

**Teaching Idiomatic Expressions through Focus-on-Form  
Techniques: Assessing Language Complexity**

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**Abstract**

The bulk of materials on focus-on-form instruction is limited in scope as the researchers were much involved with structural patterns and vocabulary. Whether this approach leads to the same overwhelming results in more holistic linguistic items like idiomatic expressions is still open to research. This research aims at analyzing the performance of 60 non-native participants in focus-on-form tasks in which participants were supposed to write a scenario for the idioms they had been instructed. Participants were divided into Group A (performing the task individually) and Group B (performing the task in pair work). Their performance which was a written scenario was analyzed to investigate which task implementation style (group work or individual work) was the most potential style in leading participants to more use of idiomatic expressions. Frequency-based analysis of idiomatic expressions in learner language seems to mask a very important language-related feature which is the complexity of language produced by the learners. Complexity of language was analyzed through measuring the length and complexity of sentences. The results show that group work and individual work created a different medium for focusing on idiomatic expressions. The results show that teachers and materials developers should make principled decisions about the type of the tasks they use and the way the tasks are implemented in classes.

**Keywords:** learning idiomatic expression, focus on form, complexity of language, length of sentences

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## **1. Introduction**

It has been established that comprehensible output can help learners to notice the gap between what they want to say and what they actually can say. A form used in input must be consciously noticed in order for it to be acquired. The act of noticing needs to occur during language production, that is, while learners are attempting to use the target language (Swain, 1995). Production has been considered as an activity which prompts students to notice the gap between what they have already learned and what they want to learn (Ellis, 2002, 2005; Robinson, 2011).

Since attention plays an important role in second and foreign language, over decades research has reported overwhelming agreed-upon findings which approve the significance and necessity of creating educational contexts that prompt students to notice the gap between their current interlanguage and the desire for native-like proficiency (Ghari & Monizadeh, 2011; Hulstijn & Schmidt, 1994; Nitta & Gardener, 2005; Rezaei, 2011).

## **2. Literature Review**

There has been a great tendency to use tasks in both research and educational contexts. The justification is that tasks have been recognized as one of the mediums through which learners can use what they know to discover what they do not know (Rezaei, 2011). Interaction helps learners to receive both negative input and feedback, which in turn helps learners to recognize form-meaning relationships and notice their current interlanguage and the yet to acquire target language (Pica, 1994).

By reviewing the literature, one would see that too much attention is paid to how form-focused instruction promotes grammar and vocabulary learning whereas too little attention is given to more holistic linguistic units like idioms and collocations. Since the most common approach in teaching idioms was mainly memory-based and rote learning, research is needed to investigate if discovery learning approaches might be effective for this purpose. To date, the research on how students are engaged with language at holistic levels like idioms in meaning-based context is very much limited not only in number but also in scope. This research aims at investigating how focus-on-form instructional models improve idiom learning in English as a foreign language contexts.

There has been a consensus among scholars that lexicon is not just a collection of single words but a dynamic system which includes larger units. The knowledge and ability to manipulate such clusters were considered as a predictor of the absence or presence of native speaker-like competence in language learners (Lesniewska, 2006). This claim has

certain implications for language teaching and learning programs. Formulaic sequences are instances of conventionalized language such as collocations, social formulas, multiword phrases and idioms (Zyzik, 2011).

When encountered in the foreign language for the first time, the collocation will not attract the attention of the learner, who has no problem with the comprehension of such collocations. Idiomatic expressions, on the other hand, attract attention and therefore are perceived as salient. Error-free production is one of the important characteristics of advanced L2 learners. Advanced learners seem not to violate the L2 rules of morphology, syntax, and semantics individually but the cumulative effect of the use of certain phrases may give the impression of non-nativeness (Lesniewska, 2006).

Over four decades, linguists and psycholinguists have experienced challenges in describing the grammatical characteristics of idioms and explaining their representational features. Although these studies have provided insights into these aspects, there are three aspects that have been neglected (Beate, 2003).

Several criteria have been suggested in the literature to define idioms. The term “idiom” is used to refer to different types of multi-word units (MWUs). MWUs are vocabulary items which consist of a sequence of two or more words (Grant & Bauer, 2004). These words form a meaningful and inseparable unit, whose meaning cannot be determined by its components. Similarly, Grant and Bauer (2004) believe that the term MWU refers to both idioms and open and restricted collocations, but excludes phrasal verbs.

Saberian and Fotovatnia (2011) suggest that there are no agreed-upon definitions for MWUs. However, there are two common characteristics across all the definitions: (a) idioms have a fixed word order, which implies that they are socially-accepted expressions, and (b) it is impossible to guess the meaning from the individual words that make up an idiom.

Since idioms are figurative expressions that do not mean what they literally state and as they are so frequent in spoken and written discourse, understanding and producing them present L2 learners with a special vocabulary learning problem (Saberian & Fotovatnia, 2011). Therefore, it would appear that for second language learners to become more fluent in the target language, just a good command of grammar and vocabulary is not enough.

In teaching idioms, Lennon (1998) suggests that since idioms are so semantically opaque, problem-solving approaches in teaching which require learners’ innate cognitive drive to make sense out of their

environment can best assist learners. Focus-on-form approach towards language learning may be a sound alternative for the activation of the innate cognitive drive.

The mere appearance of idioms in fluent language performance can be achieved through noticing techniques in form-focused instruction and may mask another important matter which is looking at the issue from the qualitative perspective. The frequency counts of used idioms in learner language masks the quality of produced language.

It has been confirmed that implementational aspects of learning task change the quality of output produced by learners (Skehen, 1996). Complexity of language is one of the variables that changes as the implementational design changes. Complexity is mostly measured as the length of the turns or sentences and complexity of the sentences defined operationally later in the method section of the study.

The objective of this study is to investigate the quantitative difference in the potential of two implementational designs: group work or individual work in engaging students' attention in idioms through focus-on-form tasks and also qualitative difference in the complexity of language across these implementational designs.

Considering the points mentioned in the preceding section including focus on form and its role in idiomatic expression learning in pair work and individual work, the researcher set the following questions:

(1) Is there any statistically significant difference in learner performance in pair work and individual groups in terms of the quantity of noticed idiomatic expressions?

(2) Is there any statistically significant difference in learner performance in pair work and individual groups in terms of the length of the turns created in each group?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

The participants in the present study were 60 male and female non-native speakers at the intermediate level of language proficiency whose first language was Persian. They were all between 18 and 23 years old. The participants were approximately at the same level of language proficiency as their oral ability was measured in the interview, designed on the basis of the curriculum through which they had learned English, according to Foreign Service Institute (FSI) rating scale (oral proficiency rating system). They were randomly assigned to two groups. In the first group, participants were supposed to use the taught idiomatic expressions to write a scenario in the form of a story or conversation individually whereas in the second group, they were supposed to do the same in groups of three or four.

### 3.2. Instruments

*Interview.* FSI rating was used to ensure homogeneity of participants on the basis of language proficiency so that any significant differences could be attributed to group membership variable rather than pre-existing differences. Students with one standard deviation above and below the mean were considered as intermediate participants.

*Classroom Tasks.* Classroom tasks which were the medium of the study were selected on the basis of topics included in participants' textbook named "Idioms and Metaphorical Expressions in Translation" by Tajali (1997). The content of the tasks were the same for both groups but the procedure to accomplish the tasks were different in each group. In both tasks, students were supposed to write a scenario in the form of a conversation or a story using the idioms and metaphorical expressions taught by the same teacher in each group. But in the first group (from now on called Group A), participants were supposed to perform the task individually. In the second group (from now on called Group B), participants performed the task in groups of three or four. The end results of the performance in each group were written scenarios that were analyzed by the researcher.

### 3.3. A Framework for Instruction Provided in Each Group

The teacher in both groups was the same, so the lesson plan including the number and the type of the idiomatic expressions (collocations, proverbs, phrasal verbs, and idioms) taught in each group and the method used were the same. In introducing each type of idiomatic expression, the teacher followed the procedure provided in the textbook which is providing a context in the form of a conversation or story and using the target idiomatic expression in this context followed by fill-in-the-blank activities.

### 3.4. Procedure

Prior to conducting the research, the participants were informed of what they were supposed to go through. Their language proficiency was evaluated using FSI rating scale. The purpose was to select homogenous groups for further analysis.

There was a concern on the part of the researcher as none of the participants had background knowledge on idiomatic expressions, so during the interview, the researcher not only probed the participants using idiomatic expressions to check their prior knowledge but also directly asked if they had any courses or experiences of learning target language idiomatic expressions. The researcher made sure that any differences in participants' performance in the study would be because of the nature of tasks through which their attention was directed towards target idiomatic expressions rather than pre-existing background knowledge on idiomatic

expressions. The participants were assigned into Group A and Group B. The same instructional framework described in the previous section was given to both groups by the same teacher.

The performance of each group was analyzed for the quantity of the idiomatic expression noticed in each group as the participants were accomplishing the tasks to answer the first research question. But quantitative analysis does not seem to tell the whole story.

Focusing on the overall numbers of idiomatic expressions masks important discourse dynamics at informational level which is the complexity of language created in each group evaluated by the length and complexity of language.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. Results

Having taken the steps mentioned in the procedure section, the researcher collected the data for both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the performance to answer the research questions.

##### *Research Question 1*

The first research question investigated if there was a statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of the number of the idiomatic expressions focused as participants accomplished the tasks. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

##### *Descriptive Statistics on Noticed Idiomatic Expressions*

	group membership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Noticed idiomatic expressions	group A	30	13.1333	1.67607	.30601
	group B	30	6.8000	1.60602	.29322

By reviewing the data in Table 2, the researcher noticed a significant difference in the number of noticed and used idiomatic expressions in participants' performance since the Sig level of the test (.000) is smaller than the research confidence level (.05) meaning that the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in the number of noticed idiomatic expressions is rejected and the first research question is answered.

To see participants of which group noticed more idiomatic expressions and used them more in their performance, Table 1 is recalled. By comparing the mean differences, the researcher made this conclusion that the mean score of the noticed and used idiomatic expressions is more

in Group A in which participants performed the tasks individually than Group A in which participants accomplished the tasks in groups.

Table 2  
*Independent Samples T-Test on Noticed Idiomatic Expressions*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Focused idiomatic expressions	Equal variances assumed	.000	.98	14.9	58	.000	6.33	.42	5.48	7.18
	Equal Variances not assumed			14.9	58	.000	6.33	.42	5.48	7.18

Although the analysis shows that there is a statistically significant difference in each group performance regarding the noticed idiomatic expressions, it does not tell much about the magnitude of the difference. Effect size was calculated using the eta square statistics.

Given this study's Eta squared value of .79 and using Pallant's interpretation (2002), we can conclude that there was a large effect, with a substantial difference in the amount of noticed idiomatic expressions in each task typology.

#### *Research Question II*

Quantitative analysis does not seem to tell the whole story. Attending to the overall numbers of idiomatic expressions masks important discourse dynamics at informational level, that is, complexity of language created in each group evaluated by the length of the turns or sentences and complexity of the sentences.

*Length of the Sentences.* A turn or a sentence is defined as a stretch of meaning. The length of the sentence was examined through the number of words per sentence (Nakahama, Van Lier, & Tyler, 2001).

T-test was used to compare the mean score of words per turn in performances in Group A and Group B. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics on the length of sentences in each group and Table 4 provides information on the test's probability value.

Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics on Length of the Turns and Sentences*

	Group membership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Length of the turns	group A	30	47.7667	5.61208	1.02462
	group B	30	89.1000	5.71960	1.04425

Table 4  
*Independent Samples T-Test on Length of the Turns and Sentences*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
Length of the turns	Equal variances assumed	.19	.66	28.25	58	.000	-41.33	1.46	44.26	38.40
	Equal variances not assumed			28.25	58	.000	-41.33	1.46	44.26	38.40

By reviewing the data on length of the turns and sentences displayed in Table 4, the researcher made this conclusion that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean score of the lengthy turns and sentences in the performance of the participants as they accomplished the tasks. This is because the research's confidence level (.05) is greater than the Sig level of the test (.000). The effect size was calculated to find the magnitude of the difference.

The results show a large effect size ( $\eta^2=.93$ ), meaning that the difference in the length of the turns across groups does not happen by chance. This signifies that the individual and pair work way of implementation of the tasks affect the complexity of language as lengthy turns were created in pair work implementation.

*Complexity of Utterance or Sentence.* An utterance is defined as a single propositional or meaning unit. For instance, sentences with one verbal construction are coded as S1 (e.g. well, I've forgotten the day) and sentences with more than one verbal construction are coded as S2 (I don't need to search for a job). T-test was used to compare the mean scores of utterances with more than one verbal construction as a mark for more complex language. Table 5 and Table 6 display the results of this analysis.



Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics on Complexity of Utterances or Sentences*

	Group membership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Complexity of utterances or sentences	group A	30	11.2667	1.85571	.33881
	Group B	30	28.3667	4.93044	.90017

Table 6  
*Independent Sample T-Test on Complexity of Utterances or Sentences*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Complexity of utterances or sentences	Equal variances assumed	37.47	.000	17.77	58	.000	-17.10	.96	19.02	15.17
	Equal variances not assumed			17.77	58	.000	-17.10	.96	19.04	15.15

Table 5 and Table 6 display the results of the mean comparison between Group A and Group B. The researcher made this conclusion that there is a significant difference in the mean score of complex utterances or sentences in the performance of the participants across groups since the test's Sig level (.000) is smaller than the research probability value (.05) meaning that participants who accomplished the tasks in group created more complex language as they tried to use the noticed idiomatic expressions in their scenarios than the participants who performed the tasks individually.

The effect size analysis shows a large magnitude ( $\eta^2=.84$ ) which means that the complexity of language output across groups did not take place by chance. Pair work led to more complex use of language.

4.2. Discussion

Having analyzed the mean scores of noticed idiomatic expressions in Group A and Group B, the researcher found that these two different ways of implementation created a different medium for interaction to take place. Individual performance had more potential for creation of noticing opportunities.

The quantity of noticing opportunities has been a primary concern of SLA researchers because it is assumed to provide the ideal locus for learners to recognize the gap between their interlanguage grammar and the target grammar. Thus, the more noticing occurs, the more opportunities for comprehension and learning will be provided. If in the present analysis the researcher had attended only to the quantity of the noticed idiomatic expressions, the data would support the assertion that individual performance provides more learning opportunities than group work does, as the individual performance triggers more instances of noticing. Subsequent analysis examined important discourse dynamics to reveal important learning opportunities beyond the ideational or informational level.

While there is research to support the premise that noticing creates the conditions needed for acquisition, there are alternative theoretical premises that emphasize other aspects of language use, for example, learner output or pushed output. One of the aspects that are used in qualifying learner language is the length of the turn. Therefore, it was used to draw the differences between the two types of performance (individual and group work) along the continuum. Having run the analysis, the researcher statistically approved that the participants created more lengthy turns in group work. This must be taken into account when the objective of any educational system is to provide opportunities for language learners to practice more extended language.

The second factor that is mentioned to be widely used for analyzing the negotiated discourse is complexity of language in the learner output. From interactional point of view, complexity can be analyzed on a number of grounds. One of those grounds is complexity of the utterance. The results of the analysis indicate that in group performance, the interlocutors created more complex discourse and also attended to more ideational level than just informational level within discourse. Group performances provide the interlocutors with more complex input and create more complex output. Consistently across both groups, the interlocutors produced more complex syntactic and more elaborated sentences in grammatical terms in group performance than in individual performance.

## **5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Research on task design attempts to find variables in task design that will lead to recognized second language acquisition processes such as negotiation or noticing. Tasks, and more specifically their components, characteristics, different types, and implementation conditions, have been the focus of much recent research. The case for including an introduction

to the principles and techniques of task-based teaching in teacher training and teacher education program is important. Such introduction makes teachers and implementers of task-based instruction informed about the effectiveness of task-based instruction and implementational factors that affect their effectiveness and avoid the over-simplifications in this field.

Materials and curriculum developers need to make principled decisions about what kinds of tasks to be included in the course, the balance of the different types of tasks, the sequencing and definitely the procedure of the tasks. There is evidence that different implementational ways of tasks set up different patterns of language use (Bygate,1999). These can be explored and exploited creatively by teachers and materials designers in order to implement tasks in a way that leads learners to produce differentiated types of language. Materials designers need to explore ways in which the design and implementation of task push learners to more demanding uses of language. Tasks could be designed to place greater demands on speakers to rehearse their interlanguage. Also, the task could be redesigned so as to engage in pushing language learners towards more complex uses of language.

As noticing is proved to have a significant role in learning and acquisition to take place, various researchers have conducted pieces of research to investigate the factors that affect noticing and in turn the acquisition through changing the negotiated discourse and pushed output. This study aimed at investigating the differences in implementation of tasks and their effects on the quantity and quality of language.

In conclusion, the results of the study revealed that while there was statistically significant difference between two types of implementation in terms of the number of the noticed idiomatic expressions, approving the superiority of individual performance in providing the medium for the creation of more noticing, there were found statistically significant differences in individual and group performances in terms of the quality of noticed discourse (the length of the turn, the complexity of the utterances), approving the superiority of group performance in providing a medium for more pushed output.

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