



is such that requires comprehension only e.g., matching idioms with their definitions, multiple choice exercises, and completion ones, without any requirement to produce them, orally or in written form. Therefore, the present study suggests that including sentence writing tasks associated with other exercises, rather than those which solely rely on comprehension exercises, will assist learners with learning and retaining idioms in an effective way. Then, syllabus designers might find it useful to provide EFL learners with well-organized curricula relying on production exercises in addition to comprehension ones as a facilitating factor in learning idioms.

This study has also revealed that new idioms can serve as mini-topics to write about. Then, students will naturally seek for and practice other contextually appropriate vocabulary. Also, discussing and checking the students' sentences in the class provides an opportunity for them to brush up on their writing skills.

Although the findings of this study provide evidence that output, here sentence writing, facilitates retention of idioms, it would be useful for future studies to continue to investigate effects of written output like paragraph and essay writing. Some studies may wish to investigate the effects of oral output on the retention of idioms.

Moreover, the FL proficiency level of participants in this research was intermediate. It is possible that the mature of the effect of sentence writing might be different among learners at advanced levels and yield null or negative results. Future studies might address other issues such as

age, sex, different L1 and different FL proficiency levels as the independent variable other than sentence writing to see the probable affinity between these variables and learning idioms.

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hypothesis, the t-value of the recognition and the recall tests was calculated, which were: 3 and 2.79.

Like most fields, the researchers selected an 0.05 level of significance to reject the null hypothesis. Checking t-critical value table with 60 d.f. at 0.05 level of significance gave 2.000 for the recognition and the recall tests.

Recognition tests were administered at the end of each session to SWG and NWG. Table 2. demonstrates the results of the subjects' performance on them.

Table 2. The results of the two groups' performance on the recognition tests

Group	N	Mean	$S(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)$	t-observed	t-critical
SWG	31	9.43	0.15	3	2.000
NWG	31	8.89			

As depicted in table 2., on the recognition tests, the t-value observed (3) was higher than the t-critical value (2.000) with 60 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level significance. The SWG subjects' average performance on the recognition tests is higher than that of the subjects in the NWG; hence, sentence composing proves to be positively effective on learning and retention of new idioms in the short run.

Table 3. below depicts the results of the subjects' performance on the recall tests which were conducted at the start of next session.

Table 3. The results of the two groups' performance on the recall tests

Group	N	Mean	$S(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)$	t-observed	t-critical
SWG	31	7.45	0.29	2.79	2.000
NWG	31	6.64			

Also, the data show that the t-value observed for 60 degrees of freedom was 2.79 which exceeds the t-critical value (2.000) at the 0.05 level of

significance on the recall tests. This is indicative of the fact that sentence writing helps FL learners learn and keep the new idioms in mind in the long run as well. In effect, this does not mean that we should overlook the role of read-and-do tasks in teaching/learning FL idioms. Utilizing the regular methods and exercises of teaching/learning idioms together with the complementary sentence-writing tasks, FL teachers and learners will get the most.

Since the t-values for both the recognition and the recall tests are above the t-critical value, we are quite safe to reject the null hypothesis. The difference is statistically significant. Obviously, as the two groups were almost homogeneous and were taught the same idioms, the difference between the two means were due to the kind of treatment, sentence writing, given to the experimental group. This is support for our claim that our method of using sentence writing promotes learning new idioms.

The results of the present research demonstrate that sentence writing is more facilitating in the retention of idioms than just having learners listen to and read the examples, definitions, and then do some exercises. The facilitating role of sentence writing in learning idioms might be somehow because of the fact that the meaning of idioms are not consolidated in the learners' mind unless they produce the new idioms in their own sentences. Requiring learners to write sentences of their own on the new idioms supports De la Fuente, M.(2002) call for pushing output from learners to promote learning.

### Pedagogical Applications

From practical point of view, many foreign language materials either ignore idioms or just devote a peripheral section to them in vocabulary learning lists leaving students to learn them through some definitions, examples and exercises without any practice. The nature of these exercises



embedded. The instructor explained the meaning of the idioms and tried to assist the learners as to how and in which situation or context the idioms are used. The subjects were asked to write a sentence or two of their own based on the definitions provided. They wrote sentences individually or in pairs and then embarked on peer correction. Then, one original sentence was discussed for each idiom. In the process of writing, the researchers were supervising to see if all the participants were busy practicing the idioms. At the end of each session, the papers were collected by the researchers to make some possible corrections at home to make sure there was no lexical, grammatical, or semantic error in the participants' writings. They were handed in next session.

In the second treatment condition, the same ten idioms were taught to the participants (henceforth Non-sentence Writing Group: NWG which identifies the control group). In effect, this group received some placebo treatment through giving definition of each idiom in English, along with sample sentences comprising those idioms. Persian equivalents of some idioms were also given in some occasions if subjects did not understand the meaning of them. Afterwards, various exercises such as matching, completing, correcting the errors, and filling the blanks with given idioms were done each session.

This process went on for 8 successive sessions with a 6-day interval between each in both groups. Indeed, 80 idioms were arranged in 8 pre-planned forms and taught to both groups.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

In order to find out whether there was any significant difference between the performance of two groups on recognition and recall tests, the experimenters analyzed the data obtained from the two tests. To obtain this goal, the researchers

applied one t-test to compare the difference between the recognition tests of the two groups and another t-test to compare the difference between the recall tests of control and experimental groups

Table 4.1. tabulates the results obtained from measuring the mean performance score of the participants in the two groups on the recognition and the recall tests:

Table 4.1. Mean of the performance scores in SWG and NWG

	SWG	NWG
Recognition	9.43	8.98
Recall	7.45	6.64

As indicated in table 1. the mean of the subjects' scores of the SWG on the recognition tests was 9.43 and on the recall tests equalled 7.45.

Also, table 1. illustrates the results obtained from the performance of the subjects in non-sentence writing group as related to the recognition and the recall tests. It shows that the mean obtained from the recognition and the recall tests were 8.98 and 6.64.

There is definitely a difference between the recognition tests administered to both groups. The same is also true about the recall tests. We needed to determine whether this difference occurred by chance or not. An appropriate procedure to estimate how much difference between the two means would be expected through chance was to calculate the standard error of the difference between the two means.

There was an average difference of (0.15) and (0.29) for the recognition and the recall tests through chance under a true null hypothesis.

In order to decide whether the observed difference was significant to reject the null

be determined from the meaning of the words that comprise them.

### **Output and New Vocabulary Learning**

Whereas Krashen's Input Hypothesis focused on the role of input for second language acquisition, other researchers have drawn attention to the role of output. Swain (see Barcroft, 2004) argued that output may help learners by relying on specific means of expression and syntax needed to produce language.

Different output activities during vocabulary learning have yielded different results. For example, Watanabe (see Barcroft, 2004) found that having learners write the meaning of FL words in their L1 while reading has no effect on lexical acquisition rates. On the other hand, Ellis (see Barcroft, 2004) found that learners in a modified output treatment achieved higher vocabulary acquisition scores than learners in two input groups.

The results of an experiment carried out by Barcroft (2004) suggest the inhibitory effects of output for sentence writing on new word learning. He also concludes that although semantic elaboration can facilitate memory for known words, it may not facilitate and can even inhibit memory for new word forms.

In another study done by Lee (2003) on the effect of writing on vocabulary retention he found that post-instruction and delayed writing will lead to better vocabulary retention because of rich vocabulary span and better sentence grammar. Instead, systematic vocabulary instruction based on the following psycholinguistic principles is proposed:

1. see the word (visual or spelling representation)
2. hear the word (teach model words)
3. understand the word (definition of meaning, explanation, elaboration of meaning in context, exemplification, using a prop, dramatization, giving synonyms and antonyms)

4. say the word (repetition)

5. use the word in context (writing)

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

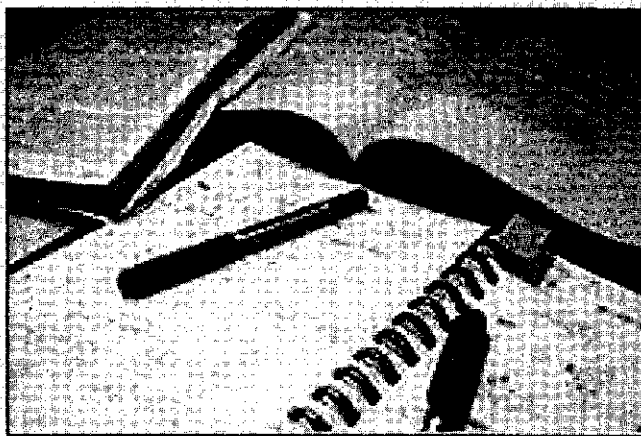
A total population of 120 female and male students at Marefat and Padideh English Institutes in Qazvin was selected. In order to evaluate the homogeneity of the subjects, the researchers administered a 100-item piloted Michigan Test. Afterwards, 62 students who got one SD above and below the mean were assigned randomly to two groups, namely control and experimental. The remaining students were discarded. All the key informants were within the age range of 17–24 years and all of them were residing in Qazvin. It is worth noting that they had passed the New Interchange Book 3 successfully and enrolled in Passages 1. Sex variable was not taken into account in this study.

#### ***Design and Procedures***

The study was conducted during spring and summer in 2005. The treatment lasted 8 sessions in a period of two months. Based on the nature and the purpose of the research, the blueprint of the research, the procedures was post-test only control group design. In effect, both control and experimental groups received instructions and tests.

Two groups, namely control and experimental, enjoyed a series of instructions through which 80 idioms were taught in the course of 8 sessions, 10 idioms in each session, with a 6-day interval between them.

In the first treatment condition, ten idioms were taught to the subjects each session (henceforth Sentence Writing Group: SWG which identifies the experimental group). The participants were exposed only to a definition of each idiom with no exposure to contexts in which the idioms were



combined; that is, an idiom is a non-compositional expression” (Linder, 1992, p.223).

What is common in all the definitions proposed for idioms is that the meaning of an idiom cannot be determined by the meaning of each particular morpheme which makes up the whole set of words in it. For instance, someone who *takes the bull by the horns* is a person who faces the problems and difficulties with determination. Clearly, its meaning has nothing to do with holding or controlling the bull by taking its horns.

### Idioms and other Figurative Expressions

All the figurative expressions state unexpected meanings and it is not always an easy task to make a crystal clear distinction between an idiom and other kind of figurative expressions so that there is often an overlap among these terms. However, some authorities have made a distinction between idioms and other figurative expressions; following definitions and examples will shed more light on the point.

1. Julie *has a head on her shoulders*. I always ask her for advice.
2. Gene found the travelers check he had lost. He *is walking on air*.

Referring to the definitions given for idioms and that every living person has a head and nobody can walk on air, one considers the italic expressions as idiomatic rather than literal non-idiomatic.

**proverbs** are traditional sayings which offer advice or present a moral in a short and pithy manner (Sampson, 1982). In other words, they are short sayings in common use that express some obvious truth and similar experience (Falk, 1973). “Although a proverb may be interpreted literally, more often its meaning is understood as something more than the sum of the meanings of the morphemes it contains” (op.cit.,43). We can say *there is no use crying over spilt milk* when you break a glass; and *don't put all your eggs in one basket* when a company went bankrupt in which you invested all your money.

Now consider the following two sentences:

1. The riot was reported in newspapers with *screaming headlines*.
2. Your daughter is *playful little lamb*; sir.

Each of these expressions is similar to an idiom in that the phrases cannot be understood as the combined meaning of their individual parts. They are **metaphors**—phrases which describe things by stating another thing with which it can be compared without using the words ‘as’ or ‘like’ (McArthur, 1981).

Expressions such as *I beg your pardon* and *just between you and me* are called **cliche's**. Abrams (1970) defines them as unchanging expressions used so commonly that have lost much of their expressive force. Yurio (1980) calls such expressions ‘routine formulas’ and believes that they are not idiomatic because their meaning can



## Abstract

Idiomatic expressions usually put non-native speakers in hot water both in written and oral contexts. On the one hand, EFL learners encounter difficulties utilizing idioms and they often prefer to avoid them. On the other hand, material developers and language teachers find it difficult to produce effective materials and teach them effectively so that they relegate idioms to have a subsidiary place in syllabus. Also, owing to inconclusive research findings in this area of study and lack of crystal clear answers as to how to teach and learn idioms, addressing the question, *whether sentence composing with idioms will lead to better retention in comparison with read-and-do tasks*, may shed some light on the ambiguities. Regarding the aforementioned question, the researchers developed the following null hypothesis: *There is no significant difference between EFL learners' retention of idioms in sentence writing versus non-sentence writing, i.e. reading*. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to probe the effects of sentence composing on the retention of idioms. The results showed that subjects in the sentence writing group gained superior grades in both tests and the difference between the means of the two groups was high enough to reject the null hypothesis. The research findings can have great applications in preparing materials and teaching to and learning idioms by non-native students.

**Key Words:** Retention, Figurative expressions, Idioms, Output

## Introduction

### *Idioms; a big challenge*

In recent years, foreign language researchers have become increasingly interested in the central role of lexical acquisition in language learning. To a large degree, improving our understanding of FL learning depends on improving our understanding of how learners learn lexicon of FL.

Carter et al. (2001) indicate that idioms present real problems to learners of a language: it is not always possible for listeners or readers to recognize that an idiom exists, and they may assume the literal meaning. Second, it is unusual to be able to substitute one word for another and provide a translation into non-idiomatic English. So, without having an access to a good dictionary providing examples for idioms, an idiom cannot often be translatable.

Non-native speakers of English can reach a point in their knowledge of the language where they feel comfortable with standard literary speech; however, they are liable to find themselves in hot water when confronted with idiomatic expressions. Foreign language learners, including

Iranian learners encounter much difficulty using English idioms and they often prefer to avoid them altogether.

This difficulty may result partly from interference from L1 and partly from imperfect mastery of English idioms (Irujo, 1986).

Eventhough complete mastery of idioms may be nearly impossible, every FL learner must be prepared to meet the challenge; since they frequently occur in spoken and written discourse.

## Review of Literature

An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special meaning that is different from the meanings of the individual words which make it up. This is what appears in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1992).

Carter (1987) defines idioms strictly as "restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up".

"The traditional definition of an idiom states that its meaning is not a function of the meaning of its parts and the way these are syntactically



# The Effects of Sentence Writing on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Retention of Idiomatic Expressions

Seyed Akbar Mirhassani, Ph.D. in TEFL, Alborz Institute of Higher Education & Saeed Talebi, M.A in TEFL Garmisar Islamic Azad University



## چکیده

فراگیران زبان های خارجی، به طور معمول در فهم و کاربرد اصطلاحات دچار مشکل هستند؛ آن قدر که ترجیح می دهند، تا حد امکان از کاربرد اصطلاحات در گفتار و نوشتار خود اجتناب کنند. از سوی دیگر، نویسندگان مطالب درسی و معلمان، تألیف و تدریس اصطلاحات را کاری دشوار می پندارند و به همین خاطر در برنامه های درسی آموزش زبان خارجی، اصطلاحات جایگاه جنبی و فرعی دارند. هم چنین، یافته های تحقیقی در این زمینه کمتر از سایر مسائل آموزش زبان خارجی است؛ لذا، پاسخ به این سؤال که: آیا جمله نویسی با آموزش اصطلاحات، در مقایسه با فعالیت خواندن و درک مفاهیم، سبب به خاطر سپاری بهتر آن ها می شود؟ می تواند بسیاری از ابهامات را در این مورد از بین ببرد.

با توجه به سؤال فوق، محققین این فرضیه را مطرح کردند: «هیچ تفاوتی بین جمله نویسی و سایر روش های معمول در تدریس اصطلاحات که سبب یادگیری و به خاطر سپاری بهتر اصطلاحات شود، وجود ندارد.» به همین منظور برای انجام تحقیق در این زمینه، ۱۲۰ نفر از زبان آموزان انگلیسی سطح متوسط در مؤسسه زبان انگلیسی «معرفت» و «پدیده» در شهر قزوین انتخاب شدند و طبق معیارهای تحقیقی، در دو گروه کنترل و آزمایش قرار گرفتند. تدریس مطالب درسی به دو گروه، هشت هفته به طول انجامید. در پایان هر کلاس، زبان آموزان اصطلاحاتی را که در همان جلسه یاد گرفته بودند، در برگ سؤالات علامت گذاری می کردند. در ابتدای جلسه بعد از آن ها خواسته می شد، اصطلاحاتی را که از تدریس جلسه ی قبل به خاطر دارند، در برگه ای جداگانه بنویسند. پس از پایان تدریس و انجام عملیات آماری مشخص شد که تفاوت معنی داری بین میانگین عملکرد دو گروه در هر دو نوع آزمون وجود دارد. میانگین گروه آزمایش بالاتر از گروه کنترل بود. با این نتیجه، فرضیه ی صفر رد شد. نتایج تحقیق نشانگر نقش مثبت و تأثیرگذار جمله نویسی در به خاطر سپاری اصطلاحات است. یافته های این مطالعه می توانند در تهیه ی مطالب درسی و تدریس اصطلاحات در آموزش زبان خارجی بسیار سودمند باشند.