious collections of idioms devoid of communicative interest and personal investment. There also needs to be adequate selection of social interaction to merit prolonged participation, because learners benefit greatly from different types of structured interaction, especially interaction that encourages learners to make their developing knowledge of idioms explicit (Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007; Boers, Piquer Píriz, Stengers, & Eyckmans, 2009; Bortfeld, 2002; Lennon, 1998; McGinnis, 2002; Szczepaniak & Lew, 2011).

Idiom comprehension and production. A number of studies to date have revealed that production of L2 idioms—and even production of L1 idioms—is more challenging than mere comprehension or interpretation (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Cieślicka, 2006a, 2006b; Irujo, 1993; Laufer, 2000; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Littlemore, Chen, Koester, & Barnden, 2011; Siyanova-

Chanturia, Conklin, & Schmitt, 2011; Sprenger, Levelt, & Kempen, 2006). Whereas comprehension of a message can take place with limited syntactic analysis of the input, production forces learners to pay attention to the conceptual, functional, and social means of an expression. It may even encourage learners to move from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom-up) processing. Barring a handful of studies on the subject, little is currently known about how learners use contextualization cues cross-linguistically or how such cues facilitate the production of idioms by learners of different L1s. Nevertheless, the findings have emphasized the importance of providing learners with contextual cues supporting the meaning of various idiom types (Bortfeld, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2002; Kecskes, 2006; Liontas, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2003, 2007, 2015; Malt & Eiter, 2004; Nippold & Duthie, 2003). Such a provision is believed to result not only in better comprehension, but also in better retention of idioms. Given that the development of idiomatic competence is a laborious, cumbersome process extending over many years, ascertaining how idioms are acquired over time and, furthermore, how accurately learners of different proficiency levels produce idioms is of critical import. Investigations of this sort can proceed in three ways. One way is to examine whether learners' idiomatic performance changes over time. A second way is to examine idiom samples of learner language collected over a period of time. A third way is to conduct a mixed-methods analysis on the idiomatic data learners produce orally or in writing over a period of many months or even several years. The data can be linguistic, metalinguistic, or pragmatic in nature, or any combination of the above.

Role-plays, for example, provide learners with a prime description of a context calling for the performance of a particular illocutionary act (i.e., representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations) that is characterized further by a particular illocutionary force (e.g., asserting, promising, advising, excommunicating, exclaiming, inquiring, ordering, advising) to convey distinct messages of communicative import. The knowledge to perform distinct illocutionary acts, coupled with a speech act's *locution* (what was said), *illocution* (what was meant by what was said), and *perlocution* (the actual

effect of what happened as a result of what was said and what was meant), constitute a large part of one's idiomatic performance or idiomatic competence in use (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1976, 1979, 1982). The data collected from such role-plays, or speech acts, examined through the lens of Grice's (1968, 1975) *cooperative principle* and its maxims of *quantity*, *quality*, *relation*, and *manner*, provide additional information about learners' ability to construct appropriate idiomatic discourse contexts for the specific act under investigation, especially when such role-plays are audio- and/or videographed for subsequent transcription and analysis.

Ensuring that learners have sufficient opportunities to participate in discourse directed at the exchange of idiomatic information can provide the needed interactional conditions hypothesized to aid the attainment of idiomatic competence. Interaction also provides learners with the opportunity *to talk in the target language* both in structured and unstructured contexts, requiring learners to interact with the input that is interesting, relevant, and comprehensible. Learners may acquire idioms as a result of learning how to participate in idiomatic conversations. This entails both verbal and nonverbal communication and involves command of a host of culturally accepted norms and practices (i.e., the [un]conscious use of postures, gestures, movements, position, mannerisms, facial expressions, eye movement) by which various physical, mental, or emotional states, attitudes, and feelings are communicated nonverbally with others (Ibáñez et al., 2010; Kövecses, 2008; Wilson, 2006, 2010).

Indeed, it is the behaviors of interlocutors during interaction of how to use idioms properly and how to participate in idiomatic discourse efficiently, encompassing visual cues (kinesics, proxemics, haptics, chronemics, oculesics) and paralanguage/paralinguistic elements (voice quality, rate, pitch, volume, rhythm, intonation, stress), that idiomatic competence matures and communicative meaning is ultimately achieved. Having attained both descriptive and prescriptive knowledge of how to use and control idiomatic knowledge for communicating verbally and nonverbally between individuals, learners need to be pushed into producing idiomatic output that is equally concise, coherent, and

culturally appropriate to the communicative needs it seeks to address. In addition, learners also need to be affectively disposed to idiomatic input, including paralinguistic input, prior to cultivating a keen appreciation for the cultural values hidden within the idiomatic expressions themselves. To be motivated to learn how to attain idiom-language norms and practices befitting native-like effort over forms of expression believed to be "frozen in time" is to develop full idiomatic control of it, and the distinguishing mark of a competent speaker.

Looking ahead. Idiomatic competence, in all its nuances and perceived complexity, is clearly a fundamental aspect of language acquisition that needs further study and explication. It is probably premature to try to reach any firm conclusions about its optimal development at this time despite notable contributions by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Strässler (1982), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), Fernando (1996), Glucksberg (2001), Littlemore and Low (2006), Liu (2008), and Kecskes (2013) over the last three decades. Presently, there is a lack of hard information about what learners do when they acquire L2 idioms. Any explanation of idiom acquisition must also take into account what learners are trying to learn: idioms and the meanings they express within the functions realized. Clearly, if the study of idiomatic competence is to progress, it will need to examine written as well as spoken learner language. For this, longitudinal studies will be required in the years ahead.

In the meantime, however, the goal should be for teachers to begin critically examining their context of teaching; their beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes about idiom teaching; and, finally, their assumptions about how learners can best study and learn idioms naturally. It is further argued that, for ELLs to develop the idiomatic competence envisaged here, they will need, at a minimum, access to authentic, multimodal idiomatic input; structured opportunities to produce output exemplifying idiomatic use; and keen understanding of, and proficiency in, using idioms both effectively and efficiently in everyday communicative contexts, and as the need arises (Holmes & Moulton, 2005; Palmer & Brooks, 2004; Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007). A summary of the most expressive insights discussed heretofore is

provided in Table 1. Collectively, these insights epitomize the principles and practices of idiom teaching and learning.

Developing idiomatic competence in the ESOL classroom is irrefutably a goal worth pursuing. Avoiding the temptation to offer either definitive answers or one single "correct" account of how best to attain this goal, the methodological framework presented next is based on pragmatic suggestions that have withstood the test of time. These suggestions, while not exhaustive in nature, unite the theoretical propositions advanced herein and, in particular, the body of knowledge derived directly from this researcher's personal teaching experience with learners of second and foreign languages—from elementary school through adult education—over the last three decades. Because of space constraints, only a select eleven suggestions or evaluative measures are offered below. Couched within simple practicing/testing formats that are amenable to change, these time-tested, student-approved suggestions can be implemented, expanded, revised, and fine-tuned according to one's own pedagogical practice and professional expertise. Invariably, however, they empower our ELLs to practice and test their newly gained knowledge of idioms at their convenience and at their own learning pace and style. Such a framework is presented next.

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE

To be clear, a single, invariable one-size-fits-all method for developing idiomatic competence *does not exist*. Searching for the "right" method is as futile as chasing red herrings. Indeed, it is inconceivable that any single method could even ensure the optimal development of idiomatic competence. To suggest otherwise is as of yet empirically unfounded and pedagogically ill advised. So argued, the information presented below aims to bridge the gap between learning/acquiring idioms and comprehending/producing idioms. Accordingly, each practicing/testing format presented next is subdivided into ten distinct simple-to-complex and engaging exercises and one grand idiom tour. Displaying easy-to-understand headings and terse

TABLE 1. From Theory to Methodology: Principles and Practices of Idiom Teaching and Learning

Regarding idiomatic competence . . .

- *Idiomatic competence* is a dynamic, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon of language acquisition and the *process of idiomatization* an arduous, cumbersome, accumulative process that extends over many years.
- The *declarative*, *associative*, and *autonomous* stages of the idiomatization process are but three distinct stages of idiomatic knowledge control learners attain on their way to gaining full idiomatic control.
- *Idiomatic competence* and *idiomatic performance*, and by extension, *idiomatic usage* and *idiomatic use,* are not linear ends in themselves, but coherent organizing principles of the greater proceduralization process of idiomatization.
- The degree of proceduralization impacts the process of idiomatization.
- Development of native-like idiomatic competence requires memorization and culturally appropriate active use of a large set of formulaic chunks and patterns in actual social situations.

Regarding idiom learning . . .

- Idioms are best learned when they are taught in an explicit and systematic way across the curriculum as learners move through higher levels of education and proficiency.
- Decisions following analyses of local circumstances and needs continuously adjust classroom dynamics to address practical questions or concerns about idiom learning.
- Idiom learning attains personal meaning and satisfaction for learners if it is well organized across the curriculum, methodical in its implementation, and authentic in its communicative pursuits.
- Experiential idiom learning emboldens learner autonomy and intuitive heuristics.
- Pragmatic and conceptual, functional, social equivalence explorations enable comprehensive and eclectic idiom learning.
- Engaging and substantial communication enhances language awareness through exploration of equivalent or opposite idioms across several languages.
- Context-sensitive idiom communication heightens cultural consciousness and ensures social relevance through realistic, meaningful use.
- Prolonged intentional exposure to idioms, combined with structured opportunities for meaningful interactions and outputs, supports language learning and idiom learning respectively.

Regarding idiom instruction . . .

- Input, interaction, and output are the three most important conditions for idiom learning.
- Input alone, however methodically systematized, impedes the optimal development of idiomatic competence.
- Quality of interactive input transcends quantity of noninteractive input.
- Input, shaped and optimized through reciprocal interaction, contributes directly and powerfully to idiom acquisition.
- Learners' needs and interests are best served when they are pushed into producing idiomatic output that is concise, coherent, and culturally appropriate to the communicative needs it seeks to address.

(Continued)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

- Instruction combining focus on form with focus on meaning facilitates development of idiomatic competence.
- Real and meaningful idiom-learning experiences maximize learning opportunities for classroom interaction with specific communicative purposes.
- Spontaneous, meaningful interactions characteristic of natural learning facilitate idiom acquisition.
- Structured interactions encouraging learners to make their developing knowledge of idioms explicit benefit learners of different proficiency levels to differing degrees.
- Multisensory, multimodal idiom training supporting individual learner differences improves motivation to learn and increases productivity of idioms in natural contexts.
- Individual learner and psychological factors contribute to differing degrees in different learners of different proficiency levels.

descriptions, each format can also be designed in an interactive multimedia environment if proper attention is paid to key technological concerns affecting the user-centered interface design. (For a detailed discussion concerning the anatomy of knowledge systems for idiom learning, see Liontas, 2006.) Each format is laconically explicated below.

1 image–4 idioms (Figure 1): Students are given an image (or cartoon-like drawing) depicting the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression and a list of four idioms. They have to decide which one of the four idioms best "fits" the image, as each image combines powerful, literal visual imagery with a memorable, striking expression. The reverse feature, *4 images–1 idiom*, could also be made available. Students must infer under which image to write in the idiom. Doing so allows students to practice writing the orthographic and syntactic features of each idiom. Constructive feedback should be given only after transcription is complete.

1 text–4 idioms (Figure 2): Students are presented with an authentic text (paragraph or dialogue) *minus* the idiom, which they

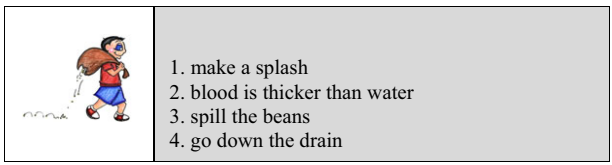

Figure 1. 1 image–4 idioms

They arrested Fernando yesterday because they suspected that he was the one who had robbed the bank. They questioned him for six hours without getting a confession, but when they told him that his accomplice, Marcos, had already confessed and had blamed everything on him, Fernando _____. Naturally, later he found out that Marcos hadn't said a thing to the police.	1. made a splash 2. blood was thicker than water 3. spilled the beans 4. went down the drain

Figure 2. 1 text–4 idioms

now have to supply in writing from four possibilities given to them in advance. In the reverse version of this task, students read four texts and decide from which text the given idiom was extracted. In yet another scaled variation, students are offered one text with four still images or, conversely, four texts with one image, but *without* any idiom choices. They are to match each text (or image) to the corresponding image (or text). While this task may be slightly more challenging, students repeatedly reported positive experiences when such variation was employed in the classroom.

Mix-and-match idioms (Figure 3): A thematic set of idiom cards (e.g., medicine idioms, time idioms, animal idioms, etc.) is scattered on multiple tables, each card depicting only the idiomatic expression. Students are given yet another set of cards depicting only paraphrases. They are to match each paraphrase

Paraphrases	**Idioms**
1. to endure a difficult situation 2. to follow through with a stated intention 3. to take more food than one can eat 4. to have no good defense for one's opinion or actions	A. *not have a leg to stand on* (4) B. *put one's money where one's mouth is* (2) C. *bite the bullet* (1) D. *eyes are bigger than one's stomach* (3)

Figure 3. Mix-and-match idioms

card with its corresponding idiom card. A timer could also be employed should students decide a contest against time is in order. A variation of the same task uses still images and idioms, as well as main and variant idioms (see also the *all in the family idioms* format [Figure 7]).

Interactive idioms (Figure 4): Students challenge one another to name an English idiom (or a paraphrase associated with said idiom). While the classmate reads an idiom from a set of idiom cards, the other student offers the corresponding paraphrase (the reverse is also possible). If the student's response is correct, the other player throws the card on the floor. However, if the given response is erroneous, then the card containing the idiom (or paraphrase) goes back into the stack of cards. The aim of this game is for the student to make his/her classmate throw all of the idiom (or paraphrase) cards on the floor, which s/he will then have to collect to the delight of the winner. Again, a timer could be made available to those individual students who believe that they can beat the clock.

Scrambled idioms (Figure 5): Students are given a set of cards containing idioms in scrambled form, one scrambled idiom per card. They are asked to unscramble the idiom first and then put it back together in its canonical word order. To succeed, students must recall the idiom in its original etymological/dictionary form, a key feature in cognitive learning and memory recall. A preset time limit adds to the challenge here.

MIA—Idiom parts missing in action (Figure 6): An idiom is heard (or seen) with its second half missing. Students must say (or write) the missing word parts to make the idiom whole again. Again, recall of missing idiom parts is central to this task. A timer adds to the challenge here.

Paraphrase: to take decisive action in a difficult situation

Idiom: to take the bull by the horns

Figure 4. Interactive idioms

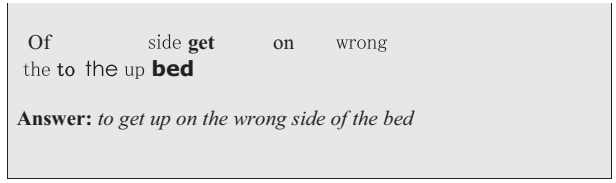

Figure 5. Scrambled idioms

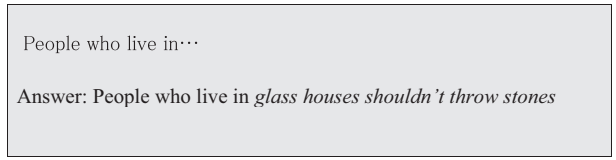

Figure 6. MIA—Idiom parts missing in action

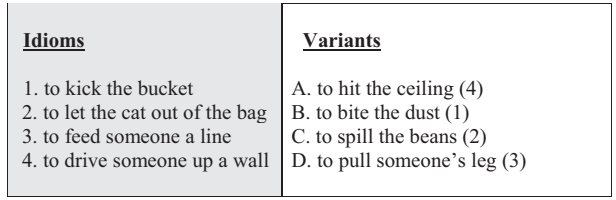

Figure 7. All in the family idioms

All in the family idioms (Figure 7): Students are asked to find each idiom's corresponding variant (conceptually related idiom) to expand their knowledge of specific main idioms and recall plausible variant idioms with identical or similar meanings. They could also be given idioms entailing dissimilar/opposite meanings to challenge them to distinguish further nuances in meaning.

Idiomatic jigsaw dialogues (Figure 8): Lines of an authentic dialogue (or narrative text) are arranged out of order. Each line of dialogue could also be written on strips of paper and placed on a table for students to walk around the classroom, all the while trying to piece together the correct order of the dialogue. For more advanced learners, several parts of a dialogue derived from a

JIGSAW IDIOMATIC TEXT	IDIOMATIC TEXT
___ Jack: I wish I did not have to, but I have no choice. I come from a long line of doctors and since I am the only child, I'm expected to carry on the family tradition. ___ After the ceremony, Mary asks Jack, her close friend, what his plans are for the future. ___ Mary: You mean, you're actually going **to follow in your father's footsteps?** ___ Jack: I wish I could, but I am waiting to hear from the medical university of Boston. ___ *At graduation night.* ___ Mary: So Jack! Are you going to look for a job now?	*At graduation night.* After the ceremony, Mary asks Jack, her close friend, what his plans are for the future. Mary: So Jack! Are you going to look for a job now? Jack: I wish I could, but I am waiting to hear from the medical university of Boston. Mary: You mean, you're actually going **to follow in your father's footsteps?** Jack: I wish I did not have to, but I have no choice. I come from a long line of doctors and since I am the only child, I'm expected to carry on the family tradition.

Figure 8. Idiomatic jigsaw dialogues

larger text containing several idioms could be introduced at once, and the lines and dialogue parts intermixed on several tables. Students are to sort the lines into the original correct order. The aim is for students to work out the order of the original dialogue and that of the idiom(s) present therein by using all available discoursal cues and textual features.

Eureka! (Figure 9): From a deck of cards students select a card. Front of card displays a single noun (verb, adjective, numeral, theme, etc.) with a corresponding image or cartoon-like drawing if available; back of card lists a collection of idioms containing that noun. Without revealing the back of the card, students are given 30 seconds to name as many idioms as they can recall from memory containing that noun. Time limits can be adjusted up or down as needed. Team competitions of 3–5 members per group add to the game's challenge.

Name that idiom! (Figure 10): A set of images (or cartoon-like drawings) depicting literal meanings of idiomatic expressions are shown sequentially one at a time at preset timed intervals. Student(s) have to name the idiom depicted in the image. Those individuals (or

Noun	**Idioms with "ball"**
Ball 	be on the ball behind the eight ball drop the ball get (set, start) the ball rolling have a ball have a lot on the ball (have someone on) a ball and chain have the ball in one's court have your eye on the ball

Figure 9. Eureka!

Figure 10. Name that idiom!

teams) with the most accurate naming record win the race against the 1-minute countdown.

The grand tour—Test idioms bank: The grand tour, as the name implies, assesses students' total idiomatic progress to date. Test materials should cover a wide range of idiom-learning tasks, such as fill in the missing idiom, multiple choice, completion items, missing idioms and idiom parts, and so on. Each test vignette should take 10–15 minutes to complete. Test items should come from the practice/testing formats cited above and students should be afforded as much choice as possible. It is strongly suggested

that students engage in this grand tour only after completing at least 80% of the available idiomatic material, because this test is the culmination of idioms and their variants/opposites that have been presented, practiced, expanded, and communicated in a classroom that values idioms and knowledge of idiomaticity for authentic communication.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented integrated theoretical and pedagogical constructs upon which successful teaching of dynamic high-context idioms can be attained in the ESOL classroom and beyond. In so doing, it has offered a pragmatic account now awaiting thoughtful K-16+ curriculum integration and application by teachers and students alike to see it enacted and realized. Above all, this article has tried to emphasize that developing *idiomatic competence* cannot proceed in isolation from the greater process of learning language in context. For idioms to exert maximum impact on learners' idiom acquisition process within the community culture of the classroom, idioms will need to be embedded meaningfully in diverse awareness-raising activities, tasks, and projects; presented methodically in a variety of pragmatic contexts requiring naturalistic conveyance of conceptual, functional, and social meanings; and performed purposefully in authentic settings. Only then will idioms broaden students' learning experiences and help them connect more productively to the language and culture they seek to master.

Those wishing to apply the suggestions offered heretofore should carefully consider the following caveat: even the most sophisticated attempts at developing idiomatic competence will fail if individual differences among students, such as prior knowledge, abilities, preferences, strategies, and affective factors, are not given apposite consideration. As argued throughout this article, both curricular and pedagogic decisions must be based on language development knowledge and perceived student appeal, on idiom acquisition processes and natural input-interaction-output opportunities, and, finally, on an awareness of students' developing linguistic-sociocultural capabilities exemplifying

conscious (meta)cognitive readiness for idiom learning. Devoid of such primary considerations, any approach to idiom learning, no matter how intricate or unique in design and application, remains, from the outset, just another approach doomed to failure.

In closing, the work involved in constructing a pedagogically sound approach to teaching and learning idioms is immense, but so are the potential benefits. As ESOL professionals, committed to excellence and culturally responsive teaching, it is our solemn responsibility to offer our ELLs access to a world that for too long has been closed to them both literally and figuratively. The teaching and learning of idioms provide such a rare window of opportunity. To this end, this article has tried to showcase an innovative way of making this pedagogical goal all the more explicit and systematic. It is up to us now to see the process of idiomatization advanced herein successfully proceduralized among our ELLs. Developing idiomatic competence in the ESOL classroom is finally within our reach. And taking the bull by the horns a welcomed choice.

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