The Role of Idiomatics in L2 Acquisition: Insights from Arabic-Speaking Doctoral Students

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A B S T R A C T

While extensive research examines second/foreign language (L2) learners' proficiency in processing or producing idiomatic-figurative language (idiomatics), fewer studies have investigated L2 educators' perspectives on idiomatics and teaching methods. This descriptive qualitative case study explored the beliefs and experiences of four native Arabic-speaking doctoral students enrolled in a Second Language Acquisition and Technology in Education program regarding idiomatics and related instructional approaches. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a three-phased thematic approach to identify discrete themes and subthemes. The findings indicate participants' strong appreciation for instruction in idiomatics, emphasizing its perceived importance within language acquisition. They also shared instructional strategies to enhance learners' idiomatic competence. The study suggests that greater emphasis on idiomatics in L2 education could enhance communicative competence and recommends incorporating contextualized, authentic, and multimodal approaches alongside opportunities for natural communication. These insights contribute to a growing body of research advocating for idiomatic competence as a critical, yet often underrepresented, dimension of communicative language teaching. They also highlight the need for language teacher education programs to address this area more explicitly.

Keywords: idiomatics; idiomatic competence; L2 acquisition; Arabic-speaking doctoral students; language teacher education

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Introduction

Proficiency in using idiomatic and figurative language fluently is often seen as a valuable learning goal in second/foreign language (L2) education (Liontas, 2015, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2024a, 20224b, 2024c). Idiomatic-figurative language, encompassing various figures of speech such as *allegory*, *allusion*, *binomial*, *chunk*, *cliché*, *collocation*, *colloquialism*, *compound*, *formula*, *hyperbole*, *idiom*, *irony*, *lexemic unit*, *lexical bundle*, *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *multilexemic phrase*, *multiword construction*, *phrasal expression*, *proverb*, *sarcasm*, *simile*, *slang*, *synecdoche*, *trinomial*, and many others (referred to collectively as *idiomatics*), is commonly used in both formal and informal speech. However, the most effective methods for teaching this knowledge to pre-service and in-service language practitioners and learners remain uncertain. Moreover, the lack of emphasis on idiomatics theory and practice in general and language education has negative implications for teacher practices and learner outcomes. Research suggests that a primary factor influencing teacher practices is teacher cognition (Borg, 1999, 2009, 2018; Farrell, 2017; Farrell & Guz, 2019; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Additionally, research indicates that idiomatics comprehension and production often fall short even at advanced levels of language proficiency (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Galantomos, 2021; Hinkel, 2017; Liontas, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2018f; Liontas et al., 2019; Littlemore et al., 2011; Liu, 2008; Macis & Schmitt, 2017; Tran, 2013).

Given the potential impact of language teacher cognition on teaching practices, exploring educators' knowledge and beliefs about idiomatics can inform innovative research on progressive idiomatics pedagogy. While some studies have examined beliefs about idiomatic-figurative language among students and L2 professionals (Liontas, 2013; Ramonda, 2016; Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2021; Tran, 2012), none, to our knowledge, have examined the perspectives of doctoral students whose emerging beliefs and practices could shape pre-service teacher preparation. To address this gap, this study examines the beliefs and teaching practices of non-native speakers (NNSs) enrolled in a Second Language Acquisition and Technology in Education (SLATE) doctoral program. These participants, current or future teacher educators and researchers, provided insights into idiomatics, idiomatic competence, and approaches to instruction and learning. Accordingly, the following literature review focuses on these key concepts.

Review of Literature

Over the past few decades, interest in idiomatics and its intersection with language teacher education has increased. This likely stems from recognition of the ubiquity of idiomatic and figurative language across genres and registers (Fernando, 1996; Karlsson, 2013; Larsen-Walker, 2020; Liu, 2008), including academic language (Miller, 2020; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Acquiring *idiomatic competence*—"the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers (NSs), and with the least amount of mental effort" (Liontas, 2015, p. 623)—is critical for advanced language proficiency (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Fernando, 1996; Galantomos, 2021; Hinkel, 2017; Abolfazli Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017; Liontas, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2018f, 2021a–c; Liontas et al., 2019; Littlemore et al., 2011; Liu, 2008; Tran, 2013; Wray, 2002). Research has addressed methods for teaching idiomatic-figurative language (Amer, 2014; Buckingham, 2006; Hinkel, 2017; Khoshnevisan, 2020; Li, 2019; Liontas, 2015, 2017, 2018a–f, 2021a–c), processing and comprehension (Liontas, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2018f; Littlemore et al., 2011; Tran, 2013), multimodal and multisensory production (Grant, 2007; Larsen-Walker, 2020; Li, 2019; Liontas et al., 2019), and the beliefs and experiences of students and educators in L2 education (Liontas, 2013; Ramonda, 2016; Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016; Tran, 2012).

Multiple studies have found that language education professionals, including pre-/in-service teachers, university instructors, and directors of language programs, generally view the learning of L2 idiomatics as important (Liontas, 2013; Ramonda, 2016; Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016; Tran, 2012, 2013). The ubiquity of idioms in native speech was cited as the primary reason for emphasizing idiomatic-figurative language instruction (Tran, 2012; Liontas, 2013; Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016). Other reasons included providing critical insight into target cultures, improving language comprehension, and enhancing communicative abilities. Additionally, Liontas (2013) highlighted "discourse enhancement" as a critical outcome of improved idiomatic competence. In Ramonda (2016), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tertiary instructors differed on teaching idiomatic-figurative language, with some citing its low academic usefulness and infrequent occurrence as reasons for omission. Despite recognizing its importance, educators often exclude idiomatic-figurative language due to complexity, perceived difficulty, challenges for beginners, limited time, and textbook priorities (Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016).

Beyond general attitudes toward L2 idiomatics, researchers have examined teacher cognition related to idiomaticity, including understandings, metalinguistic knowledge, and beliefs about idiomatic-figurative language education (Liontas, 2013; Tran, 2012). Tran (2012) explored idiomatic language-teaching approaches at a Vietnamese university and found that activities targeting macro skills with embedded idiomatic language learning were more common than those focusing exclusively on idiomatic language. Activities included matching, idiom sharing, and theater. Participants generally found these approaches effective, though opinions varied on the success of activities, motivation, progress, and participation. Idioms were selected based on course relevance and ability level, with textbooks, the internet, and idiom books as primary sources.

Similarly, Liontas (2013) investigated the *knowledge about language* (KAL), skills, theoretical foundations, and instructional techniques used by university instructors and language program directors in L2 idiomaticity. The study focused on their beliefs about effective teaching methods for idiomatic-figurative language and whether idiomatics instruction was included in teacher training or professional development programs. The discussions highlighted several themes deserving further research attention and systematic pedagogical practice, including teacher-learner roles, contextualized teaching of idiomatic-figurative language, use of authentic materials, and choices in approach, techniques, and materials. Participants suggested various teaching activities, including multimodal approaches (visual, kinesthetic, communicative learning) and engagement with NSs. They also recommended integrating idiomatic-figurative language into all course activities and utilizing authentic, contextualized materials. While some instructors felt inadequately prepared by their teacher education programs to teach idiomatics, they still perceived NSs and authentic materials as effective resources. Selection criteria for idiomatic-figurative language teaching often prioritized relevance to context and student needs.

Building on this line of inquiry, Abolfazli Khonbi and Sadeghi (2017) investigated the effects of teaching idioms through four modes: short movie clips, sentence use, definitions, and role-play. An idioms test given to 47 English learners assessed their knowledge before teaching 100 idioms over one month. Posttest results revealed significant differences among the modes, with role-plays most effective, followed by movies, sentence use, and definitions. Role-plays heightened learners' attention, boosted comprehension, and fostered accurate interpretation of idioms. Visual materials paired with words encouraged verbal and non-verbal engagement, enhancing idiom learning.

The Study

This study was part of a larger mixed-methods project examining L2 education doctoral students' beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and abilities related to idiomatics through nine performance tasks, including binomials, trinomials, idioms, similes, clichés, alliterations, and proverbs. Due to the extensive amount of data collected and space constraints, only a subset of data from the larger project will be discussed next. Specifically, three research questions are addressed:

1. What are the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students regarding idiomatics and its teaching and learning?

2. How do non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students produce idiomatic-figurative expressions?

3. What strategies or techniques do non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students employ when producing idiomatic-figurative expressions?

Research Design

We utilized a descriptive qualitative case study research design to craft a comprehensive description of participants' beliefs and experiences (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). We believed that adopting a qualitative approach would assist us in interpreting phenomena based on the meanings individuals attribute to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study is a case study of four native Arabic-speaking doctoral students within a bounded system (Creswell, 2012). The participants, enrolled in the same doctoral program, shared various courses, including a seminar on L2 idiomatics.

Context

This study was conducted within a Ph.D. program at the College of Education at a large, public research university in the Southeastern United States. The program adopted an interdisciplinary curriculum with core courses split between second language acquisition (15 hours), instructional technology (9 hours), and research methods (16 hours). This multidisciplinary approach provided students with a deep understanding of language learning theories and the application of instructional technologies. Most had experience teaching English in international contexts.

Participants

Participants were all current or former members of the doctoral program. We selected native Arabic speakers to ensure linguistic homogeneity while accounting for variations in language learning and exposure. The ten participants were divided into four groups based on their years living in English-speaking countries, with one participant randomly chosen from each group. Informed consent was obtained following IRB protocols, and pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, P4) were assigned to maintain confidentiality (Table 1).

Table 1
Participants' Background

Participant	Origin	Gender	Age	Years Studying English	Years in English- Speaking Countries
P1	Saudi Arabia	M	32	4	3
P2	Egypt	F	-	25	22
P3	Libya	M	35	15	6
P4	Saudi Arabia	F	30	20	6

Data Collection

While the broader project included both quantitative (performance scores and Likert survey results) and qualitative data (interview transcripts), this inquiry focuses solely on qualitative analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews to gather rich data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) on participants' experiences and beliefs regarding idiomatic-figurative language learning (see below for a sample of the interview questions). The interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions, with additional follow-up prompts to explore participants' beliefs and experiences in greater depth. Each interview, conducted in English via MS Teams and Zoom, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. During the sessions, participants' scores on idiomatic-figurative language production tasks from the larger project were displayed to elicit reflections on their learning experiences and pedagogical beliefs. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim (Oliver et al., 2005), and reviewed for accuracy, with attention to paralinguistic cues.

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions

5. Do you consider the teaching and learning of idiomatics important in language acquisition and development?

9. Which applications of technology do you find most promising for developing idiomatic competence in second and foreign language learners? [Would you use authentic materials, incorporate different genres, or integrate various print and multimedia texts?]

10. Reflecting on your participation in this study and considering the results of your performance on the nine idiomatics tasks, what would you like the researchers to know about you as a language learner and educator?

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

To ensure a thorough thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), we used a three-phase approach. First, we read the transcripts thoroughly to become familiar with the content and coded them independently using MaxQDA (VERBI Software, 2019). We used both deductive coding based on survey items from the larger project and inductive coding developed during the analysis. In the second phase, we held online meetings to compare codes and achieve inter-coder agreement, meticulously reviewing transcripts line by line and resolving discrepancies through negotiation. This

process led to a unified MaxQDA file with consistent coding for all transcripts. In the third phase, we created a code map to help develop related themes and subthemes.

Epistemological Perspectives, Validity and Verisimilitude

We adopt a poststructuralist perspective, recognizing that beliefs, truth, and validity are all contingent upon the study's context and the researchers' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Tracy, 2020). We acknowledge that our interpretation of the data may differ from others' interpretations. Additionally, our research is guided by *interpretivist* principles, aiming to understand the subjective truth of the research participants, as well as the meanings they attribute to their lives and cultures, through the researcher's experience, empathy, and intelligence (Court, 2018). We strive to conduct research characterized by rigor, sincerity, credibility, and ethicality (Tracy, 2020), following IRB protocols and rigorous procedures for collecting and analyzing data.

Results

Distilling discrete themes proved challenging due to significant overlap among intertwined themes and subthemes. Through an iterative coding process, we identified three main themes (T) and corresponding subthemes (ST), as shown in Figure 1.
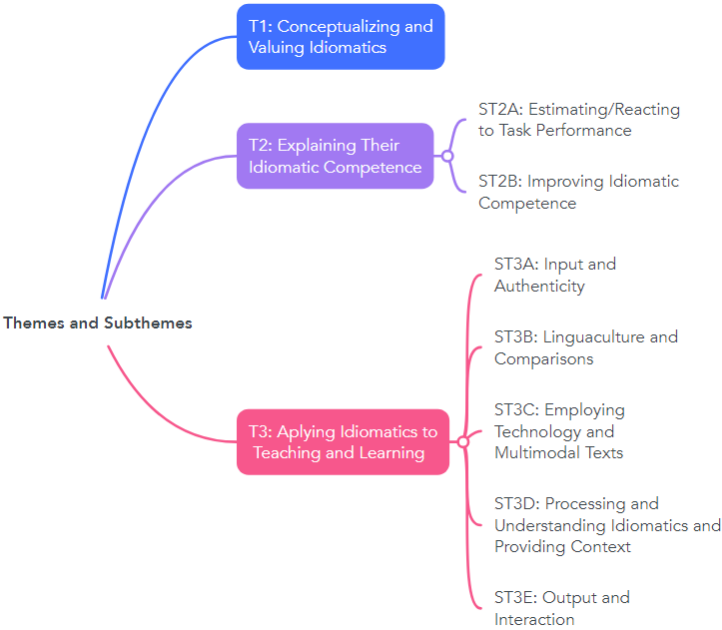

Figure 1. Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1 — *Conceptualizing and Valuing Idiomatics*

The initial theme centers on participants' beliefs and perceptions concerning *culture*, *curriculum*, and the *learning of idiomatic language*. Although explicitly asked to define *idiomatics*, participants discussed their understanding of idiomatic-figurative language throughout the interviews. Synthesizing their responses, they perceived *idiomatics* as "fixed" (P3) multi-word expressions (P1) used by NSs (P1, P2) to communicate naturally (P3). P3 elaborated that "people created this shortcut language for them to ... understand things and refer to deeper meanings and values through short words or through phrases or short expressions to make it easy to understand what they want to talk about." P2 noted that *idiomatics* can be "a very confusing term because … it could be too many things."

Participants emphasized the importance of explicit idiomatics education. P3 asserted that "we should focus more on idiomatics" in ESL education, considering it integral to language learning. P2 and P1 highlighted its role in effective communication, with P1 warning against direct translation from L1, which can result in inaccurate phrases. P4 observed that studying idiomatics aids in developing cultural understanding: "[I]f you want to actually feel that you have more cultural competence, then I feel idioms is the door to that."

P4 proposed that students should take multiple idiomatics courses, noting that a single course offers only "an introduction." Similarly, P2 advocated for at least one formal course, emphasizing that explicit instruction reveals idiomatics' value: "I didn't know the value of it until I just ... took the [idiomatics] class." P3 argued that idiomatics should be integrated into all language education courses, as it is inseparable from language study. Although P1 recognized the value of learning idiomatics, P1 suggested that mandating courses or including idiomatics in standardized tests might be unnecessary due to the varied goals students have in studying English.

Theme 2 — *Explaining Their Idiomatic Competence*

The second theme pertains to participants' explanations of their own idiomatic competence.

Subtheme 2A: Estimating/Reacting to Task Performance

P1, P2, and P4 accurately estimated their performance on the idiomatic-figurative language production tasks, while P3 underestimated his performance. P1 was surprised by the task contents, noting a "basic knowledge" of idiomatics and encountering many expressions he "totally didn't know." He attributed this limited knowledge to starting English later in life and having insufficient time in the US to develop cultural understanding.

P4 was unsurprised by her score (48.92%) but was surprised to find it exceeded the average for all NNSs (39.17%) and was close to the overall average of both NSs and NNSs (51%). She credited her performance to "formal training" and intentional self-study in idiomatics. She believed her competence was adequate for everyday communication, stating, "I think I know enough to survive in conversations and interactions with native speakers, watching movies. I don't know, just being in the culture in general."

P2 was surprised by her better-than-expected score (73.43%), explaining she "had a hard time" recognizing some idioms but "didn't know exactly what [they] meant." The study made her realize she knew more about idiomatics than she thought: "To be honest, I didn't know that I know this much [about idiomatics]," she said. She found the low NNS average (39.17%) unsurprising.

P3's task scores elicited mixed reactions. Though unsurprised by his score (40.58%), he was pleased it exceeded the average for all NNSs (39.17%). He believed he "should have scored higher," but attributed his performance to a lack of "cultural competence" due to not having "grow[n] up in the culture." He noted that NNSs must consciously learn and use idiomatics, acknowledging a deficit in cultural understanding: "I can write and read and all that, but the cultural component that comes with idiomatics is missing because of my minimal … contact with this culture."

Subtheme 2B: Improving Idiomatic Competence

Participants expressed interest in improving their idiomatic competence and outlined their plans. P1 attributed his performance to "low idiomatic competence" and intended to "work on that in the future" using an app that helped him "notice the idioms and comprehend" them when encountered. Similarly, P4 aimed to "pay more attention to the different types of idioms like those nine categories" by studying definitions, common idioms, and engaging in "intentional and formal learning" for use "outside of the classroom." She elaborated, "I will carefully choose favorites [sic] ones that I actually want to add to my language bank and use it." P2 was "definitely" interested in improving her idiomatic competence and mentioned keeping lists of expressions. She recorded idioms with "different color[s]" in a notebook for review. P3, interested in learning idiomatics via an Instagram account with daily posts, emphasized the value of everyday experiences.

Theme 3 — Applying Idiomatics Teaching and Learning

The third theme consists of participants' beliefs about idiomatics-related pedagogy.

Subtheme 3A: Input and Authenticity

Participants discussed the significance of input in idiomatics education and their beliefs about how to provide it, including using technology for authentic input, multimodal resources, emphasizing idiomatic-figurative language in texts, and making informed choices about variety, selection, sequencing, and purpose. P4 highlighted the role of teacher-provided input in idiomatic-figurative language acquisition, stating, "there's a relationship between how the idiom is first introduced to you and how you store it correctly from the very first time and how would you use it after that." P1 believed that "textual enhancement or … some other colorful image or a visual" could "help students to notice," particularly at "beginner and intermediate levels."

Subtheme 3B: Linguaculture and Comparisons

All participants stressed the necessity of direct contact with and knowledge of target cultures for comprehending and using idiomatics. P1 described idioms as "important in terms of learning about culture," while P2 emphasized the need for "more culture" to improve learning outcomes. P3 recounted learning idiomatic language from a recently immigrated child, attributing the child's competence to greater "exposure to the culture." P4 observed that "the learning and teaching of idiomatics is closely related to culture," asserting that L2 learners must "build their cultural competence and their confidence" to interact with native speakers. Collectively, these views suggest that mastering idiomatics enhances cultural competence, as understanding idioms requires cultural knowledge. It is equally plausible, however, that cultural competence facilitates idiomatic comprehension, indicating a reciprocal relationship worth further investigation. Accordingly, cultural contact emerges as a central factor in developing idiomatic competence.

Participants discussed both linguacultural differences and similarities. P1 suggested using students' L1, including L1 idioms, to enhance comprehension and motivation by explaining how "a particular expression [is] being used in their first language and for what purposes," thereby facilitating a

"connection between their L1 and L2" knowledge. Similarly, P3 recognized that individuals inevitably "compare and contrast idiomatic expressions" from their own "culture," but noted that such comparisons may not always be effective due to cultural differences.

P2 warned about the pitfalls of literal translations without cultural context, noting that they can cause misconceptions whereby aspects of a target culture seem "very rude," though they may not be considered "rude at all" by members of that culture. She illustrated cultural differences with varying depictions of farmers across countries. P4 shared an effective active-learning method called "contrastive analysis" from her experience as a student. In this approach, the teacher presented an English idiom and asked the class to suggest "equivalent idioms in Arabic." Through guided discussion and active learning, P4 and her classmates grasped the idioms more effectively than by simply receiving "lists of English idioms" paired with Arabic equivalents.

Subtheme 3C: Employing Technology and Multimodal Texts

Participants advocated for incorporating various technologies and multimodal texts in idiomatics teaching and learning. They showed interest in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) apps and dictionaries (P1, P2), web-based technology (P1, P2), and social media platforms (P2: Twitter, Reddit, ClubHouse, WhatsApp, Facebook; P3: Instagram). Additionally, they highlighted the potential of internet posts (P4), augmented reality (P2), videos (P3), games, movies (P3, P4), movie clips (P2), images/pictures, memes (P2, P3, P4), and caricatures (P3). All participants agreed that integrating technology and multimodal texts could provide students with authentic, contextualized, and engaging input.

Movies and videos were particularly emphasized. P4 noted that "something that combines text, image, or video and audio would be great so that the learners hear how the idiom is actually said," as these multimodal texts integrate auditory and visual input with idiom usage in real-life contexts. P4 recommended movies for their pre-made dialogues, while P2 suggested using short movie clips to focus on idiomatic language and check if students could "recognize the words they learned as idioms." P3 highlighted multimodal texts as "the center of teaching techniques and strategies" with their ability to convey "powerful messages." He explained that watching people use idioms in videos allows students to observe how idiomatic language is used and sense the "energy." P3 noted that multimodal input is "motivating," reduces "boredom," saves "a lot of time" for teachers, and provides more context to support acquisition compared to traditional methods. He also mentioned that videos' auditory input can aid in pronunciation.

Participants also discussed the benefits of static images, including pictures (P2), caricatures (P3), memes (P2, P3, P4), and cartoons (P3). P4 expressed interest in memes and internet posts, while P2 suggested incorporating pictures or embedding idioms within dialogues to enhance comprehension. P3 explained how caricatures can provide context for idiom learning. P1 expressed enthusiasm for incorporating "multimedia components," such as "[p]icture[s] … videos, [and] animations," to aid students, viewing multimedia enhancements as particularly promising. P1 highlighted the potential of MALL for adult learners and emphasized the need for "web-based technology" with teacher supervision for younger learners. P3 described an Instagram account teaching daily idioms through "caricatures or cartoons" or "movie clips" to provide etymology and examples, allowing learners to understand idioms through varied presentations. He noted that these multimodal methods cater to individuals who "[learn] differently."

Subtheme 3D: Processing and Understanding Idiomatics

Participants emphasized the necessity of cultural and contextual awareness for understanding idiomatics while acknowledging the need to "exercise caution" when decoding them. P1 asserted

that attempting to "make connections between idioms containing the same word" (e.g., *leg, horse*) may not yield the intended "figurative meaning," emphasizing that "idioms work independently … no matter how words appear in different expressions." Similarly, P3 cautioned against hasty comparisons of idiomatic-figurative language across cultures, noting that, although expressions may be similar, they are not identical.

Context emerged as pivotal in discussions of idiomatic-figurative language processing and production. "The context plays a big role in understanding the idiom or the thematic expression," stated P3. P2 and P1 echoed the need for background information, with P2 noting, "with no context, it's hard," and P1 adding that it is challenging to "figure out the figurative meaning" without it. P4 expressed strong interest in teaching idiomatics within context to enhance learners' idiomatic and cultural competence.

Contextual framing significantly influences the interpretation of idiomatic expressions, as reflected in participants' accounts. P2 highlighted potential confusion between the literal and idiomatic meanings of terms like "rat" or "smell something fishy" without context, noting that "a piece of cake" can mean either food or something easy depending on the context. P3 acknowledged context's critical role but noted that local teaching practices or "time constraints" may necessitate idiomatics instruction without it. Participants recommended embedding expressions in dialogues (P2), using multimodal texts such as movies (P4), and employing role plays (P1) as effective strategies for incorporating context into idiomatics learning.

Subtheme 3E: Output and Interaction

Participants highlighted the importance of actively using idiomatic-figurative language and engaging in interactions to improve idiomatic competence. P3 stated, "interaction actually teaches you more" than passive learning. He noted that mistakes made by L2 speakers in their output, such as using "bushes" instead of "bush" in the phrase *beating around the bush*, "will give a different meaning" and make it "not idiomatic anymore." He shared how his accidental alteration of an idiom ("50 cent" instead of "two cents") resulted in miscommunication. P2 suggested using memes for teaching and practicing idiomatics, proposing that the teacher "teach the students multiple expressions, […] generate a couple of memes, and […] ask them to either mix and match [expressions with memes] or […] create the idiomatic expression." She highlighted the versatility of memes and emphasized their usefulness in improving speaking skills.

Both P2 and P3 displayed enthusiasm for using role play to practice idiomatic-figurative language. P2, whose students enjoyed role-playing activities in her classes, had them "create short scenes." She suggested having students "build sentences" and "embed" idioms into these activities. P3, inspired by one of his own teachers, outlined several benefits of role playing: "You have different situations. You have different scenarios. You have different actors. You have different roles. You are using different materials … It's informative and productive." He stressed that role-plays can create context, which is crucial for learning language.

Discussion

Participants possessed well-developed understandings of idiomatics and strongly advocated for its integration into language education. They favored student-centered approaches with authentic, ample, engaging, and multimodal input, output, and interaction. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of context and cultural knowledge in understanding and using idiomatics, believing that learning idiomatic-figurative language enhances knowledge of the target linguaculture. Even with advanced academic backgrounds in the SLATE program, extended residence in English-speaking

countries, and over a decade of English learning experience for three of the participants, they continued to face challenges in producing idiomatics, often scoring below NSs. They employed various strategies to comprehend, learn, and produce idiomatic-figurative language, including interacting with NSs, using mobile apps, organizing lists, and reviewing idioms. Techniques included inferring meaning from context (e.g., *a piece of cake* as either food or something easy), comparing idioms within the target language (e.g., idioms involving *leg* or *horse*), and referencing idioms from their L1. However, they cautioned against over-reliance on comparisons to avoid misunderstandings or confusion (e.g., idiomatic phrases involving *horse* or *leg* may have unrelated meanings; *Fifty Cent* confused with *share my two cents*; misunderstanding *you're killing me* as making somebody laugh).

Research Question 1: *What are the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students regarding idiomatics and its teaching and learning?*

Participants valued both their own and others' idiomatic competence and advocated for integrating idiomatics instruction into language courses. Having completed a course on idiomatics, they regarded it as an essential component of language, integral to enhancing overall communicative competence and deepening understanding of the target linguaculture. These findings align with studies emphasizing the importance of teaching idiomatic-figurative language to enhance linguaculture competence (Abolfazli Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017; Liontas, 2013; Ramonda, 2016; Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016; Tran, 2013). However, they contrast with Ramonda's (2016) findings, which showed that some tertiary EFL instructors did not perceive the value of teaching idiomatics in academic contexts.

These convictions reflect participants' readiness to contribute to research and teacher education on idiomatics. Teacher beliefs often shape practice (Borg, 1999, 2009, 2018; Farrell, 2017; Zhu & Shu, 2017), but positive beliefs alone may not improve pedagogy (Soto-Jurada & Garcia-Ponce, 2016). Future research should examine internal (e.g., teacher cognition) and external (e.g., curriculum pressures, time constraints) factors influencing idiomatics instruction. Given idiomatics' ubiquity across genres and registers (Fernando, 1996; Karlsson, 2013; Larsen-Walker, 2020; Liu, 2008; Miller, 2020; Simpson & Mendis, 2003) and its role in advanced language proficiency (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Liontas, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2018f; Liontas et al., 2019; Liu, 2008), educators must possess strong foundational knowledge to promote idiomatic competence through digital and print materials. Accordingly, participants' demonstrated and desired idiomatics knowledge reflects positively on their roles as instructors, teacher educators, and emerging researchers.

A nuanced understanding of idiomatic language's defining characteristics (T1) was evident in participants' responses—a notably complex task (Hinkel, 2017; Liontas, 2018c). They defined idiomatic-figurative language as multi-word expressions used by "native speakers" (P1) in authentic or "natural" (P3) communication and noted that such expressions allow communicators to convey more or different meanings with fewer words. These definitions generally aligned with those of Liontas (2018c) and Hinkel (2017). Given participants' status as former or current doctoral students in SLATE who had completed at least one idiomatic language course, these findings were unsurprising. Encouragingly, as potential teacher educators and researchers, they demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of idiomatics and a keen interest in advancing their knowledge and teaching it to others.

The importance of incorporating active, culturally contextualized learning opportunities was consistently underscored across participant responses. By incorporating authentic, culturally contextualized materials and employing multimodal/multisensory activities (e.g., role play) and digital media (e.g., memes, videos), the process of *idiomatization* can be enriched over time (Liontas, 2015). These findings align with Liontas (2013), who observed that language educators support

various methods, including interaction with NSs, the use of culturally authentic materials, and multimodal and multisensory activities (such as communicative learning, kinesthetic, visual, oral, and aural methods) in structured learning environments. Participants advocated for student-centered education, with P4 emphasizing the goal of "empowering students" to apply knowledge for personal growth, not just for grades.

These findings, supported by related research, highlight the endorsement by language education professionals of materials and methods that prioritize student-centered and effective educational approaches. While the content of idiomatics instruction (the *what*) is crucial, the manner in which it is taught (the *how*) is equally vital (see Abolfazli Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017).

Research Question 2: *How do non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students produce idiomatic-figurative expressions?*

In RQ2, we investigated how participants perceived their idiomatic competence, including both receptive and productive abilities, as well as their past experiences with and future plans for learning English idiomatics. The performance of P1, P3, and P4 on the production tasks, a primary focus of the larger project not reported here, was notably lower than that of NSs. All participants offered explanations for their performance and shared observations regarding their own idiomatic competence. Specifically, P1 believed his idiomatic competence was low and noted that the task items lacked context, which would have facilitated easier production. P3 attributed his unsatisfactory performance partly to limited exposure to idiomatic language, insufficient cultural contact, and learning approaches that lacked cultural context.

It is noteworthy that even doctoral-level SLATE students face challenges in producing idiomatics at a level comparable to native or near-native speakers. Given that idiomatic competence is crucial for achieving advanced language proficiency (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Abolfazli Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017; Liontas, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2018f; Liontas et al., 2019; Liu, 2008), there is a clear need for greater emphasis on idiomatic competence within the SLATE field. These results warrant further research and attention in this area.

Research Question 3: *What strategies or techniques do non-native English-speaking SLATE doctoral students employ when producing idiomatic-figurative expressions?*

Participants advocated several approaches for learning and producing idiomatic-figurative language. These included maintaining lists (P2), using MALL apps (P1, P3), exposure to authentic contexts through natural communication (P3), incorporating videos and movies (P1, P3, P4), and viewing interactions with NSs as opportunities for continuous learning (P3). They also discussed translation, linking Arabic idioms to English, and using similar English idioms. However, they highlighted the drawbacks of relying on literal translation, particularly when applying knowledge of one English idiom to produce others in the L2. They noted that idiomatic or figurative expressions might lose their intended meaning if inaccurately worded (e.g., *beating about/around the bush* vs. *beating the bushes*; *sharing my 50 Cent* instead of *sharing my two cents*).

The participants' exploration of various strategies indicates their motivation to enhance idiomatic competence, which they saw as crucial for proficiency. Despite years of studying English and living in English-speaking countries, three of the four participants were dissatisfied with their production task performance. This likely motivated self-study to improve idiomatic competence. Further investigation into learners' aspirations, motivations, and engagement within SLATE disciplines could provide valuable insights and offer novel perspectives on understanding, defining, and applying idiomatics across educational frameworks and skill levels, ultimately improving outcomes and fostering evidence-based methodologies that bridge the gap between theorizing idiomatics and

practicing idiomatics *with a purpose* and *for a purpose*.

Limitations and Implications for Idiomatics Instruction

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Our experiences and pedagogical beliefs as practitioners and language learners may have influenced the analysis. Conducting interviews in English may have constrained participants' ability or willingness to fully express their perceptions. Further research should examine the interplay between cultural knowledge and idiomatic competence, particularly the role of explicit instruction in this development.

Developing comprehensive theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for idiomatics education is challenging. Without research-based evidence, such frameworks may lack the robustness required to establish a solid foundation for acquiring *idiomatic competence* in both classroom and real-world contexts (see Liontas, 2015, 2021a–c, 2024a–c). Beyond anecdotal evidence, requisite knowledge, skills, and linguacultural understandings must be grounded in empirically supported practices to effectively promote idiomatic-figurative language acquisition. Recognizing and integrating these elements is crucial for achieving idiomatic competence, as shown in our study.

First, providing learners with culturally appropriate contexts is key to deepening their understanding of idiomatics. This approach fosters pragmatic knowledge and enables learners to grasp when and how to use specific idioms in conversation. Therefore, teacher educators should systematically integrate idiomatic-figurative language education into teacher training and professional development.

Second, integrating technology with multimodal and multisensory resources (Liontas, 2023) can significantly enhance learner motivation and deepen understanding of idiomatics. In today's digital age, many students are accustomed to—and increasingly expect—learning through digital technologies. CALL-MALL tools offer accessible, engaging, and relevant input, leading to improved outcomes and higher language proficiency. They also provide opportunities for students to practice producing idiomatics in authentic, real-world contexts.

Third, fostering students' etymological (Boers et al., 2007), cultural, pragmatic, and metalinguistic knowledge is essential. Since idiomatic-figurative language is culture-specific, this holistic approach is vital for developing (inter)cultural competence. Equipped with this knowledge, learners better decode, produce, and negotiate idiomatic-figurative meaning. Accordingly, integrating idiomatic-figurative metalinguistic knowledge—also known as Knowledge About Language (KAL; Liontas, 2013)—alongside pragmatic knowledge should be a cornerstone of curriculum development. This approach enables L2 learners to identify, process, acquire, and apply idiomatic-figurative language accurately and appropriately across sociocultural contexts.

Finally, we recommend that institutions, administrators, and language practitioners at all levels—from elementary school to graduate school—integrate idiomatics pedagogy and KAL into curricula and courses. This can be achieved by embedding idiomatics into existing courses or developing stand-alone ones.

Conclusion

This study explored beliefs and experiences related to idiomatics among doctoral SLATE students. It aimed to understand approaches these students deemed effective for promoting idiomatic competence—the proficient use of idiomatic-figurative language. Four native Arabic speakers were randomly selected from the largest linguistic group in a broader mixed-methods study, each with varying experience learning English and living in English-speaking countries. Data were collected via online semi-structured interviews and analyzed through a three-phase thematic process to identify themes and subthemes.

Participants emphasized that a thorough understanding of idiomatic-figurative language nuances is essential for full proficiency. They viewed idiomatics as intrinsically linked to culture, with comprehension of one requiring understanding of the other. Consequently, they advocated making idiomatics a core component of language education and teacher training. They proposed effective strategies such as providing contextualization, using authentic materials to facilitate genuine communication, integrating technology and multimedia for contextualized content, and creating opportunities for purposeful practice of idiomatic-figurative language.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the crucial role of idiomatics in second language learning, given its pervasive presence in natural communication. Integrating idiomatics instruction into curricula or offering stand-alone courses should be prioritized. Providing learners with real-world context and essential cultural knowledge, supported by multimodal and multisensory resources, can deepen understanding and foster meaningful production. Ultimately, idiomatics belongs at the heart of language education. All else is noise.

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