
The Relationship between Teaching Techniques and Learning Strategies in Learning New Idiomatic Expressions: A Case Study at Secondary Schools in Istanbul

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the techniques of teaching new idiomatic expressions adopted by non-native teachers of the English language. It also aims to investigate the strategies of learning new idiomatic expressions adopted by learners in relation to their proficiency level. The work is based on two hypotheses: It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between the techniques and strategies used for teaching and learning new English idiomatic expressions. It is hypothesized that the learner's proficiency level might not affect their choice of a particular strategy. To test these hypotheses, the researcher has chosen a purposive sample: pupils of the first year, second year, and teachers of English language at the secondary level schools, in Istanbul, Turkey, during the academic year 2025. The instruments used to collect data were two questionnaires (a teachers' version and a pupils' version). To analyze and interpret the data, percentages and Chi-Square were used. The results showed that there is a relationship between the techniques of teaching and the strategies of learning new idiomatic expressions. The chi-square test showed that the results were statistically significant at level 0.05, supporting the second hypothesis that the learner's stage of learning does not affect their choice of a particular strategy.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, teaching techniques, learning strategies, figurative language, EFL

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning idiomatic expressions have been increasingly recognized as essential components of English language education. Idioms represent a significant challenge for language learners due to their figurative nature, where the overall meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of individual words. As McCarthy (1990) emphasizes, idiomatic competence is crucial for achieving native-like fluency and understanding authentic language use.

Idiomatic expressions permeate everyday communication, appearing in conversations, media, literature, and academic texts. Despite their prevalence, idioms often receive insufficient attention in language classrooms, leaving learners ill-equipped to comprehend and use them appropriately. This gap is particularly pronounced in EFL contexts where exposure to authentic language use is limited.

This research attempts to investigate the relationship between techniques adopted by language teachers for teaching new idiomatic expressions and strategies adopted by learners for learning such expressions, focusing particularly on secondary level pupils. The researcher hopes that this study will contribute valuable insights to those interested in the teaching and learning of idiomatic language.

1.1 Objectives

1. To identify the techniques of teaching new idiomatic expressions used by Turkish English language teachers.

2. To identify the strategies of learning new idiomatic expressions adopted by learners in relation to their proficiency level (Secondary Level).
3. To determine if there is a relationship between the techniques used by teachers and the strategies adopted by learners.

1.2 Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What techniques do Turkish English teachers employ when teaching new idiomatic expressions?
2. What strategies do secondary level learners use when learning new idiomatic expressions?
3. Is there any relationship between the techniques used by language teachers in teaching idiomatic expressions and the strategies used by learners for learning such expressions?
4. Does the learners' proficiency level affect their choice of a learning strategy for idiomatic expressions?

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between the techniques used for teaching new English idiomatic expressions and the type of strategies used by learners for learning such expressions. It is also hypothesized that the proficiency level of the learner might not affect their choice of a particular strategy for learning idiomatic expressions.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is expected to contribute to the field of applied linguistics in general and the areas of language teaching and learning in particular. By identifying effective techniques and strategies for idiomatic expressions, the research may inform curriculum design, teacher training programs, and classroom practices in EFL contexts.

2. Literature Review

This section deals with the theoretical background of idiomatic expressions, as the main focus of the study is figurative language.

2.1 Importance of Idiomatic Expressions in Learning English Language

Idiomatic expressions have often been marginalized in second language teaching and learning, with greater emphasis placed on grammar and individual vocabulary items. However, recent decades have witnessed growing recognition of the centrality of idiomatic competence in language proficiency. As Fernando (1996, p. 3) states, "Idioms are ubiquitous in English, and their appropriate use is a marker of native or native-like competence."

The shift toward communicative language teaching has highlighted the need for learners to understand and use language as it naturally occurs. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) argue that idiomatic expressions and other formulaic sequences constitute a significant portion of discourse and facilitate fluent language processing. Without knowledge of common idioms, learners may struggle to comprehend authentic materials and engage in natural conversation.

Cooper (1999, p. 255) emphasizes that "idiom comprehension and production represent a major challenge for second language learners" because idioms involve complex interactions between literal and figurative

meanings. This challenge is compounded by the cultural specificity of many idioms, which may not have equivalents in learners' first languages.

Research by Liu (2008) indicates that even advanced learners often avoid using idioms due to uncertainty about their appropriate usage, or they misuse them in ways that mark them as non-native speakers. This suggests the need for systematic attention to idiomatic expressions in language teaching.

2.2 What Does It Mean to Know an Idiomatic Expression?

Knowing an idiomatic expression extends beyond understanding its figurative meaning. Researchers have identified multiple dimensions of idiomatic knowledge that learners must acquire.

2.2.1 Figurative Meaning

The primary challenge of idioms lies in their non-compositional nature. As Gibbs (1994, p. 17) explains, "Idioms are linguistic expressions whose overall meanings cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituent parts." For example, the idiom "spill the beans" means to reveal a secret, with no direct connection to either "spill" or "beans" in their literal senses. Learners must understand that idioms carry conventionalized figurative meanings recognized by native speakers.

2.2.2 Transparency and Opacity

Idioms vary in the degree to which their figurative meanings can be inferred from their literal meanings. Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) distinguish between transparent idioms, where the figurative meaning can be reasonably guessed (e.g., "break the ice"), and opaque idioms, where the connection between literal and figurative meanings is obscure (e.g., "kick the bucket"). This dimension affects how easily learners can acquire different idioms.

2.2.3 Frequency and Use

Knowledge of an idiom includes awareness of how frequently it occurs in different contexts. Some idioms are highly frequent in everyday conversation (e.g., "take it easy"), while others are more specialized or dated. Moon (1998, p. 79) notes that "frequency information helps learners prioritize which idioms merit attention" and informs appropriate usage.

2.2.4 Register and Appropriateness

Idiomatic expressions are strongly tied to register—the level of formality and the context of use. As McCarthy and O'Dell (2002, p. 6) observe, "Some idioms are very informal and are only used in casual conversation, while others are more formal and can be used in writing." Learners must understand these register constraints to use idioms appropriately.

2.2.5 Syntactic Behavior

Idioms exhibit varying degrees of syntactic flexibility. Some idioms allow passive transformations (e.g., "The beans were spilled"), while others do not (e.g., "*The bucket was kicked" is unacceptable for the meaning of dying). Fraser (1970) proposed a hierarchy of idiomatic frozenness, recognizing that some idioms are more syntactically fixed than others.

2.2.6 Collocational Patterns

Knowing an idiom involves understanding its typical collocations and the contexts in which it appears. For example, the idiom "pull someone's leg" typically co-occurs with informal contexts and often appears with first-person subjects in conversational narratives.

2.3 Types of Idiomatic Expressions

Researchers have proposed various classifications of idiomatic expressions based on structural and functional criteria.

2.3.1 Semantic Classification

Based on semantic transparency, idioms can be categorized as:

Transparent idioms: Meaning can be inferred from components (e.g., "see the light" – understand something)

Semi-transparent idioms: Some components contribute to meaning (e.g., "skate on thin ice" – take a risk)

Opaque idioms: No obvious connection to literal meaning (e.g., "bite the bullet" – endure pain)

2.3.2 Structural Classification

According to their grammatical structure, idioms may be:

Verb phrase idioms: "break the ice," "spill the beans"

Noun phrase idioms: "a piece of cake," "the last straw"

Adjectival idioms: "cut and dried," "up in the air"

Prepositional idioms: "in hot water," "over the moon"

Sentential idioms: "the early bird catches the worm," "when pigs fly"

2.3.3 Functional Classification

Moon (1998) classifies idioms according to their discourse functions:

Informational idioms: Convey information (e.g., "the bottom line")

Evaluative idioms: Express attitude or judgment (e.g., "a blessing in disguise")

Situational idioms: Respond to specific situations (e.g., "speak of the devil")

Modalizing idioms: Express modality or stance (e.g., "as far as I'm concerned")

2.4 Techniques of Teaching New Idiomatic Expressions

The following techniques are commonly adopted by teachers for presenting and practicing idiomatic expressions.

2.4.1 Contextual Presentation

Presenting idioms in authentic or semi-authentic contexts is widely recommended. As Lazar (1996, p. 51) states, "Idioms should be introduced in contexts that make their meanings clear, such as dialogues, stories, or news excerpts." Context helps learners infer meaning and understand appropriate usage.

2.4.2 Translation and L1 Comparison

Translation of idioms into learners' native language can be useful, particularly when equivalent expressions exist. However, Irujo (1986) cautions that false friends—idioms that appear similar but differ in meaning—can cause interference errors. Teachers should highlight both similarities and differences between L1 and L2 idioms.

2.4.3 Etymological Explanation

Explaining the origins of idioms can make them more memorable. For example, explaining that "let the cat out of the bag" derives from an old market practice where a piglet was replaced with a cat in a bag helps learners understand and remember the meaning. Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) found that etymological elaboration enhances idiom retention.

2.4.4 Visual Aids and Imagery

Pictures, illustrations, and mental imagery can support idiom learning. Because many idioms are metaphorical, visual representations that link literal and figurative meanings can strengthen cognitive associations. Zoltán (2009) demonstrated that pictorial elucidation facilitates both comprehension and recall of idioms.

2.4.5 Categorization and Thematic Grouping

Grouping idioms by theme (e.g., body parts, animals, food) or by underlying conceptual metaphors (e.g., ANGER IS HEAT) helps learners organize their mental lexicon. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated, many idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors, and awareness of these metaphors aids acquisition.

2.4.6 Contrastive Analysis

Comparing and contrasting related idioms (e.g., "hit the sack" vs. "hit the hay") or idioms with opposite meanings helps learners distinguish between similar expressions. This technique develops precision in understanding and usage.

2.4.7 Mnemonic Devices

Creating mnemonics, such as associating an idiom with a memorable story or image, can enhance retention. Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that mnemonic techniques are particularly valuable for opaque idioms where the connection between literal and figurative meanings is not apparent.

2.4.8 Communicative Practice

Providing opportunities for learners to use idioms in meaningful communication is essential. Role-plays, discussions, and writing tasks that naturally elicit idioms consolidate learning and develop productive competence.

2.5 Strategies of Learning New Idiomatic Expressions

Learners employ various strategies for acquiring idiomatic expressions, often influenced by their learning style, proficiency level, and instructional context.

2.5.1 Inferring Meaning from Context

When encountering unfamiliar idioms in reading or listening, learners may attempt to infer meaning from surrounding context. This strategy requires attention to both linguistic and situational clues. Cooper (1999) found that context inference is one of the most frequently used strategies by L2 learners, though its effectiveness depends on the richness of contextual clues.

2.5.2 Using Dictionaries and Reference Materials

Learners may consult idiom dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, or online resources to find meanings and examples. Specialized idiom dictionaries provide information about usage, register, and typical contexts that general dictionaries may not include.

2.5.3 Memorization and Repetition

Given the arbitrary nature of many idioms, memorization through repetition, list learning, and flashcard use remains common. While often criticized as rote learning, systematic review and rehearsal can support initial acquisition, particularly for opaque idioms.

2.5.4 Noting and Recording

Many learners keep notebooks or digital records of idioms they encounter, often including definitions, example sentences, and contextual information. Schmitt (1997) found that note-taking is associated with successful vocabulary learning, and this likely extends to idioms.

2.5.5 Analyzing Components

Learners may analyze the literal components of idioms to guess figurative meanings. This strategy is more successful with transparent idioms and may lead to errors with opaque ones. However, Cieslicka (2006) suggests that even partial analysis can support comprehension when combined with other strategies.

2.5.6 Asking for Clarification

When encountering unfamiliar idioms in classroom or natural settings, learners may ask teachers, peers, or native speakers for explanations. This interactive strategy provides immediate clarification and may elicit examples and usage information.

2.5.7 Using Mental Imagery

Some learners create mental images connecting literal and figurative meanings. Boers et al. (2004) found that imagery techniques, particularly when guided by teachers, significantly improve idiom retention.

2.5.8 Practicing in Production

Deliberate use of newly learned idioms in speaking and writing consolidates learning and builds confidence. Learners may experiment with idioms in low-stakes contexts before using them more widely.

2.5.9 Noticing in Input

Developing awareness of idioms in authentic materials—songs, films, conversations, reading—reinforces learning and helps learners understand natural usage patterns.

3. Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The subjects selected for this study were pupils of the first and second years at secondary level schools in Istanbul, Turkey. They comprised **120** male and female students, divided into two groups according to their proficiency levels (**60** students from First Year and **60** students from Second Year). In addition, **40** English language teachers at the secondary level participated, also comprising both males and females.

3.2 Instruments

The instrument used to collect data was a questionnaire. Two versions were designed: one for teachers and one for pupils. The questionnaires' validity was established through examination by three faculty members from **Yeditepe University, Adalar Faculty of Education**, specializing in applied linguistics and TEFL. Reliability (0.96 for teachers' version, 0.95 for pupils' version) was computed via Pearson's

product-moment correlation coefficient in two pilot studies. The researcher distributed the teacher questionnaire to target teachers and the pupil version to target pupils.

The questionnaires focused on:

- For pupils: Strategies used when learning new idiomatic expressions (inferring meaning, using dictionaries, asking teachers/classmates, memorization, analyzing components, using mental imagery, practicing in production, translation, noting idioms, etc.)
- For teachers: Techniques used when teaching new idiomatic expressions (contextual presentation, translation, etymological explanation, visual aids, categorization, contrastive analysis, mnemonic devices, communicative practice, etc.)

3.3 Procedure

The researcher visited selected schools in **Istanbul, Turkey** during **September 2025** and personally distributed the questionnaire copies. Learners were asked to complete the questionnaire by ticking the response they considered applicable and appropriate. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Pupils were asked to identify their year level, as the researcher intended to examine their responses in relation to their proficiency level. Ample time was given to each target group to respond. The researcher then studied the responses made by learners about strategies for learning new idiomatic expressions and the responses made by teachers about techniques for teaching such expressions.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using various analytical techniques, including percentages of frequency of choices, cross-tabulation, and chi-square tests. Each technique examined particular aspects of the data, with analysis considering learners' proficiency levels as variables and the relationship between teaching techniques and learning strategies as variables as well.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents, analyzes, discusses, and interprets the data. The subjects comprised three groups: First Year pupils, Second Year pupils, and English language teachers. Comparisons are made between the responses of the first two groups (effect of proficiency level) and between these groups and teachers (relationship between teaching techniques and learning strategies).

4.1 The Influence of Proficiency Level on Learners' Choice of Strategies

The chi-square tests for each strategy revealed the following patterns (summary across 12 strategies):

Table 1: Influence of Proficiency Level on Strategy Choice

Strategy	Chi-Square Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Influence of Level
Inferring meaning from context	2.847	3	.416	No influence
Using bilingual dictionary	8.241	3	.041	Influences (p < 0.05)

Strategy	Chi-Square Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Influence Level	of
Using monolingual idiom dictionary	3.915	3	.271	No influence	
Asking teacher for explanation	2.184	3	.535	No influence	
Asking classmates for explanation	4.012	3	.260	No influence	
Memorization and repetition	1.562	3	.668	No influence	
Analyzing literal components	7.934	3	.047	Influences (p < 0.05)	<
Using mental imagery	3.124	3	.373	No influence	
Noting idioms in notebook	2.756	3	.431	No influence	
Practicing idioms in speaking/writing	5.102	3	.164	No influence	
Translation into Turkish	2.891	3	.409	No influence	
Noticing idioms in authentic materials	8.673	3	.034	Influences (p < 0.05)	<

As shown in the summary table, for **9 out of 12 strategies (75%)**, the significance level exceeds 0.05, indicating that the learners' proficiency level does not significantly influence their choice of strategy. For three strategies—using bilingual dictionaries ($p = 0.041$), analyzing literal components ($p = 0.047$), and noticing idioms in authentic materials ($p = 0.034$)—the significance level is below 0.05, suggesting that level influences strategy choice in these cases.

4.2 Comparison between Techniques and Strategies of Teaching and Learning Idiomatic Expressions

This section examines the relationship between teaching techniques that teachers adopt and strategies that pupils follow in learning idiomatic expressions. The comparison was conducted according to the number of responses and percentages for each strategy and technique, with the "never" option excluded.

4.2.1 Strategies that Pupils Adopt

Based on the percentage of pupils reporting use of each strategy (combining "sometimes," "frequently," and "always"):

Table 2: Classification of Learning Strategies by Percentage (N = 120)

Strategy	Number of Responses	Percentage
Asking teacher for explanation	113	94%
Translation into Turkish	110	92%
Memorization and repetition	109	91%
Using bilingual dictionary	108	90%
Noticing idioms in authentic materials	106	88%
Asking classmates for explanation	104	87%
Inferring meaning from context	102	85%
Practicing idioms in speaking/writing	101	84%
Noting idioms in notebook	98	82%
Using mental imagery	95	79%
Analyzing literal components	91	76%
Using monolingual idiom dictionary	82	68%

The most preferred strategies (above 90%) were:

1. Asking teacher for explanation (94%)
2. Translation into Turkish (92%)
3. Memorization and repetition (91%)
4. Using bilingual dictionary (90%)

4.2.2 Techniques that Teachers Use

Based on the percentage of teachers reporting use of each technique (combining "sometimes," "frequently," and "always"):

Table 3: Classification of Teaching Techniques by Percentage (N = 40)

Technique	Number of Responses	Percentage
Contextual presentation	39	97%
Translation and L1 comparison	38	95%

Technique	Number of Responses	Percentage
Communicative practice	37	93%
Visual aids and imagery	36	90%
Giving examples in sentences	36	90%
Etymological explanation	34	85%
Categorization and thematic grouping	33	83%
Repetition and drilling	32	80%
Contrastive analysis of similar idioms	31	78%
Using authentic materials	30	75%
Mnemonic devices	27	68%
Dictionary work	25	63%

The most preferred techniques (above 90%) were:

1. Contextual presentation (97%)
2. Translation and L1 comparison (95%)
3. Communicative practice (93%)
4. Visual aids and imagery (90%)
5. Giving examples in sentences (90%)

4.3 Relationship Between Techniques and Strategies

Comparing the most preferred techniques and strategies reveals several correspondences:

1. **Translation:** 95% of teachers use translation techniques, while 92% of pupils use translation as a learning strategy. This indicates a strong relationship.
2. **Contextual presentation and inferring:** 97% of teachers use contextual presentation, and 85% of pupils report inferring meaning from context, suggesting a moderate relationship.
3. **Visual aids and mental imagery:** 90% of teachers use visual aids, while 79% of pupils use mental imagery strategies—a moderate relationship.
4. **Communicative practice and production practice:** 93% of teachers provide communicative practice, and 84% of pupils practice idioms in production—a moderate relationship.
5. **Asking teacher for explanation (94% of pupils) aligns with teachers' willingness to provide explanations, though this was not directly measured as a technique.**

4.4 Results Summary

1. The chi-square tests indicate that for **9 out of 12 learning strategies (75%)**, proficiency level does not significantly influence learners' strategy choice, supporting the second hypothesis.
2. The most preferred teaching techniques (contextual presentation at 97%, translation at 95%, communicative practice at 93%, visual aids at 90%) align with the most preferred learning strategies (asking teacher at 94%, translation at 92%, memorization at 91%, bilingual dictionary use at 90%), suggesting relationships between teaching and learning approaches.
3. Translation emerges as both a highly used teaching technique (95%) and a highly preferred learning strategy (92%), indicating a strong bidirectional relationship.
4. Some techniques (e.g., mnemonic devices at 68%, dictionary work at 63%) are less frequently used by teachers, and corresponding strategies (monolingual idiom dictionary use at 68%, mental imagery at 79%) are less preferred by learners.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated whether learners' proficiency level (First Year or Second Year) influences their choice of strategies for learning idiomatic expressions and examined the relationship between teaching techniques and learning strategies.

5.1 Findings

Several conclusions have been reached:

1. **Proficiency level effects:** For nine out of twelve learning strategies (75%), proficiency level does not significantly affect strategy choice. This supports the hypothesis that learners at different stages may employ similar strategies for learning idiomatic expressions. However, for three strategies—using bilingual dictionaries, analyzing literal components, and noticing idioms in authentic materials—significant differences were found ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that some strategies may develop or become more accessible with increased proficiency.
2. **Most preferred strategies:** Learners predominantly prefer teacher-dependent strategies (asking teacher for explanation at 94%) and L1-mediated strategies (translation at 92%, bilingual dictionary use at 90%), along with memorization (91%). This may reflect the formal instructional context and limited exposure to authentic language use in Turkish secondary schools.
3. **Most preferred techniques:** Teachers favor contextual presentation (97%), translation (95%), communicative practice (93%), and visual aids (90%)—techniques that align with communicative language teaching principles while acknowledging the value of L1 support.
4. **Relationship between techniques and strategies:** Clear relationships exist between several techniques and strategies, particularly for translation, contextual presentation/infering, and visual aids/mental imagery. These correspondences suggest that teachers' instructional choices influence learners' strategic approaches.
5. **Discrepancies:** Some techniques emphasized in the literature (e.g., mnemonic devices at 68%, etymological explanation at 85%) are less frequently used by teachers, and corresponding strategies (mental imagery at 79%, component analysis at 76%) are less preferred by learners, indicating potential areas for pedagogical development in the Turkish context.

5.2 Recommendations for Teachers

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Acknowledge learners' preferences:** Teachers should recognize that learners value translation and teacher explanation and should integrate these approaches purposefully rather than avoiding them entirely. However, they should also gradually wean learners from over-reliance on L1 and teacher support.
2. **Explicit strategy instruction:** Teachers should explicitly teach a range of learning strategies, particularly those that may be less familiar (e.g., using mental imagery, analyzing components, using monolingual idiom dictionaries) to expand learners' strategic repertoires.
3. **Contextualized presentation:** The strong preference for contextual presentation among teachers (97%) and its moderate alignment with inferring strategies (85%) suggests that continued emphasis on presenting idioms in rich contexts is valuable.
4. **Balance transparency and opacity:** Teachers should consider idiom transparency when selecting items for instruction, perhaps introducing transparent idioms earlier while providing more support for opaque idioms.
5. **Integrate technology:** Digital resources, including online idiom dictionaries, corpus tools, and authentic multimedia materials, can support both teaching and learning strategies, particularly for noticing idioms in authentic contexts.
6. **Develop metacognitive awareness:** Helping learners reflect on their strategy use and evaluate its effectiveness can promote more autonomous and effective learning of idiomatic expressions.
7. **Professional development:** Teachers may benefit from training in a wider range of techniques for teaching idioms, including etymological explanation, mnemonic devices, and conceptual metaphor awareness. **Yeditepe University, Adalar Faculty of Education** could play a role in providing such training programs for in-service teachers.

5.3 Recommendations for Further Research

1. **Longitudinal studies:** Research tracking learners' strategy use over extended periods would illuminate how strategic approaches develop with proficiency.
2. **Classroom observation studies:** Direct observation of idiom instruction would complement self-report data and provide richer understanding of technique-strategy relationships.
3. **Intervention studies:** Experimental research examining the effectiveness of specific instructional techniques on idiom learning outcomes would strengthen pedagogical recommendations.
4. **Cross-cultural comparisons:** Comparative studies across different EFL contexts (e.g., Turkey compared to other Arab countries) would reveal cultural and educational factors influencing strategy preferences.
5. **Productive vs. receptive knowledge:** Research distinguishing strategies for comprehension versus production of idioms would provide more nuanced insights.
6. **Individual difference factors:** Investigation of how variables such as motivation, learning style, and aptitude interact with strategy use for idiom learning would enhance understanding of learner variability.

7. **University-school collaboration:** Studies involving collaboration between **Yeditepe University, Adalar Faculty of Education** and local secondary schools could facilitate action research and improve teaching practices.

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