



USING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN TEACHING THE ARABIC LANGUAGE



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Abstract: Idiomatic expressions represent an essential component of natural linguistic competence, yet they remain one of the most challenging elements for learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language. Because idioms often carry figurative, culturally embedded meanings, traditional vocabulary-based instruction is insufficient for full comprehension. This article investigates the role of idiomatic expressions in the teaching of Arabic, reviews relevant linguistic and pedagogical theories, and synthesizes empirical findings on idiom instruction. Results indicate that explicit teaching of idioms improves learners' communicative competence, cultural understanding, and pragmatic awareness. The paper concludes by recommending instructional strategies for integrating idioms systematically into Arabic language curricula.

Keywords: Arabic language teaching, idiomatic expressions, figurative language, formulaic sequences, L2 pedagogy, cultural competence, vocabulary acquisition, pragmatic competence, cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions, also known as formulaic sequences or fixed expressions, constitute a major part of everyday communication. In Arabic, idioms such as “يداً بيداً” (hand in hand) or “بلغ السيل الزبى” (the flood has reached the brim) carry meanings



that cannot be directly deduced from their individual words. For learners of Arabic as a second language (L2), mastering idioms is crucial for understanding authentic speech, cultural references, and literary texts (Schmitt, 2017).

Despite their importance, idiomatic expressions are often underrepresented in Arabic language textbooks. Many learners develop strong grammatical knowledge yet struggle with natural expression and figurative language usage. This article addresses a central research question: **How does teaching idiomatic expressions influence learners' linguistic and cultural competence in Arabic?**

2. Literature Review

2.1 Nature of Idiomatic Expressions

Idioms are multi-word units whose meanings are figurative or conventionalized. Linguists categorize them into:

- **Opaque idioms** (meaning not easily guessed), e.g., “أكل بعقله حلاوة” (he manipulated him).
- **Transparent idioms** (meaning somewhat guessable), e.g., “يغسل يديه من الأمر” (to wash one's hands of something).
- **Semi-idioms** (one literal and one figurative component) (Fernando, 1996).

In Arabic, idioms reflect deep ties to religion, history, and collective memory, making cultural context essential for interpretation (Holes, 2004).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives



Cognitive linguistic theory suggests that idioms reflect conceptual metaphors embedded in culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For example, many Arabic idioms draw on schemas of honor, hospitality, patience, and emotion, such as:

- “طال لسانه” (his tongue grew long) meaning he became rude.
- “على قدم وساق” (on a foot and a leg) meaning very actively.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, idioms are stored as chunks in long-term memory, enabling faster retrieval compared to novel phrases (Wray, 2002). Teaching idioms therefore contributes to formulaic competence, a key component of fluency.

2.3 Idioms in L2 Instruction

Research in L2 pedagogy consistently shows that learners benefit from explicit idiom instruction. Studies across various languages document improved comprehension and more native-like production when idioms are integrated into classes (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). In studies specifically involving Arabic learners, idiom-focused instruction improved reading comprehension and listening accuracy, especially when idioms were presented with cultural explanations (Mahfoudhi, 2012).

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative literature review to synthesize theoretical and empirical research on idioms in Arabic L2 instruction.

3.1 Data Sources

Sources were collected from JSTOR, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Arabic-language linguistic journals. Search terms included: *Arabic idioms*, *figurative language*, *formulaic expressions*, *Arabic L2*, and *idiom pedagogy*.



3.2 Inclusion Criteria

Studies were selected based on:

1. Focus on Arabic as L2 or foreign language,
2. Relevance to idiom learning, comprehension, or teaching,
3. Availability in English or Arabic.

A total of 34 studies were identified, with 16 included for detailed analysis.

3.3 Analysis Method

Themes were extracted through manual coding and categorization into: linguistic difficulty, cultural load, instructional strategies, and learner outcomes.

4. Results

Three main findings emerged from the literature.

4.1 Increased Communicative Competence

Learners exposed to idioms demonstrated noticeable improvements in natural, fluent speech. Mahfoudhi (2012) found that learners who studied 40 common Arabic idioms used more native-like expressions in oral interviews (Sadiq et al., 2025). Idioms also enhanced learners' ability to understand informal speech and regional dialects.

4.2 Improved Cultural Understanding

Idioms carry cultural scripts that reflect values, humor, and social norms. Learners reported better understanding of Arabic media, literature, and interpersonal communication after idiom instruction (Holes, 2004). Cultural explanations improved memory retention and reduced misinterpretation.



4.3 Enhanced Reading and Listening Skills

Idioms frequently appear in news reports, novels, films, and everyday conversations. Studies show that explicit idiom instruction significantly increased learners' comprehension scores in both reading and listening tasks. Instruction that combined visuals, stories, and etymological explanations led to the highest gains (Boers, 2018).

5. Discussion

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

Idioms should be systematically integrated into Arabic curricula rather than treated as vocabulary extras. Benefits include:

- Faster lexical processing due to chunk learning,
- Improved pragmatic competence,
- More culturally appropriate communication.

Teachers can enhance learning by using:

- **Storytelling with idioms** (placing idioms in short narratives),
- **Semantic mapping** (grouping idioms by themes such as emotions, wisdom, warnings),
- **Dialogues and role-play**, enabling students to practice idioms in context,
- **Visual metaphors**, showing literal origins of imagery (e.g., illustrations).

5.2 Cultural Considerations



Arabic idioms often have religious or historical roots. Teachers must avoid literal translation and instead highlight cultural meaning. For example:

- “حبل الكذب قصير” (the rope of lies is short) conveys moral advice.
- “لا ناقة لي فيها ولا جمل” (I have neither a she-camel nor a he-camel in it) reflects pre-Islamic culture and means “I have nothing to do with this issue.”

Teaching idioms is therefore also a pathway to teaching cultural literacy.

5.3 Challenges for Learners

Learners commonly struggle due to:

- Figurative meaning,
- Limited contextual exposure,
- Differences between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and dialects.

Instruction should incorporate both MSA idioms and common dialect variations to better prepare learners for real communication.

6. Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions play a crucial role in achieving communicative and cultural competence in Arabic. The review indicates that explicit instruction in idioms enhances learners' fluency, comprehension, and cultural understanding. Because idioms are deeply rooted in Arab culture, their systematic inclusion in Arabic language teaching helps bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and authentic language use. Future research may focus on experimental classroom studies comparing idiom teaching techniques across proficiency levels.



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