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CORPUS BASED ANALYSIS OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION ERRORS IN EFL STUDENT WRITING

Teti Lestari[1*], Huriyah[2], Hendi Hidayat[3]
[1,2,3]Universitas Islam Negeri Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, Indonesia

Article Information	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates EFL learners' proficiency in using idiomatic expressions within academic writing by employing a corpus-based qualitative approach. Writing journals produced by second-semester students of the English Language Teaching Department (ELTD) at UIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon were analyzed to identify the types, frequency, and accuracy of idiom usage. Semi-structured interviews further explored students' experiences and sources of idiomatic knowledge. Findings show that idiom acquisition occurs mostly through informal exposure such as social media, while formal instruction remains limited. Seven categories of idiomatic errors were identified: literal translation, lexical substitution, contextual misuse, structural deformation, overgeneralization, incomplete idioms, and collocational clashes. These errors indicate partial comprehension but lack of contextual and structural mastery. The study emphasizes the need for explicit idiom instruction through corpus-guided and genre-based pedagogical practices to improve academic writing fluency.
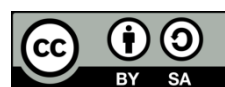
Corresponding Author: *Cirebon, Indonesia. E-mail: lestariteti07@gmail.com*

1. INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic phrases exist in every language. Boers (2008) notes in MED Magazine that idioms are prevalent across all languages. Fluent speakers often use these expressions instinctively whitout considering their metaphorical implications. It is understandable that learners of a language may struggle with idioms, as they may not grasp the underlying imagery that these phrases convey. For instance, if English language learners encounter the term referring to exams being part of a "carrot and stick" approach, they might struggle to comprehend it. This confusion arises because

they may not recognize that this phrase relates to an image of a donkey being motivated to move by a carrot placed in front of it, or by being prodded with a stick.

The use of idiomatic expressions poses a persistent challenge for EFL learners, as idioms often defy literal interpretation and demand a nuanced grasp of cultural, contextual, and collocational conventions. In analyzing students' academic and reflective writing, a range of idiomatic errors emerged, revealing not only linguistic interference from the learners' L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) but also broader issues related to lexical choice, structural control, and pragmatic appropriateness. These errors, although diverse in form, point to recurring patterns that have been well-documented in idiom acquisition literature. The table below categorizes these patterns into seven major types, illustrating each with student-generated examples and anchoring the analysis in relevant theoretical insights.

In the field of Linguistics, idioms are regarded as established phrases that are generally employed in a metaphorical manner and possess arbitrary significances. In other words, the meanings of idiomatic phrases arise by coincidence. Learners are instructed that there is no connection between an idiom and its interpretation, necessitating memorization of idioms. Nevertheless, recent studies have indicated the contrary; these studies have revealed a relationship between idiomatic phrases and their interpretations. The association between an idiom and its definition may stem from shared physical experiences or may relate to specific cultural sectors.

Idiomatic expressions are fundamental components of natural English communication and frequently appear in both spoken and written discourse. Despite their importance, idioms remain challenging for EFL learners because their meanings cannot be understood from their individual lexical elements. Indonesian learners often struggle with vocabulary, making idiomatic mastery even more difficult. Academic writing environments highlight these challenges, as students rarely receive explicit instruction on idiomatic usage.

Previous research has explored idioms in relation to translation, corpus linguistics, and idiom pedagogy. However, limited studies examine idiomatic expressions specifically in the context of EFL student writing within Indonesian universities. This study therefore aims to analyze idiomatic expression use within student journals and explain error patterns emerging from their writing.

This research focuses on how idioms can impact a person's writing, considering that previous researchers have always focused on vocabulary rather than the writing section. The object of this research is the students of the English language faculty themselves because the author saw several phenomena there. The increasing demand for the use of idiomatic expressions in writing classes, especially for class A ELDT students in semester 2, the students lack of understanding words or sentences which contain idiomatic expressions, the students have less opportunity to improve their ability to understand idioms due to a lack of practice, teachers have not taken an approach to improve students' idiomatic abilities. Those are the phenomenons that found. The focus of this study is on determining the extent of students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions, especially since they have journal writing assignments to complete in their writing class. This study also examines whether there are idiomatic errors due to students' weak basic knowledge of idiomatics and the lack of time for practice because there are no special classes to study it.

This study hopefully can be beneficial for the following parties: For teachers, hopefully the results of this study can help in overcoming the learning of idiomatic expressions. For students, it is hoped that this study can be a reference and idea if you want to analyze sentences containing idiomatic expressions. In addition, hopefully students can also explore the meaning of sentences containing idiomatic expressions more deeply, this study also shows the classification of types of idioms according to experts.

For other researchers, this study focuses on semantic studies, and further studies require references from previous studies conducted. Therefore, it is expected that further researchers will be able to achieve sufficient and in-depth understanding from the Idiomatic perspective and to consider the research. Other researchers can also gain knowledge about semantic research that may not have been known before.

Writing is one of four important skills that must be mastered by the students. As stated by Harmer (1992, as cited in Salsabila, 2018) even though writing is a talent that is valued, students find it to be demanding and complex (p. 1). Cohen and Riel (1989) stated that writing is a communicative act, a way of sharing, observation, information thoughts, or ideas with ourselves and others. In line with Azizah et. al, (2018, p. 417) described that writing is essentially the process of conveying information to readers through written form. In writing assignments, students are expected to be able to create intriguing compositions that combine their understanding of grammatical conventions with their talents to express themselves clearly.

In English, native speakers frequently and naturally use idiomatic phrases every day. These phrases are a vital component of the language's vocabulary and lexicon. Consequently, idiomatic expressions are unavoidable for those learning English as a second language. Thus, individuals who are not native speakers should familiarize themselves with these phrases. It is important for non-native speakers to study idiomatic expressions and to practice their usage to align with native speakers. Therefore, integrating idiomatic expressions into ESL and EFL classrooms and instructional resources is essential.

Dixon (2009) said that idioms have always played an important role in the English language. Because of how frequently they are used, idioms are an integral part of everyday communication and are essential to mastering all four language skills. Many English dictionaries, such as the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, to mention just two, incorporate idioms or idiomatic phrases; this is very reasonable. According to Collis, idiomatic expressions are a major source of student frustration due to the multiple obstacles they present.

Even if a non-native speaker of English improves to the point where they are comfortable utilizing academic literary terminology, they are more likely to cause confusion by use slang. Idioms and colloquialisms can anger or confuse listeners since their true meaning is rarely obvious from a knowledge of its individual parts. A learner's attempt to provide a universal definition of an idiom is often doomed to failure.

And also there is one new study called corpus. The word corpus comes from language Latin, corpus, which means body of groups (Jones, 2008). Gathering what is meant is a collection of texts from a variety of language which is maximum able to represent a trend or phenomenon of sentence variations (McEnery & Wilson, 2007). To be able to see variations language or language phenomena on a corpus, then it is needed large group of texts. Appearance of the inner corpus linguistics is divided into two phases, namely the early and modern phases. In the initial phase the preparation of the corpus is carried out by manuals.

Advantages of using data corpus in analyzing a language that is to facilitate researchers in know which words or phrases appears most often in a Language. Corpus can also show which words are most frequent pair with a word. Data corpus can also show what prepositions are most frequent stick to a word. Corpus data makes it easier for researchers to know the meaning contained in a word based on the context of use.

In this global era, there is a new advanced technology called AI. In compiling this research, the author used AI as an assistant in processing corpus data. This is because AI can help save time compared to using old corpus applications. The effect of using Idiomatic, especially Idiomatic Expression errors, is very useful for the beauty of the language used

both in conversation and in writing. However, sometimes few of the students know about idiomatic especially in English so that its use in conversation and writing is very rare.

Research on the use of idiomatic expressions has been carried out by several researchers with different focuses, such as Fahcruddin's (2021), Lina Paola (2022), Kogan, M., Yaroshevich, A., & Ni, O. (2018), Birhan, A. T. (2021). researchers focused their research focusing on the relationship of mastery of idiomatic expressions to writing skills, linguistics especially in speaking and the effect of mastery on these skills.

In addition, there is also an essay by Chasley Jorell (2018). which focuses on Idioms are linguistic patterns that cannot be changed because their meaning cannot be separated from the words and their respective parts. In other words, idioms defy literal translation. Therefore, it is important for a translator to have deep familiarity with idioms and their connotations From the research of Chasley Jorell (2018) shows that there are many idiomatic expressions and translation strategies that can be used by researchers in translating idiomatic expressions. Analysis leads to the detection of problem areas that limit progress in the field. Several studies have shown that Idiomatic Expression is very much needed in linguistic aspects such as in the research of Lina Paola (2022), Safira Hanafi in (2019), Afifatun Ni'mah-lah (2019) Task-based learning (TBL), lexical approach (LA) , idiomatic expressions (IE), the use of digital technology (Google Classroom), by using a diagnostic exam and an assessment rubric made by the instructor, researchers can identify students' strengths and weaknesses. This research can also easily help us find out what types of idioms are most commonly used and how these expressions are used in learning or education, of course.

From the summary of some of the previous research above, here are some differences that became the focus of research by researchers in the context of using idiomatic expressions in writing classes. First, research on idiomatic expressions carried out on the campus of UIN Cyber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, exspecially in semester 2 of class A where in the writing class there is the task of making a journal, of course there are some students who use idiomatic expressions in the process. Second, not studying English as a whole, the researcher intends to conduct research that focuses on the use of idiomatic expressions in writing classes, the researcher also focuses on the basic idiomatic abilities of semester 2 students majoring in English. Lastly, the researcher focuses on conducting research with an evaluative descriptive design. However, previous studies have not highlighted the urgent need to integrate idiomatic competence into writing instruction. Rather than treating idioms as peripheral vocabulary. They focused specifically on vocabulary information or else.

2. METHODS

This study applied a qualitative case study design. Data sources consisted of writing journals produced by second-semester ELTD students at UIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon.In this research There are 7 student journals to be analyzed, as well as 3 students as participants who will be interviewed. These three students are active students in class. Three students were also interviewed to gather insights about idiom learning experiences. Data collection in this journal: First, analyzing student journal documentation compiled into a corpus. After that, conducting interviews, semi-structured interviews to explore the exposure and challenges of idioms. The data analysis is as follows: first; Identifying idioms using McCarthy's idiom classification. Second; Reducing and categorizing idioms into types and categories of errors. Then Interpreting idioms based on accuracy, context, and accuracy. And finally, making conclusions.

2.1 Interviews

The method used to gather information for this research involved conducting interviews. In this research project, interview-based data collection was specifically chosen due to its compatibility with the research environment and its capacity to develop a thorough comprehension of the topic. The participants in the data collection process were students specializing in English education at UIN Siber Syech Nurjati Cirebon.

A vital component of acquiring pertinent and extensive information from individuals lies in the execution of interviews. Lavee & Itzchakov, (2021) demonstrate effective use of interviews to directly investigate the experiences, drive, and opinions of the individuals being interviewed. High-quality data, which is essential for developing a strong research argument, is the result of a successful interview; in essence, a well-conducted interview yields thorough data.

Therefore, interviews are indispensable for gaining profound insights into literacy courses within English language education. The interview instrument for this study consisted of 10 questions to be asked to students. These questions were designed to determine the students' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Three respondents participated in the interviews, all second-semester Class A students majoring in English Education. These three students were chosen to represent the rest of the student body because they were active in class.

2.2 Document Analysis

Document analysis represent a qualitative research strategy that invoves evaluating and interpreting documents to generate findings, foster comprehension, and reinforce practical knowledge. This strategy is employed to scrutinize text or written content pertinent to the research subject. Within the framework of idiomatic and the exploring literacy course in the english education department. Document analysis enables researchers to scrutinize details extracted from the curriculum, course outline, instructional resourses, reports, and supplementary documents connected to literature instruction. As stated (Armstrong, 2021) qualitative researh document analysis necessitates the inspection and alucidation of data to derive significance, acquire insight, and cultative empirical understanding.

The primary advantage of employing document analysis in this investigation lies in its capacity to furnish precise data and insights sourced from existing written materials. Furthermore, this methodology proves efficient by circumventing the necessity for extensive data-gathering procedures, such as interviews or observational studies.

In the realm of literary research, document analysis empowers researchers to gauge the efficacy of educational resources, pedagogical methodologies, and the alignment of the curriculum with students' requirements. Through the application of this method, researchers can likewise pinpoint recurring themes and patterns within pertinent documents, thereby offering a more all-encompassing understanding of literary theory.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings on idiomatic errors frequently encountered in learning activities, particularly in writing courses. The results are interpreted by explaining the errors that frequently occur when idiomatic expressions are used, as well as errors that students are unaware of. In analyzing students' academic and reflective writing, a range of idiomatic errors emerged, revealing not only linguistic interference from the learners (Bahasa Indonesia) but also broader issues related to lexical choice, structural control, and pragmatic appropriateness. These errors, although diverse in form, point to recurring patterns that have

been well-documented in idiom acquisition literature. The table below categorizes these patterns into seven major types, illustrating each with student-generated examples and anchoring the analysis in relevant theoretical insights. These are types of Idiomatic Errors in EFL Student Writing with Examples and Supporting Literature.

3.1 Literal Translation

One of the most recurrent idiomatic errors found in student writing is literal translation from Bahasa Indonesia into English. This error occurs when students attempt to convey figurative ideas directly using learners conceptual structures, resulting in expressions that are grammatically acceptable but semantically obscure or pragmatically inappropriate in English. A striking example from document D6 reads: *"He stepped on his own tail,"* which seems to be a direct rendering of the Indonesian idiom *"menginjak ekor sendiri,"* meaning to sabotage oneself or fall into one's own trap. This type of error reflects what Fernando (1996) identifies as cross-linguistic interference, where learners transfer idiomatic logic from their native language without realizing the idiomatic non-equivalence in the target language. As idioms are deeply embedded in culture and metaphor, they often cannot be translated word-for-word. The failure to recognize this results in expressions that may be syntactically correct but are non-existent or confusing in native English usage.

3.2 Lexical Substitution

The second idiomatic error type identified in student writing is lexical substitution, where learners substitute one or more components of an idiom with incorrect or semantically mismatched words. An illustrative example was found in journal : *"I bite the spoon to finish my task."* This construction appears to be a malformed version of the idiom *"bite the bullet,"* which means to endure something difficult with courage. By replacing *bullet* with *spoon*, the expression loses its original metaphorical meaning and becomes nonsensical in English usage. Lexical substitution errors point to a partial recall or incomplete internalization of the idiom's fixed form. According to Nesselhauf (2005), idioms are often opaque and non-compositional, meaning their overall meaning cannot be deduced by understanding individual words. Learners who lack full exposure may grasp the idiom's semantic intent but misremember or misreproduce its lexical composition. This is particularly likely when learners encounter idioms informally through social media or entertainment without teacher confirmation or corrective feedback.

3.3 Inappropriate Contextual Use

Another prevalent error in student writing is the inappropriate contextual use of idiomatic expressions, where an idiom though structurally correct is inserted into a context that clashes with its typical usage, tone, or register. One example was found in journal, where the student wrote: *"At the end of the day, I just wanna chill."* Although both "at the end of the day" and "chill" are valid idiomatic expressions in English, their informal tone conflicts with the otherwise academic, reflective nature of the writing task. This type of error indicates a lack of awareness regarding register and stylistic appropriateness, a concept emphasized in academic writing research by Hyland (2012). Students often encounter idioms in casual, spoken English via YouTube, social media, films, or peer interaction and may attempt to transfer these expressions into formal written contexts without adjusting tone or structure.

As Chen and Lai (2013) noted, students need not only to know *what* an idiom means, but *when* and *where* it is appropriately used.

3.4 Structural Deformation

Structural deformation occurs when learners modify the grammatical structure of an idiom, either by inserting unnecessary particles, omitting obligatory components, or altering word order resulting in loss of idiomatic integrity. A clear instance appears in the journal, where the student wrote: *"She spilled out the beans quickly."* While the intended idiom *"spill the beans"* (meaning to reveal a secret) is recognizable, the addition of *"out"* disrupts the fixed structure, rendering the expression stylistically awkward and grammatically distorted. This kind of error illustrates learners' uncertainty about the fixedness of idiomatic phrases. Unlike free word combinations, idioms are semi-fixed formulaic sequences as explained by McCarthy & O'Dell (2010) where insertion or rearrangement can break the idiomatic bond. Students often treat idioms like phrasal verbs, assuming flexibility where there is none. As a result, they may insert common particles like *out*, *up*, or *on*, believing they add intensity or clarity, when in fact they compromise idiomatic accuracy.

3.5 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization in idiomatic expression occurs when learners attempt to apply productive patterns or logical extensions to fixed idioms, thereby creating non-existent or distorted forms. A representative example from journal reads: *"I was on cloud ten when I passed the exam."* While the phrase clearly draws from the well-known idiom *"on cloud nine"* (meaning extremely happy), the learner, perhaps seeking to intensify the expression, substituted *nine* with *ten*, assuming the idiom follows a gradable or logical numerical scale. This kind of overextension reveals the learner's partial understanding of idioms as compositional phrases rather than fixed expressions. As Fathma et al. (2020) explain, overgeneralization often stems from the learner's desire to apply familiar grammatical or lexical logic to new forms. In idioms, however, this logic frequently breaks down, as idiomatic phrases are often non-literal, non-gradable, and culturally anchored. *Cloud nine* has no literal connection to numeric happiness scales; it is an opaque idiom derived from historical aviation jargon and cultural usage.

3.7 Idiom Incompleteness

Idiom incompleteness refers to errors where learners use only part of an idiom, omitting key lexical elements necessary for its full idiomatic meaning. A student wrote: *"We were burning the midnight."* This phrase appears to be an incomplete rendering of the idiom *"burning the midnight oil,"* which means to work late into the night. While the core concept is suggested, the omission of *"oil"* removes the metaphorical anchor of the idiom, rendering the expression ambiguous or grammatically odd to native speakers. This form of error reflects what Boers & Lindstromberg (2009) term as "decay of idiomatic completeness"a phenomenon where learners recall only fragments of idiomatic phrases due to incomplete exposure, poor retention, or limited reinforcement. It is especially common in idioms that contain archaic or culturally opaque elements, such as *"oil"* in this case, which may seem dispensable to learners unfamiliar with its metaphorical basis. The issue also stems from the cognitive challenge of multiword unit storage. According to Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2005) and Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (1991), learners store and retrieve chunks of language more effectively when verbal and visual input are paired.

Without visual or contextual reinforcement, learners may only retain the most salient or frequently heard component of an idiom *"burning the midnight"* and assume it is sufficient to convey the intended meaning.

3.7 Collocational Class

Collocational clash occurs when learners combine idiomatic expressions with verbs, nouns, or prepositions that do not naturally co-occur, leading to unidiomatic or awkward phrases. An illustrative case appears in the journal: *"Make a cold feet before presentation."* The student appears to confuse the idiomatic expression *"get cold feet"* (meaning to become nervous or hesitant before doing something) with a more general collocational structure such as *"make a decision"*. The result is a syntactically plausible but pragmatically inaccurate idiom.

This error type reveals learners' incomplete mastery of idiom-collocation integration. As emphasized by McCarthy & O'Dell (2010), idioms are not only fixed expressions but also rely on collocational harmony that is, certain verbs "go with" certain idiomatic objects. Substituting *make* for *get* in *"get cold feet"* breaks that harmony, producing a phrase that, while understandable to some extent, lacks idiomatic authenticity and may confuse native readers.

Storch (2010) and Cobb & Boulton (2015) both note that EFL learners often overgeneralize collocational rules from literal language use to idiomatic contexts. Learners become accustomed to high-frequency verbs like *make*, *do*, or *take*, and apply them broadly, unaware that idiomatic combinations defy such logic. In the example from the jounal, the student likely understood the meaning of "cold feet" but lacked familiarity with the correct collocational verb that typically accompanies it.

These errors are not isolated incidents; they point to broader lexico-grammatical disconnection in idiom acquisition. While students may memorize idioms as vocabulary items, they often fail to internalize them as holistic syntactic units, especially in writing. As Boers & Lindstromberg (2009) explain, idioms require integration into lexical bundles combinations of form and function that are practiced as a whole, not pieced together during composition.

4.   CONCLUSION

The present study explored the extent to which students of the English Language Teaching Department (ELTD) at UIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon engage with basic idiomatic expressions in their writing. Findings from interviews and document analysis suggest that students learn idioms primarily through passive exposure and incidental encounters, particularly from digital media, classroom interaction, and informal conversations. While students exhibit a growing awareness of idiomatic forms, their ability to apply them effectively remains limited. The lack of explicit instruction, guided practice, and contextual modeling contributes to the superficial or hesitant use of idioms, especially in formal academic writing contexts.

In examining the types of idiomatic errors students made, this study identified seven recurrent patterns: literal translation, lexical substitution, inappropriate contextual use, structural deformation, overgeneralization, idiom incompleteness, and collocational clash. These errors reflect varying levels of idiomatic competence, with most indicating partial understanding of form and meaning but inadequate mastery of structural and pragmatic usage. While students often attempted to use idioms to enrich their expression,

misapplication frequently resulted from misremembered forms, inappropriate register choices, or faulty collocation. These findings echo previous literature that emphasizes idioms as one of the more challenging aspects of langauage acquisition due to their cultural specificity and syntactic rigidity.

Overall, this study highlights the urgent need to integrate idiomatic competence into academic writing instruction. Rather than treating idioms as peripheral vocabulary, educators should frame them as essential discourse tools teaching them through contextualized exposure, contrastive analysis, and production-based tasks. Doing so will not only enhance students' lexical richness but also empower them to write with greater fluency, rhetorical nuance, and stylistic maturity. Future studies may expand by investigating idiom instruction interventions or analyzing the long-term effects of idiom focused pedagogy on academic literacy.

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