

Evaluating the Effects of a Topic-Based Workbook of Idioms on Candidates Preparing for International Language Examinations

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ABSTRACT

Idiomatic competence is a crucial component of advanced foreign language proficiency. Despite their prevalence and communicative value, idioms remain one of the most challenging aspects of language learning, especially for students preparing for high-stakes international examinations, where lexical sophistication and naturalness of expression are key indicators of proficiency.

The following study is aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a topic-based workbook targeting idioms for developing learners' idiomatic competence in high-stakes international examination contexts. An initial needs analysis was conducted, which included a questionnaire administered to students and interviews with two experienced language teachers. Based on the findings obtained from these methods, the workbook was designed to incorporate a combination of authentic input, controlled practice, metacognitive activities, and communicative tasks that encourage the meaningful use of idiomatic language.

In the final stage of the study, the workbook was implemented in a trial session with a small group of learners at a B1–B2+ proficiency level. Prior to the intervention, participants completed a pre-test consisting of two Use of English tasks and a Speaking task. Following this, students received a usual preparation lesson, but the teacher used the workbook as a complementary material. Following this instructional session, students were given a post-test with a similar structure from the pre-test in order to measure changes in their performance after the intervention.

The results indicated an overall improvement in students' idiomatic competence. These preliminary results show that the workbook intervention was generally successful and that these type of materials can have a positive impact on the enhancement of idiomatic competence in learners. Further research with larger samples and longer intervention periods is recommended to confirm these preliminary findings.

Key Words: idioms, idiomatic competence, international language examinations, materials design.

INTRODUCTION

Being fully proficient in a foreign language goes beyond having a good command of grammar, or being able to remember and use an extensive number of words. It also requires an understanding of how these words combine to form greater units and an awareness of the role grammar plays in it.

English is a highly phraseological language, filled with word combinations such as noun phrases, collocations and phrasal verbs. However, one structure in which English is particularly rich in is idioms, which account for more than 25000 across the different variants of the language (Canta & Husaj, 2023). According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, an idiom is “an expression in the usage of a language that has a meaning that cannot be understood from the combined meanings of its elements or in its grammatically atypical use of words” (Merriam Webster, n.d). They are widely used by native speakers in a myriad of contexts, such as in magazines, books,

television, songs, and in daily conversations due to their expressiveness and the opportunity they offer to convey ideas in a more humorous, vivid and cultural-specific way. This suggests that those who strive for proficiency in any language, especially in English, should be able to master idiomatic language skillfully and confidently. Being able to understand and use idioms efficiently is known to increase perceived fluency because these expressions are usually processed by the brain as a single familiar unit of meaning that makes comprehension and production much more immediate and almost automatic (Beck & Weber, 2016; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). They also help users sound natural and native-like in their discourse, and when fully mastered, they even offer valuable insights about cultural aspects of the language and nation they belong to (O'Reilly et al., 2025).

Consequently, idiomatic competence is given an important place in the Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), especially when it comes to attaining higher levels of proficiency, which is probably why idiomatic language is also regarded as fundamental in international language proficiency exams. In many of these prestigious examinations, candidates are expected to be able to comprehend, syntactically manipulate, and use idioms appropriately and self-assuredly, as a way of proving their overall lexical and communicative competence in English (Vanderniet, 2015; O'Reilly et al., 2025; Heidari & Aliyar, 2025).

However, even though idioms are recognized as highly relevant for achieving higher scores in international exam, these structures are undoubtedly challenging to master and therefore, many students preparing for such exams still show limited idiomatic competence and a certain lack of confidence in using idioms in their everyday discourse and under exam conditions. Many current materials specifically designed to prepare candidates for international examinations effectively train students for particular components and skills, but overlook idiomatic language and fail to integrate these structures more emphatically into the preparation process. This gap between the linguistic expectations set by international exams and the availability of materials and support that candidates have motivated the author of the present research to carry out a study on idiomatic competence for international exam preparation.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a topic-based workbook in developing learners' idiomatic competence for high-stakes international examination purposes. The workbook is envisioned as a complement for the existing preparation materials and it seeks to make its users much more confident when using idiomatic language in their everyday communication and under exam pressure.

An early needs analysis stage helped to identify the students' main difficulties and the activities that could help solve or minimize them. Based on these findings, the topic-based workbook was designed and later tested in a trial session with a small experimental group. The results of the trial were positive and will be discussed further in the present paper.

METHODOLOGY

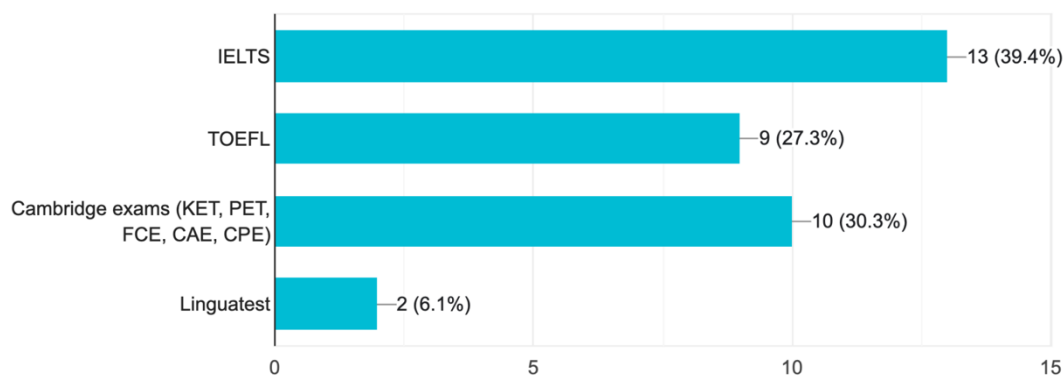
A questionnaire was distributed to 33 students: 21 of them from the Higher School of Economics, among them Russian nationals and international students, as well as 12 students who were not associated with any educational institution at the moment of this research. All the students that took part in the survey had at least an Intermediate level in English and they were either preparing to take an international English exam or had already taken one. The main objective of the questionnaire was to explore the difficulties that learners face regarding idiomatic language when preparing for exams.

Among the language exams the participants took or were preparing for, the most popular one was IELTS, with 13 students (39.4%), the second most popular ones were Cambridge exams with 10 students (30.3%), and finally in the third place was TOEFL with 9 students who took it (27.3%). In this question, the questionnaire also included the option "Others" in which participants could have specified other language exams they have been involved with recently, to which 2 students wrote the Linguatext (a Russian domestic examination of English), one of these 2 had also previously chosen IELTS. These results are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of Students by Exam Type

3. What language exam are you preparing for or have recently passed?

33 responses

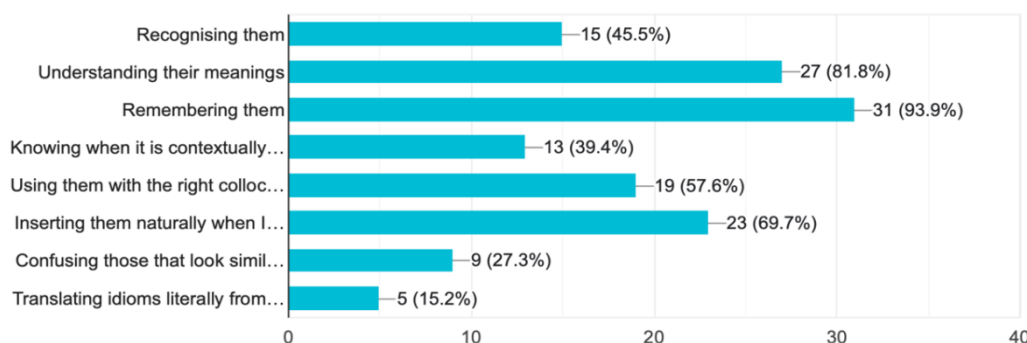


Participants were asked to choose the most common problems they have experienced when learning and using idioms (see Figure 2). They are provided with a list of eight problems and they are given the opportunity to choose several problems from it. The results illustrated in Figure 12 revealed that the two most common problems students face are remembering idioms (chosen by 93.9% of the participants) and understanding their meanings (chosen by 81.8% of the students). Similarly, 69.75% of the 33 participants chose as the third most common problem inserting idioms naturally when producing language. The two least common problems chosen by the participants were translating idioms literally from their first language, with only 15.2% of students identifying this as an issue and confusing expressions that look similar but mean different things, with 27.3% students marking it.

Figure 2: Perceived types of problems with idiomatic language

1. What common problems have you experienced when learning and using idioms? (Select all that apply)

33 responses



In order to identify the most suitable activities that could minimize the identified problems with idiomatic language, two semi-structured interviews were carried out with two professors from the School of Foreign languages (SoFL) from the Higher School of Economics (HSE).

According to the findings collected via the interviews, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Idioms are not a must for passing international language exams but they function as a sign of proficiency that is usually linked to higher bands and scores.

2. Learners' perceived deficiencies coincide with the problems professors had detected. They include problems with retention, comprehension, L1 interference and internalization.
3. A combination of authentic exposure, controlled practice and metacognitive activities, as well as communicative tasks that encourage the use of idiomatic language could be the most useful approach to enhancing students' idiomatic competence.
4. Current preparation materials are diverse and abundant but lack emphasis on developing idiomatic competence.
5. A complementary material dealing with idioms for exam preparation could be useful if it offers enough exposure, guided practice and communicative opportunities.

Based on these findings, a workbook targeting common idioms in the context of common international language exam topics was designed. Both the outline, and tasks included in this workbook were developed to address the main needs of students and follow the recommendations given by the interviewed professors.

The process of designing the workbook consisted of six main interrelated stages: a) selection of thematic groups and content of each unit, b) extraction of idioms from relevant exam samples using the tool AntCon c) compilation of a database of relevant idioms per topic using Microsoft Excel, d) creation and adaptation of selected texts within the selected themes, e) design of the relevant presentation, controlled and semi-controlled practice activities per unit f) creation and adaptation of exam-oriented production activities.

The activities included within the presentation stage are mainly focused on noticing the idioms used in the authentic texts, their form and the way their meaning contributes to the ideas put forward in each text. Students are mainly asked to analyze the text, underline the idioms they notice and in some cases, figure out their meaning based on the context that surrounds them. There are also some activities that make the learners reflect on the form, meaning and use by means of questions that aim at raising their metalinguistic awareness. For example, learners are asked to look into whether certain grammatical changes can be made within the expressions' structure without affecting their meaning or idiomatic nature.

As for the controlled practice, it included several activities that focused on developing accuracy in the usage of idioms, but with a low communicative pressure. The activities included tasks focused on word-order, matching, sentence paraphrasing, activities in which students needed to correct errors, complete sentences in a guided way, crosswords aimed at reinforcing form-meaning associations, among others. Even though the style and idea behind many of these activities repeat across the workbook, the combination of them was varied on purpose across the different units. This was done in order to maintain consistency and reinforce familiarity with these formats, while still keeping the learning process fun and engaging.

Similarly, tasks with a semi-controlled nature included guided sentence creation, short written answers using specific idioms, dialogues completion in which learners were supposed to react using the idioms, among others. By engaging with these activities, learners had more freedom to answer, and rather than a mechanical insertion of the expressions, they were required to make decisions on appropriateness in each communicative situation given.

The production stage was created using activities taken from or inspired by common exam questions from IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge exams. This was done in order to make the questions useful for all students no matter what exam they are taking, and to give learners the opportunity to apply the idioms they learned to meaningful communicative contexts that mirror the ones they will have to face in the exams.

Finally, each unit concludes with a section called Reflection log, aimed at making students revisit the idioms they learned within the framework of the unit, identify the ones they still remember, the ones that were more challenging, think of other possible contexts in which they still could be used and assess their current ability and confidence to understand and use these expressions after completing the unit. By doing so, learners are encouraged to develop their metacognitive awareness.

After the material was designed, a group of students was selected in order to run a trial of the workbook and gather first-hand evidence of whether it was effective to be used as a complementary material in the classroom to improve the learners' idiomatic competence. The experimental group was composed by five students from the International Language School (ILS) who are currently preparing for taking the Cambridge Advanced Examination (CAE). They are all young adults, with mixed abilities, with B1-B2+ level according to an internal placement test given at the beginning of the course. After a short talk with their teacher, it was possible to find out that their usual instruction focuses primarily on exam format and task types. However, the teacher usually introduces new vocabulary and grammar structures to help students demonstrate a higher level of proficiency. Similarly, in addition to working with speaking tasks based on exam formats, the teacher also introduces some communicative elements to her lesson by encouraging debates and discussions. Idioms have been addressed before on several occasions, but mainly when they appear in specific sample tasks.

During the trial the experimental group was administered a pre-intervention test and a post-intervention test. Due to time constraints and in order to avoid disrupting the school curriculum the trial took place in only one session which consisted of two periods of 60 min each. At the beginning of the session, the experimental group was given the pre-test (see Appendix 12) that included two Use of English tasks and one speaking task mirroring the formats of the ones appearing in the Cambridge exam. In the Use of English tasks, students were expected to fill in gaps and transform sentences using some idioms. Additionally, as part of the speaking task, learners were supposed to express their position towards one controversial statement, providing strong arguments and using idiomatic language in their responses. All the tasks were set in the context of environmental issues, since this was the topic the students were working on as part of their regular curriculum.

After the pre-test, the students received a usual lesson on this same topic. During the lesson they worked with sample tests and the teacher incorporated some exercises from unit 6 of the workbook, entitled Environment and Science. At the end of the session, learners were given the post-test with the same structure and amount of items of the pre-test. There, students again had to prove their knowledge of certain idioms with which they worked as part of the lesson, and later were asked to use them in a speaking task. All their responses were recorded with their consentment.

An analytic rubric (see Table 1 and 2) for both tests was created beforehand in order to compare the results before the intervention of the workbook and after it. The data gathered from the pre-test and post-test will be discussed and compared in the following section.

Table 1: Use of English assessment rubric

5	4	3	2	1
The student answers all 5 items correctly.	The student answers 4 items correctly.	The student answers 3 items correctly.	The student answers 2 items correctly.	The student answers only 1 item correctly.

* 0 is given when the student answers all items incorrectly or does not answer. For an answer to be considered as correct, both the choice of idiom and its form should be accurate.

Table 2: Speaking assessment rubric

	5	4	3	2	1
Task Achievement	The student stays on topic throughout and addresses fully all parts of the task. A clear	The student stays on topic throughout and addresses fully all parts of the task. A clear opinion is	The student stays on topic throughout and addresses moderately all parts of the task. A clear opinion is provided and	The student goes off-topic and/or addresses insufficiently the task. An opinion is provided but	The student goes off-topic and/or addresses only one part of the task. Either provides an

	opinion is provided and supported by strong arguments in each case.	provided and supported by strong arguments in most cases.	supported by strong arguments in some cases.	offers a strong argument in only one case.	opinion but offers no clear or strong arguments or offers neither of them.
Pronunciation	The student speaks clearly, pronounces all words correctly and always uses appropriate stress, rhythm and intonation patterns.	The student speaks clearly, pronounces all words correctly and uses stress, rhythm and intonation patterns almost always appropriately. One minor slip might happen, but it does not impede comprehension.	The student speaks clearly, pronounces most words correctly and uses stress, rhythm and intonation patterns moderately appropriately. Up until two minor slips might happen, but they do not impede comprehension.	The student speaks clearly to a certain extent, pronounces some words incorrectly and uses stress, rhythm and intonation patterns with limitations. Several slips happen, some of which impede comprehension.	The student speaks unclearly, pronounces several words incorrectly and uses stress, rhythm and intonation patterns with significant limitations. Several slips happen, all of which impede comprehension.
Fluency and coherence	The student speaks fluently, using a natural speed and none or minimal hesitations. Discourse markers are used effectively, creating organized, coherent and logical connections between ideas.	The student speaks fluently, using a natural speed and occasional hesitations that do not break the flow of speech. Discourse markers are used effectively, creating organized, coherent and logical connections between ideas	The student speaks using a somewhat unnatural speed and occasional hesitations that moderately break the flow of speech. Discourse markers are used sometimes, creating organized, coherent and logical connections between ideas in most cases.	The student speaks using an unnatural speed and frequent hesitations that often break the flow of speech. Discourse markers are used rarely and do not ensure organized, coherent and logical connections between ideas.	The student speaks using an unnatural speed and frequent hesitations that almost always break the flow of speech. Discourse markers are never used, which causes unorganized, incoherent and illogical connections between ideas.
Lexical and grammatical resources	The student uses a wide range of complex lexical and grammatical resources always accurately and appropriately, as well as	The student uses a wide range of complex lexical and grammatical resources almost always accurately and appropriately, as well as complex grammatical structures. One	The student uses a moderate range of lexical and grammatical resources, sometimes accurately and appropriately. Two minor mistakes might happen, but they do	The student uses a limited range of lexical and grammatical resources with frequent inaccuracies. Several mistakes happen, some of	The student uses a very limited range of lexical and grammatical resources with frequent inaccuracies. Several mistakes happen, all of

	complex grammatical structures.	minor mistake might happen, but it does not impede comprehension.	not impede comprehension.	which impede comprehension.	which impede comprehension.
Use of idiomatic language	The student uses appropriately and accurately more than 3 idioms while formulating the answer of the task.	The student uses appropriately and accurately at least 3 idioms while formulating the answer of the task.	The student uses appropriately and accurately at least 2 idioms while formulating the answer of the task.	The student uses appropriately and accurately at least 1 idiom while formulating the answer of the task.	The student does not use any idioms accurately while formulating the answer of the task.

* 0 is given when the student does not provide an answer or when does not use the category specified

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table shows the results of the pre and post tests given to students during the trial session. The upper row includes an identification (ID) number given to each participant in order to maintain their anonymity. At the very bottom of the table, an average point gain is provided based on the average score obtained by the experimental group in each test. This gain represents how much the average score improved after the intervention of the workbook during the post test, as compared to the pre test before the intervention.

Table 3: Results of the pre- and post- tests taken by the experimental group.

Pre-test (max. 15 points)	ID: S1	ID: S2	ID: S3	ID: S4	ID: S5	
USE OF ENGLISH						
Gapped text	0	1	2	2	3	
Sentence transformation	0	1	1	3	3	
<i>Total Use of E. (sum)</i>	0	2	3	5	6	
SPEAKING						
Task achievement	5	5	5	5	5	
Pronunciation	3	3	3	4	4	
Fluency & coherence	2	3	3	4	4	
Lexico-grammatical resources	2	3	3	3	4	
Use of idiomatic language	0	0	1	2	2	
<i>Total Speaking (average)</i>	2.4	2.8	3	3.6	3.8	
Max. Score (out of 15)	2.4	4.8	6	8.6	9.8	

Average Score						6.32
Post-test (max. 15 points)	ID: S1	ID: S2	ID: S3	ID: S4	ID: S5	
USE OF ENGLISH						
Gapped text	3	2	3	4	4	
Sentence transformation	3	3	3	4	4	
<i>Total Use of E. (sum)</i>	6	5	6	8	8	
SPEAKING						
Task achievement	5	5	5	5	5	
Pronunciation	3	3	3	4	4	
Fluency & coherence	3	3	3	4	4	
Lexico-grammatical resources	2	3	3	3	4	
Use of idiomatic language	2	3	2	3	3	
<i>Total Speaking (average)</i>	3	3.4	3.2	3.8	4	
Max. Score (out of 15)	9	8.4	9.2	11.8	12	
Average Score						10.08
Average Gain (both tests)						+3.76

Overall, with a simple glance at the table it is possible to see a substantial improvement in the results obtained by the participants after the intervention compared to before it. This could be noted in the difference between the average score for the pre test (6.32 points) and the average score for the post test (10.08 points), both out of a maximum of 15 points. Here the difference is 3.76, which is the average number of extra points gained in the post test, after the students worked with the workbook.

At individual level, the most substantial gain is observed in S1, who saw a score rise from 2.4 points out of 15 in the pre test, to 9 points out of 15 in the post test. As for S2, S3 and S4, the rise was more moderate (from 4.8 to 8.4 points, from 6 to 9.2 points and from 8.6 to 11.8 points respectively) but also significant. A much more modest improvement was recorded for S5, who scored 9.8 points in the pre test and 12 in the post test, suggesting that those that benefited the most with the intervention were the participants with a weaker initial idiomatic competence.

As for the components of the tests, it is possible to notice that the Use of English section had a much more significant improvement as opposed to the Speaking section. The former showed a considerable increase from an average score of 3.2 points in the pre test to 6.6 points in the post test, whereas the latter went from an average score of 3.12 in the pre test to 3.48 points in the post test.

Although it is worth noting that all participants showed improvements in both components, this difference between the Use of English and Speaking components suggests that the intervention with the workbook had a stronger effect on students' ability to remember, recognize and manipulate idiomatic language, rather than in their ability to incorporate them in their spoken discourse. In all cases, learners with initial lower scores exhibited larger gains than their higher-scoring peers.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed at investigating whether a topic-based workbook of targeting idioms could contribute to enhancing idiomatic competence in candidates preparing for international examinations. In order to do so, the study set out to identify the main difficulties that learners usually encounter regarding idiomatic language. The main challenges found were primarily related to remembering, understanding meanings, having awareness of when it is contextually appropriate to use them, and L1 interference. In addition, the study conducted a content analysis of two exam preparation textbooks, which helped to understand that although the use of idioms was recognized as an important indicator of proficiency, it did not constitute a main focus in any of the materials analyzed, which could suggest that this tendency might be seen across other preparation materials for different examinations.

An interview with two expert professors in the field of teaching for exams helped identify activities with the potential of developing idiomatic competence in students preparing for these high-stakes international examinations. Activities that guaranteed and combined exposure, controlled practice, metacognition and encouraged the use of idiomatic language in communicative situations were found to be the most effective ones.

Based on these findings, the workbook was created and its efficiency in developing learners' idiomatic competence tested with an experimental group. Based on the quantitative results of the trial, it is possible to conclude that the topic-based workbook is relevant for enhancing learners' idiomatic competence when preparing for international examinations. However, due to the limited duration of the intervention, this positive result should be interpreted cautiously, as it might not necessarily indicate a long-term acquisition but rather the result of being exposed to the idioms shortly before taking the post intervention test.

Despite this, the study serves to highlight the relevance of idiomatic language instruction in second language learning, which is an area that often receives limited attention, especially when teaching for exams. Teaching and learning idioms is undoubtedly challenging for both teachers and learners. This study intends to emphasize how practices and materials that support contextualization, learner-centeredness, metacognition, cross-language comparisons and opportunities for meaningful spoken and written usage could significantly improve the chances of mastering idiomatic language. It constitutes an attempt to encourage language educators to give idioms a more prominent place within their teaching practices, ultimately helping learners to achieve a more proficient and natural use of the language.

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