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towards Learning English Idioms**

التعرف على اتجاهات متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية الليبيين نحو تعلم المصطلحات الانجليزية

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# Investigating Libyan EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Learning English Idioms

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## Abstract:

This study investigated the attitudes of 36 Libyan EFL students towards learning English idioms. The study also aimed to find out whether there were any significant differences between the third and fourth year students in their attitudes towards learning English idioms, and whether gender has any significant impact on these students' attitudes towards learning English idioms. The data of the study was gathered through an attitude questionnaire consisting of 20 statements with a four- Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was administered to 36 students: 18 students from the third year and 18 students from the fourth year at an English department. The data was analyzed through a two-independent samples t-test. The results showed that all participants had positive attitudes towards learning English idioms, and although there were significant differences between male and female students in their English idioms learning attitudes, there were no significant differences between the third and fourth year students in their attitudes towards learning English idioms. In light of these findings, the researcher proposes a number of pedagogical recommendations including the inclusion of idioms in the curricula of English courses such as listening, speaking, and reading. The researcher also recommends making idioms a constant part of classroom practice.

Keywords: English idioms, attitudes, Libyan EFL learners, year of academic study.

## ملخص البحث:

تشكل التعبيرات الاصطلاحية جزء كبير من اللغة المزاجية التي تستخدم بشكل واسع في اللغة الانجليزية وثقافتها. كما إن أعداد هذه التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في تزايد في مختلف مجالات الحياة اليومية. عليه هدفت هذه الدراسة والتي عنوانها (تقصي مواقف طلاب الجامعات الليبيين الدارسين للغة انجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية) إلى تحري مواقف طلاب الجامعات

الليبيين الدارسين للغة الانجليزية تجاه تعلم هذه التعابير الاصطلاحية. وهدفت الدراسة أيضا إلى معرفة ما إذا كان هناك أي فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الطلاب الدارسين في السنوات الدراسية الثالثة والرابعة في مواقفهم نحو تعلم هذه التعابير الاصطلاحية، كما نقصت الدراسة عن ما إذا كانت هناك أية فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الطلاب في مواقفهم نحو تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية الانجليزية التي يمكن عزوها إلى جنس الطلاب (ذكور وإناث). استخدم في هذه الدراسة المنهج الكمي حيث جمعت بيانات الدراسة باستخدام استبيان يتكون من 20 فقرة تهدف إلى قياس مواقف المشاركين على مقياس لا يكرت تظهر فيه موافقة الطلاب المشاركين على فقرات الاستبيان على أربعة مستويات تتراوح من غير موافق بشدة إلى موافق بشدة. أُعطي هذا الاستبيان إلى عدد 36 طالب: 18 طالب من السنة الدراسية الثالثة و 18 طالب من السنة الدراسية الرابعة بقسم اللغة الانجليزية. تم تحليل البيانات بواسطة اختبار (t-test) الإحصائي لعينتين مستقلتين. أظهرت النتائج أنه لدى جميع المشاركين مواقف إيجابية تجاه تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية، وعلى الرغم من وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الطلاب والطالبات في مواقفهم نحو تعلم هذه التعابير الاصطلاحية، إلا أنه لم تكن هناك أي فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين طلاب السنة الثالثة والرابعة في مواقفهم نحو تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية. وفي ضوء هذه النتائج، تقدم الباحث بعدد من التوصيات منها إدراج التعابير الاصطلاحية في مناهج المواد الدراسية بقسم اللغة الانجليزية كمادة المحادثة، الاستماع، والقراءة. كما يوصى الباحث بجعل هذه التعبيرات الاصطلاحية جزء لا يتجزأ من العملية التعليمية داخل الفصل الدراسي.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التعابير الاصطلاحية، المواقف، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيون بصفتها لغة أجنبية، السنة الدراسية.

## Introduction:

English is rich with its use of metaphorical language, which includes a number of types such as simile, metaphor, and idioms. Idioms are the most common subcategory of metaphorical language in English. They are frequently used by native speakers in informal and formal communication. They are used to talk about many aspects in our life, and every year new idioms are created in the English language and culture. They can be idioms from sports, entertainment or any other social field in our life (Karunakaran & Maisa, 2013).

There have been many attempts to define and clarify the concept of idioms in the literature. According to Larson (1984, as cited in Alkadi, 2015) idioms are a sequence of words that yield an entirely different meaning from the meaning that would be conveyed the individual composing words. Some researchers have focused on the content of idioms when they defined idioms. For example, Carter (1998) referred to idioms as "fixed expressions". Further, Howarth (1998) used the term "phraseology" in his definition of idioms, and more recently O'Dell and McCarthy (2010) defined idioms as multi-word phrases that have a non-literal meaning.

However, a majority of the idiom researchers, despite using different terms in defining them, agree on the semantic of idioms as being non-literal and culture-based. In other words, the constituent words of an idiom do not give a clue about the meaning of the whole idiom.

The meaning of an idiom usually has a cultural reference that native speakers can usually identify. This poses a lot of challenge to nonnative speakers because they need to learn the meaning of the idiom and remember the group of words that compose it.

Due to the abovementioned facts about idioms, learners need to learn a number of aspects about English idioms such as their frequent use in daily language, structure and meaning. Therefore, there have been many studies since the 1980s (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff; 1987; Low; 1988) that have attempted to clearly define and categorize idioms in order to create models that teachers can use to present and teach idioms to nonnative learners (Boers, 2000).

However, because of the idiosyncratic nature of idioms with regard to their mismatching syntax and semantics that the meaning of the whole idiom cannot be detected from the meanings of the composing elements, there is a heavy burden on learners to acquire and use them because they need to learn the meaning of the whole idiom without counting on the familiar meanings of its individual composing parts. This has made the role of the teacher in introducing and facilitating the learning process of idioms is indispensable (Alkarazoun, 2015).

Many researchers emphasize the importance of teaching idioms to EFL/ ESL learners. Lewis (1993, as cited in Karunakaran & Maisa, 2013) argues that there has been a shift in language teaching from teaching traditional grammar to teaching vocabulary and that vocabulary not only include single words but also multi-word structures and chunks of which idioms are a part. Schmitt (2000) affirms that formulaic language plays an important role in acquiring a second language and acts as a motivation that helps learners gain fluency in their L2.

Despite the large number of studies that have focused on EFL learners' competence of English idioms in many EFL and ESL contexts (e. g., Iranian EFL learners by Rohani and Ketabi 2012; Yemeni EFL learners by Alkadi 2015; Jordanian EFL students by Ababneh 2016) none of these studies, according to the available literature and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has aimed to investigate the attitudes of the Libyan undergraduate students doing their BA in the English Language towards learning idioms in the Libyan context. Therefore, the present research will look into the attitudes of these students with regard to learning English idioms.

## **Literature Review:**

Idioms in L2 research have attracted attention for a long time. Many studies that have been concerned with idioms processing and learning have focused on learners' comprehension of idioms and the importance of teaching and learning them. However, when we look at the

literature of idiom competence and performance, we find that L2 research into idiom knowledge and usage in the Libyan context is limited and almost lacking.

Some L2 researchers like Rohani and Ketabi(2012) examined the attitudes of 60 Iranian EFL learners towards learning English idioms, and the effects of written and video context on the long- term and short-term retention of idioms. The participants were at the intermediate level and were divided into two groups. New idioms were introduced to the first group in a video whereas the second group was exposed to new idioms in a written context. With regard to the participants' attitudes, the results of the study showed that both of the participating groups had highly positive attitudes to learn English idioms. As for the effects of the written and video context on idiom retention, the results indicated that there was no significant difference between written and video context on short-term retention of idioms. However, there was a significant difference between these two contexts in the long-term retention of idioms, as the students who were exposed to the video context outperformed their counterparts in the written context.

De Caro (2009) investigated the effect of learning idioms on improving speaking skills in the Columbian context. The participants in this study were undergraduate engineering students who were learning English. The participants were guided to use idioms in daily conversations for one semester. The results of the study showed that teaching idioms had helped the participants improve their speaking proficiency.

TadayyonandKetabi (2014) surveyed Iranian EFL learners on their attitudes about learning English idioms. Forty students from the English Translation and Literature Department participated in the study. A questionnaire was administered to the participants to find out their interest in English, attitudes towards learning English in general and attitudes towards learning English idioms in particular. The results of the study showed that the participants had very high attitudes to learn English idioms.

Alkadi (2015) investigated the idiomatic competence of Yemeni EFL undergraduate students. The study aimed to find out whether there was a correlation between English proficiency and idiomatic competence. Idiom tests were used in the study to determine the participants' idiomatic knowledge and a questionnaire was administered to the participants to find out the strategies they use to process English idioms and the difficulties they encounter when they learn new idioms. The results revealed that the high-scoring participants outperformed their low-scoring counterparts in the listening and speaking skills.

Ababneh (2016) surveyed 94 Jordanian students who were doing their BA degrees in Translation and English Language about their attitudes towards learning English idioms. The data of the study revealed that a majority of participants had positive attitudes about learning English idioms because they believed idioms are essential for effective communication in English.

In an idiom attitude study in 2018, Alhouti and Aldaihani surveyed 218 Kuwaiti EFL university female students about their attitudes towards learning English idioms. The students responded to items on the questionnaire that pertained to their preferred strategies and difficulties in learning idioms. The results showed that the participants had positive views about learning English idioms, and they had used specific strategies when learning these idioms. The results also showed that age, as an independent variable in the study, had a significant effect on the participants' attitudes towards learning idioms. Therefore, older participants had more positive attitudes to learn idioms than their younger counterparts.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

As shown in the body of literature, there is a large number of studies, some of which are included here (e.g., Rohani and Ketabi,2012; Alkadi, 2015; Ababneh ,2016; Alhouti and Aldaihani, 2018) that have focused on EFL learners' idiomatic competence and the factors that have an effect on this competence such as learners' attitudes, inclusion of idioms in the syllabus and reinforcing the importance of idioms by teachers.

However, none of the studies that the researcher has identified in the literature have focused on the attitudes of Libyan EFL learners towards learning English idioms. To bridge this gap in the literature, the present study will investigate Libyan EFL students' attitudes towards learning English idioms.

### **Significance of the Study:**

This study is intended to reveal essential information about the attitudes of Libyan EFL learners towards learning English idioms. Therefore, the results of this research study will provide useful insights for Libyan EFL teachers through calling for the importance of integrating metaphorical language in teaching and making it a part of the routine practice in class.

### **Research Questions:**

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Libyan undergraduate students majoring in English towards the importance of learning English idioms?
2. Do their attitudes towards the importance of learning English idioms differ according to their year of academic study?
3. Are there any significant differences in the students' attitudes towards learning English idioms that could be attributed to their gender?

### **Research Methodology:**

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, which were concerned with finding out the attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners' towards learning English idioms, and whether there were any differences in their attitudes that could be attributed to their gender or year of study, the researcher has devised a questionnaire through adapting the questionnaires of Khan and Daskin (2014), and Al-houti and Aldaihani (2018). The data of the study was quantitatively gathered. It was then analyzed through a t-test in order to measure the participants' attitudes and spot any differences in their attitudes.

### **Participants:**

The participants of the study were students in the English department at Omar Al Mukhtar University. Since the aims of this study are to look into the attitudes of Libyan EFL learners towards learning English idioms, the target student population was from the third and the fourth years because these students have good command of English and must have already encountered English idioms. However, the number of students in these two years was not that large. There were 21 students in the third year and 23 students in the fourth year. Therefore, the researcher has approached the more interested and proficient students in both years in an attempt to yield more reliable results from the participants' responses. As a result, the questionnaire was administered to eighteen participants in the third year (7 males and 11 females), and eighteen participants in the fourth year (11 males and 7 females). Their age range was between 19 and 22. All of these participants had studied English for more than 6 years before they majored in English at university, starting at middle school through high school.

### **Instrument:**

Since the aim of this study is to find out the attitudes of Libyan English-majoring students towards English idioms, after a thorough examination of the related literature (Rohani and



Ketabi,2012; Alkadi, 2015; Ababneh ,2016; Alhouti and Aldaihani, 2018), an attitude questionnaire was devised and employed to gauge these students' attitudes.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items of which 14 were from Khan andDaskin (2014) while the other six items were adopted from Al-houtiand Aldaihani (2018). All of the statements were in English, and the participants indicated their agreement or disagreement to these statements on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (See Appendix I).

### **Procedure:**

Prior to conducting the study, the questionnaire was piloted with four students in order to check the clarity of the items. As a result, some modifications such as changing the wording of some items (e.g. Statement 5 was originally: English language learners should have knowledge about idioms, and reworded here as I like to learn new idioms on a regular basis; and Statement 7 was originally: We might need to recognize and understand English idioms when we have to communicate in English outside the classroom, and it has been reworded as We need to know idioms to communicate outside the classroom)\ were made to clarify some items and make the questionnaire more appropriate to the context and participants of the study. The results of the piloted questionnaire were excluded from the study.

The modified questionnaire was administered to the participants during the academic year 2019-2020. All of the participants were informed by the researcher that their responses will be used only for research purposes, and they all gave oral consent to participate in the study. The participants were requested to give true and honest responses by the research in order to yield reliable data for the study.

### **Data Analysis:**

The data gathered from the questionnaire was analyzed as follows: a response of strongly disagree or disagree was deemed negative and awarded one or two points respectively, whereas a response of agree or strongly agree was considered positive and given three or four points respectively. The data was then run through a t-test, a statistical analysis used to calculate the differences between two independent groups (Moore et al, 2013). Therefore, this test is suitable for this study because it aims to find out the differences between the third and fourth year students in their attitudes to learn English idioms. The t-test calculates mean scores, standard deviations, and the p and t values in the participants' responses in order to reveal whether or not



the differences in the participants' responses are significant. This analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22.

### Limitations of the Study:

It is hard to generalize the findings of this study because of the following limitations: First, the study is limited to the Libyan EFL learners enrolled in the third and fourth years at the English department from one university in east Libya. Including participants from more than one university could have yielded more reliable results. Secondly, although the sample was representative of the participating student population, it is still relatively small; a larger sample would have been more reliable and representative.

### Results and Discussion:

In order to answer the research questions, the gathered data was run through t- test in order to calculate the means and standard deviations of the students' responses. The t value and pvalue were also calculated for some analyses.

**Table 1 Means and Standard deviations of the students' attitudes towards learning English idioms**

No	Questionnaire Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I believe idioms are important in everyday communication.	3.18	0.58
2	Teachers should teach idioms to learners.	3.22	0.60
3	Idioms should be part of the classroom practice.	3.20	0.66
4	Idioms should be included in the language curricula.	3.35	0.57
5	I like to learn new idioms on a regular basis.	3.22	0.63
6	Idioms help me learn more about the target culture.	3.77	0.45
7	We need to know idioms to communicate outside the classroom.	3.05	0.69
8	Idioms are very important for English language learners.	3.10	0.71
9	Using idioms makes speech sound more effective.	2.97	0.73
10	Knowing English idioms is necessary for me to understand the everyday language better.	3.24	0.60
11	Idioms are important because they reflect and represent culture.	3.65	0.49
12	Idioms are important because they indicate native-like knowledge of the language as they reflect proficiency.	3.40	0.58
13	Idioms are important because they are frequent and common.	2.55	0.66
14	Knowing idioms can make listening texts easier to understand.	2.30	0.86
15	Knowing idioms can make reading texts easier to understand.	2.52	0.84
16	Learning English idioms is important for me to get familiar with the English figurative expressions.	3.50	0.52
17	I believe learning new idioms increases my language proficiency and competence.	3.10	0.60
18	Learning to use English idioms in oral communication is necessary for developing my speaking skills.	2.50	0.79
19	Learning to use English idioms in written communication is necessary for developing my writing skills.	1.85	1.15
20	Knowing English idioms is important for me to perceive the cultural differences and similarities better.	3.55	0.49
<b>Total</b>		<b>3.01</b>	<b>0.64</b>

Table 1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations of the students' responses to each attitude statement in the administered questionnaire. The statistics in table 1 indicate that the mean scores of the students' responses range between 1.85 and 3.77. As can be seen in the table, the highest mean score refers to statement (6) *Idioms help me learn more about the target culture*, whereas the lowest mean score goes to statement (19) *Learning to use English idioms in written communication is necessary for developing my writing skills*. The overall mean score for the participants' responses was 3.01. This indicates that the participants know that idioms are a part of the English culture, and they realize the importance of culture and its roles in learning a language. This finding concurs with the findings from earlier studies that were conducted on Arabic EFL learners (Ababneh, 2012; Alhouti and Aldaihani, 2018).

It is worth noting that all of the statements that refer to learning culture through idioms, represented by statements (6, 11, 16, and 20) with their respective means (3.77, 3.65, 3.50, 3.55), have received the highest mean scores. The overall mean for the culture-related idiom was 3.61. Furthermore, the highest mean score goes to a culture-pertaining statement. Based on these scores, it can be concluded that Libyan EFL learners place high importance on idioms as a tool to learning the English culture. This culture-idiom link was also emphasized by the Kuwaiti participants in the study conducted by Alhouti and Aldaihani in 2018.

Furthermore, the students have indicated positive attitudes towards learning English idioms because of their importance for everyday communication. These attitudes were represented by statements (1, 7, and 19) which have also received high means (3.18, 3.05, and 3.24 respectively). Furthermore, the three statements (9, 12, and 17) that point out that idioms are a mark of language proficiency and mastery have high mean scores as well (2.97, 3.40, 3.10 respectively). The mean scores of these communication-pertaining statements indicate high level of agreement by the participants on the importance of idioms in everyday communication. This finding differs slightly from the findings in Khan and Daskin 2014, in which although the participants expressed agreement on the importance of idioms in communication, their level of agreement was relatively low when compared to the agreement level indicated by the participants in this study.

Moreover, four statements of the questionnaire (2, 3, 4, and 5) were aimed to investigate the participants' attitudes towards learning idioms in the classroom. These statements have also received high mean scores (3.22, 3.20, 3.35, 3.22 respectively), with an overall mean of 3.24.

This confirms that the participants would like to have instruction on idioms in the classroom. This finding is in agreement with findings from previous studies such as Alhouti and Aldaihani in 2018, and Khan and Daskin in 2014, in which the majority of the participants expressed eagerness to learn English idioms in the classroom.

Overall, the findings from the present study are consistent with the findings of earlier studies in other EFL contexts in which the participants have positive attitudes to learn English idioms (Rohani and Ketabi,2012; Alkadi, 2015; Ababneh ,2016; Alhouti and Aldaihani, 2018), and this answers the first question of this research about the Libyan EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English idioms.

In order to answer the second question of this study which was to find out whether there are any significant differences in the students' attitudes towards the importance of learning English idioms that could be attributed to their year of study, the mean scores of the students' responses at the third year were measured against those of the students at the fourth year through a two-independent samples t-test of equality at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ).

**Table 2 T-test data between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students' attitudes towards idioms**

Year of Study	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	Sig
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	2.99	0.46	0.22	.82
4 <sup>th</sup> Year	3.03	0.45		

The results obtained from table (2) indicate that the t value was (0.22). Therefore, it can be concluded that there are no significant differences between the students' responses to the questionnaire items that could be caused by the year of academic study. This finding is similar to the findings in the study conducted on Kuwait EFL learners by Alhouti and Aldaihani in 2018 in which age was found to have no effect on the positive attitudes of the participants to learn English idioms.

In order to answer the third question of this study which aimed to find out whether there are any significant differences in the students' attitudes towards the importance of learning English idioms according to their gender, again, the mean scores of the male students' responses were measured against those of the female students through a two-independent samples t-test of equality at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ).

**Table 3 T-test data between male and female students' attitudes towards idioms**

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	Sig
Male students	3.13	0.23	-3.00288	.002494
Female students	2.89	0.24		

Table 3 represents the statistics of the t-test between male and female students. The statistics include means, standard deviations, t and p values of the participants responses., the t-test reveals that although both male and female participants have positive attitudes towards learning English idioms as shown by the mean scores of their responses (3.13 and 2.89 respectively) , there are still significant differences in their attitudes as indicated by the p value (.0024). This finding is different from the findings of the study conducted by Ababneh in 2016 on Jordanian EFL learners, in which there were found no significant differences in the participants' attitudes towards learning English idioms that could be attributed to gender.

To sum up, the findings of the present study, like many previous studies in other EFL contexts, confirm that the participating Libyan EFL learners had positive attitudes towards learning English idioms and were aware of their importance in learning the English culture.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The present study investigated the attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners towards learning English idioms. Additionally, the independent variables that were measured in the study were the gender of the participants and their academic year of study. From the study, it can be concluded that Libyan EFL learners had positive attitudes to learn English idioms. The findings showed that there were no significant differences in the participants' attitudes that could be attributed to their year of academic study. Moreover, the results revealed that although both of the male and female participants had positive attitudes, the male participants indicated higher levels of positive attitudes towards learning English idioms.

Based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations could be made. First, EFL instructors must be aware of the idiomatic importance in learning English. Therefore, they should include idioms in their course's syllabi, especially when teaching courses such as reading, listening, and speaking. They can adapt a lot of materials that contain idioms and use them for these courses. This will also raise the students' awareness to the importance of idioms in the English culture. Second, instructors should devote some part of their classroom practice to teaching idioms as this will help increase the learners' exposure opportunities and help increase their idiomatic competence. Finally, instructors must emphasize the importance of figurative expressions in English.

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