# Idioms in Academic Context: A Student Perspective

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2024**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:162:642492

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-03-11**

Sveučilište u Zadru

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Zadar, 2024.

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Sadržaj mojega rada u potpunosti odgovara sadržaju obranjenoga i nakon obrane uređenoga rada.

Zadar, 9. rujna 2024.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this thesis is "Idioms in Academic Context: A Student Perspective." A comprehensive understanding of this topic necessitates a clear grasp of the concept of idioms. Idioms are an integral component of the English language, often adding color and depth to both everyday conversations and more formal communication. While many language learners may strive to achieve proficiency at a fundamental level, effective communication in English—whether spoken or written—is challenging without the use of idiomatic expressions due to their pervasive nature. However, defining what an idiom is a complex task, even for linguists, underscoring the complexity and significance of this linguistic phenomenon. English is a language abundant in idiomatic expressions, many of which were established long before idioms became a focal point of linguistic study. For example, the phrase *a wolf in sheep's clothing* can be traced back to the Bible (New Testament, Matthew 7:15), *bite the dust* appears in Homer's Iliad (Book 2, line 418), and *break the ice* is found in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew (Act 1, Scene 2). Given the intricate nature of idioms, it is unsurprising that a variety of classifications and definitions have developed over time.

The goal of this bachelor's thesis is to recognize idioms within academic context and to study their representation in the selected corpus. The paper is outlined as follows – the introductory section outlines the research subject, aim, purpose and structure of the paper. The second section delves into various definitions and classifications of idioms, providing a comprehensive understanding of the term's complexity and highlighting different categorization possibilities. It also emphasizes the significance of comprehending non-literal language, specifically idiomatic expressions. The third section addresses the challenges associated with teaching and learning idioms. In the fourth section, prior research studies are reviewed, establishing the foundation for the current study, followed by the presentation of the research objectives and questions. The methodology is detailed in the fifth section, while the sixth section offers an in-depth analysis of the research findings. The final section synthesizes both theoretical and empirical aspects, concluding the paper.

# 1. DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

The work by Palmer (1933), which laid the groundwork for many later studies and has been widely incorporated into research on idiomatic expressions, is often cited as a key reference. In this influential study, Palmer categorized a large array of frequently used lexical phrases which he termed clusters. In addition to this, Palmer introduced the concept of "collocation" in his focus on practical language instruction. According to Palmer, these expressions should be learned as complete entities rather than by analyzing their individual components (p. 4). *Break the news, catch someone's eye, take advantage of,* and *make an effort* are some of the clusters and collocations from his work that are now considered idioms.

A definition included in an edition of the Oxford English Dictionary from the 1980s was first introduced by Makkai (1972, p. 23). In this definition, idioms are essentially a grammatical structure, phrase, or expression specific to a language — a unique way of expressing something that often carries a meaning beyond its logical interpretation. This definition remains valid to this day, although it is rarely explicitly stated in textbooks or dictionaries. Furthermore, Makkai (1972) also believes compounds can be an idiom, and he categorizes them into two main types: encoding (having a clear meaning) and decoding (having an unpredictable meaning). Under his criteria, words with one free and one bound morpheme (e.g., *bi+cycle, pre+view*) can not be considered idiomatic as the meaning is deductible from its parts (p. 28-30). In contrast, if two free morphemes are joined together making the meaning not obvious (e.g., *free+way*, *car+port*) they are considered idiomatic (p. 43-45).

Researchers such as Cowie and Mackin (1975) and Simpson and Mendis (2003) advance the understanding of idioms by arguing that they are not single words but rather sequences of words that create relatively fixed expressions. They concur that the meaning of such expressions cannot be discerned merely by analyzing the meanings of the individual words. Following these definitions, it is safe to say that idiomatic constructions can be a phrase as short as two words (e.g., *botch up, cave in, have kittens, clear up, tag along*) or as long as a whole sentence (e.g., *bang your head against the brick wall, do not throw the baby out with the bath water, do not count your chickens before they are hatched*). Based on their meanings and syntactic complexity, idiomatic phrases can create lexico-grammatical continuums, which are often treated as single, unified structures (Cowie, 1998, as cited in Hinkel, 2017).

Hinkle (2017, p. 49-50) recognizes that there is no single, universally accepted definition of idioms but highlights that idiomatic expressions typically encompass several key categories:

a) Frequently recurring and culture-specific expressions with opaque meanings (e.g., *cost an arm and a leg, call it a day, better late than never*)

b) Collocations, or words that often occur together but with flexible components (e.g., *take place/part/a test, ready to go/start, give advice/suggestion(s), at a discount/receive a discount*).

c) Fixed phrases with specific meanings and phrasal verbs (e.g., *break in/out/down/up, give up, run into trouble, out of place*)

d) Figurative expressions, such as metaphors (e.g., *under the weather, couch potato, heart of gold, hit the jackpot*)

e) Set and rigidly ordered phrases where components are fixed in a specific order (e.g., *out of the blue, by all means, in the long run*)

f) Proverbs (e.g., *two wrongs don't make a right*, *the early bird catches the worm*)

g) Culturally-bound sayings (e.g., hit the sack, not my cup of tea, Rome wasn't built in a day)

## 2.1 The principle of compositionality

As already mentioned, a great number of idioms contradict the principle of compositionality. This principle states that one should be able to understand the meaning of the whole by analyzing and understanding each individual part (Pagin & Westerståhl, 2022). For instance, idiom *keep your mouth shut* carries the meaning of not commenting on something in any way, or simply, "remain silent ". Similarly, phrase *clear the air* is considered idiomatic as it means resolving a misunderstanding. Analyzing the meaning of each individual part of these idioms will give the same result as analyzing phrases such as "keep the front door shut" or "clear the storage". Therefore, although analyzing individual parts of these idioms could bring you close to their correct meaning, they contradict the principle of compositionality as it is unlikely that both literal and idiomatic meaning will align. Some idioms are more opaque than others. For example, applying this approach to idioms such as *be over the moon* (1), which means "extremely happy," or *spill the beans* (2), which refers to "revealing a secret," would lead to an entirely incorrect interpretation.

(1) be over the moon – being physically above or beyond the moon

(2) spill the beans – spilling a container of beans

Fernando (2000, p. 61-63) divides idioms into three categories based on how transparent or opaque their meanings are. The first category, pure non-literal idioms, includes expressions like *break a leg* or *kick the bucket*, where the figurative meaning is entirely separate from the literal meaning of the words. The second category, semi-literal idioms, includes phrases that have a partially figurative meaning that still retains some connection to the literal words. An example of a semi-literal idiom might be *hold your tongue*. Here, "hold" is used metaphorically (as in restrain or control), but "tongue" retains its literal meaning as part of the body. Another example is *foot the bill*, where "foot" is metaphorical (meaning to pay) while "bill" remains literal. Finally, literal idioms, such as *break new ground* or *looking forwards*, which, although idiomatic, are closely related to their literal meanings.

As demonstrated, relying exclusively on the principle of compositionality to study idioms would be misguided. This is where figurative competence becomes essential.


## 2.2 Figurative competence

Figurative competence, as outlined by Levorato (1993, p. 104), refers to an individual's capacity to understand, interpret, and appropriately use figurative language within communication. This competence involves the ability to recognize non-literal meanings of phrases and accurately interpret them within specific contexts. For example, understanding that the expression *raining cats and dogs* signifies heavy rainfall rather than a literal event demonstrates figurative competence. Additionally, this skill encompasses the ability to generate and utilize figurative expressions effectively in both spoken and written language.

Steinmann (1973, p. 224) explores the relationship between intended and literal meanings in figurative language, explaining that the difference between the two is often a matter of degree rather than a strict separation. He explains that in figurative expressions, the intended meaning can vary significantly in how much it diverges from the literal words. For instance, in the idiom *kick the bucket*, the intended meaning, which refers to someone's death, is entirely figurative and far removed from the literal interpretation. In contrast, idioms like *hit the nail on the head* have an intended meaning that is more closely aligned with the literal phrase, though still somewhat figurative.

Gibbs (1994) and Giora (1997) offer differing perspectives on the role of context in the interpretation of figurative meaning, highlighting the complexity of understanding non-literal language. Gibbs (1994, p. 102) argues that context plays a crucial role in interpreting figurative language, suggesting that the meaning of idioms is highly dependent on the surrounding linguistic and

situational context. To understand figurative expressions, the listener or reader needs to combine contextual information with the literal meaning of the words in order to grasp the intended figurative meaning. Without appropriate context, the figurative meaning might remain obscure or be misinterpreted. Giora (1997, p. 114), however, presents a different perspective, stating that the literal meaning of words is processed first, even in the presence of contextual clues. She argues that context comes into play only after the literal interpretation has been processed. Figurative meaning is reached by first considering the literal meaning and then adjusting it based on the context. This approach suggests that context is secondary, acting more as a way to correct or refine the initial literal interpretation rather than guiding the understanding from the start.

Research which provides a great insight on figurative language processing is written by Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert (2010). Driven by the observation that figurative language often poses challenges for L2 learners, the study employed an experimental methodology, wherein participants were asked to complete tasks that involved processing figurative language in both their L1 and L2. The study concluded that figurative competence is generally better developed in a person's first language (L1) compared to their second language (L2). However, the results also suggested that this difference is not absolute and that with sufficient exposure and practice, L2 learners can achieve a high level of figurative competence, sometimes approaching the level of their L1.

## 2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON IDIOMS

Research on idiomatic phrases delves into their complex roles in both understanding and using language, highlighting their significance in both native and second-language contexts. Scholars have examined various aspects of idioms, including their cultural uniqueness, cognitive processing, and teaching implications. Such research shows that idioms are deeply embedded in culture, presenting challenges for language learners while enriching interactions for native speakers. Common methodologies include experimental studies and comparative approaches to analyze idiom usage across diverse linguistic and cultural settings. The primary goal of this section is to gain a deeper understanding of how idiomatic phrases influence language acquisition, communication effectiveness, and cultural integration.

### 3.1 Idioms in language learning

Idioms are among the most challenging aspects for non-native speakers to master. For second language learners, idioms represent a number of obstacles they have to cross on their path to fluency. It is difficult for them to understand and use idioms properly, as they usually encounter them in a passive manner—through social media or television. Native speakers can easily identify non-native speakers and, in order to ensure clear communication, often avoid using figurative language in their interactions. Consequently, learners cannot fully understand idioms or receive feedback on their usage (Irujo, 1986, p. 236 - 237).

As Cooper (1999, p. 86) explained, idioms add richness and authenticity to language, enabling speakers to express complex ideas and emotions with nuance and creativity. When language learners shy away from using idioms, their speech and writing can come across as overly formal, rigid, and lacking in the fluidity that characterizes native speech patterns. Many other researchers (e.g., Watson, 1998; Gibbs, 1995) support this theory and go even further, stating that without idiom usage, learners sound foreign and, therefore, cannot be considered fully competent speakers. Thus, mastering idioms is crucial for any language learner aspiring to achieve fluency.

Irujo (1986, p. 236-238) identifies several reasons why students struggle with learning idioms. Firstly, idioms often have meanings that cannot be easily inferred from the individual words, posing a challenge for learners. Additionally, idioms are typically acquired through repeated exposure in natural contexts, which non-native speakers might not experience sufficiently, making it more difficult for them to master and use idioms fluently. Furthermore, Irujo notes that idioms vary significantly between

languages. For learners whose first language features different idiomatic expressions or lacks direct equivalents, this discrepancy adds an extra layer of complexity.

Students must be prepared to master idioms, despite their inherent difficulty. Idioms are an integral part of both spoken and written English, occurring frequently in everyday language. Due to this high frequency, mastering idioms is crucial for non-native speakers to achieve a functional proficiency in English. (Adkins, 1968, p. 149)

Interestingly, there are many debates about how, and even whether, idioms should be taught in educational institutions. Various factors contribute to why teachers avoid incorporating idioms into their language lessons. According to Çakir (2011) and Liontas (2017), educators may prioritize other aspects of language learning, such as oral communication or grammar, which they perceive as more essential. Additionally, teachers might refrain from teaching idioms because they view the process of selecting appropriate idioms, creating materials, and planning lessons as time-consuming and labor-intensive. Gibbs (1994, p. 14) suggests there are numerous reasons why teachers discourage the use of idioms in an academic environment, the main one being that "figurative language is only an embellishment of ordinary literal language with little cognitive value of its own."

Tran (2012, p. 78) raises several critical questions concerning the teaching of idioms, including which idioms should be prioritized, what teaching methods are most effective, and whether idioms should be taught in isolation or integrated into existing curricula. The answers to these questions remain elusive, as the best approach to idiomatic instruction continues to be a topic of ongoing debate. Nonetheless, Liontas (2002, pp. 95-120) advocates for a contemporary approach that incorporates multimedia and technology in idiom instruction. He emphasizes the effectiveness of interactive software, including quizzes, games, and video clips, in making idiom learning more engaging and efficient.

Guduru (2012) emphasizes traditional and contextual methods for teaching idioms, particularly targeting beginner learners. He suggests that students are most likely to learn idioms effectively by repeatedly encountering them in various contexts, such as through stories, dialogues, and visual aids (p. 588-590). This approach allows students to develop a deeper understanding of idioms by observing their use in meaningful, real-life situations. In contrast, Chen and Lai (2013, p. 15-17) propose teaching methods more suited for advanced learners, focusing on the conceptual metaphor framework. Their approach encourages students to explore the figurative meanings behind idioms and connect these to their prior knowledge, fostering a more nuanced comprehension of idiomatic expressions.

Despite the challenges associated with teaching idioms, neglecting them can significantly hinder students' language proficiency. Given that idioms are an integral part of every language, it would be illogical to study a language while ignoring them. It is important to note, there is a distinction between learning idioms and effectively using them in an academic context.

## 3.2. Comparative Research on Idiom Usage in Academic Contexts: Influences and Findings

This section reviews several key studies that have significantly influenced the current research on idiomatic expressions in academic contexts. These studies provide valuable insights into the frequency, usage, and comprehension of idioms across both spoken and written academic communication. Their findings help to inform an understanding of idiom usage in academic discourse, particularly in relation to engagement and learner competence.

The study that most significantly influenced this research is Miller (2020). This study aimed to investigate the frequency of idiomatic expressions in academic contexts and to compare their usage between spoken and written forms of academic communication. To achieve this, Miller compiled a specialized corpus that included both academic speech, such as lectures and presentations, and academic writing, such as journal articles and essays. The analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis focused on determining the frequency of idioms and comparing their prevalence across different forms of academic discourse. Qualitative analysis examined the functions and contexts of idioms, exploring how they contribute to clarity, engagement, and emphasis within academic communication. The findings revealed that idiomatic expressions are present in both spoken and written academic discourse, with a higher frequency in spoken contexts. In spoken academic discourse, idioms were found to enhance relatability and engagement, while their use in written academic texts was more restrained and strategically employed.

The second research paper that this paper draws upon is written by Simpson and Mendis (2003). The researchers sought to understand how idioms are utilized in academic contexts, focusing on their frequency, types, and functions within scholarly communication. The research methodology involved a corpus-based approach. The researchers compiled and analyzed a specialized corpus of academic speech, which included various academic lectures, presentations, and discussions. The type of analysis employed was both qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative analysis involved measuring the frequency and distribution of idiomatic expressions across the corpus. The analysis showed that

idiomatic expressions are present in academic speech, though they are used less frequently compared to other types of language. The research indicated that the use of idioms varies depending on the specific academic discipline and context. The findings suggested that while idioms can enhance communication by making it more vivid and expressive, they also require careful usage to avoid misunderstandings.

Another notable research study is Al-Houti and Aldaihani (2020). The research sought to assess how well learners grasp figurative idiomatic expressions and to determine which learner-related factors, such as proficiency level and educational background, impact their idiomatic competence. The researchers used a structured questionnaire to collect data from a sample of learners. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize the learners' overall performance and their familiarity with idiomatic expressions. Inferential analysis was applied to examine the relationships between learners' idiomatic competence and the learner-related factors. The results showed that Kuwaiti EFL (English as a foreign language) learners had a notably low overall understanding of these idioms. This limited comprehension of idioms suggests a correspondingly low frequency of idiom usage, extending beyond academic speech and writing to encompass general language use.

# 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Based on the insights from the studies on idiomatic expressions discussed in the previous chapter, this study aims to address a relatively underexplored area in the literature by conducting a corpus-based analysis of idioms in both spoken and written academic discourse. Additionally, this research intends to build upon previous studies by comparing the results of the corpus-based analysis with findings from research that examined students' perspectives on a similar topic. This comparison aims to highlight any correlations or discrepancies between the objective data and the subjective viewpoints of students, providing a more comprehensive understanding of idiom usage in academic contexts. The following chapter will give a complete and extensive analysis of the methods used in this research, as well as a comprehensive assessment of the current study. Based on the aforementioned aspects, the research questions that guided this study are:

**RQ1**: How does the frequency of chosen idioms vary between spoken and written academic language?

**RQ2**: Are idioms equally distributed in all event types of academic speech?

**RQ3**: Are the idioms equally distributed in all discipline types of academic writing?

**RQ4**: To what extent do EFL students use idioms in an academic environment?

The primary hypothesis of this research is that idiomatic expressions occur more frequently in academic speech than in academic writing. This hypothesis is informed by warnings from numerous sources advising caution in the use of idioms in writing to avoid potential misuse. Additionally, personal experience in academic settings suggests that both students and professors are more likely to use idioms in spoken communication as a means of expressing themselves more effectively and clarifying the topic under discussion.

## 4.1 Methodology

After reviewing key concepts essential for understanding idiomatic expressions, a corpus-based study was conducted to explore the role of idioms in language and their usage within an academic context. The research, carried out in July 2024 using the corpus management and text analysis software Sketch Engine, aimed to examine the presence of idioms in both spoken and written registers. Sketch Engine is a sophisticated tool designed for the analysis of language and how it functions across different contexts. By processing real-time texts that contain billions of words, this tool enables

researchers to investigate various linguistic phenomena. Two corpora were selected: the British Academic Spoken English Corpus (BASE) and the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE), due to the limited availability of academic sources meeting the study's criteria. A list of thirty (30) idioms, ranging from two to four words, was compiled.

The sample for this research is considered random because the list of idiomatic expressions was generated without following a specific pattern or adhering to exclusive criteria. The list included idioms drawn from previous research studies, as well as those encountered in songs, movies, TV series, and books over the course of a month. Furthermore, to minimize bias, the list was randomized[1], and idioms were adjusted throughout the study to ensure they were present in at least one of the corpora. Some of the idioms that did not make the list due to this criterion are *ups and downs*, *be snowed under*, *have second thoughts*, *hit the books*, etc. The design is cross-sectional as it is conducted at a single point in time. For research questions 1-3, the independent variable measured is register of academic language (spoken or written) and frequency of chosen idioms represents the dependent variable. For the final research question, proficiency serves as the dependent variable while the independent variable is frequency of idiom usage.

In this study, the concordance feature was employed as the primary method for analyzing idioms within the selected corpus. Concordance searches can be conducted at both basic and advanced levels, with this research utilizing the advanced level for more precise analysis. When performing a search, the user must choose the appropriate query type, which dictates the method for matching the search criteria. The options available include simple matching, lemmatization, among others. For the purposes of this research, the chosen query type was CQL (Corpus Query Language), which facilitates more complex and targeted searches by utilizing a structured query language specifically designed for working with corpora. The functionality of concordances requires the use of specific formulas when conducting searches. For instance, when searching for the idiom *get the picture* the appropriate formula would be [lemma="get"] [lemma="the"] [lemma="picture"]. The use of "lemma" in the search formula is particularly advantageous because it retrieves the base form of a word, thus including all its variations in the results.

Moreover, Sketch Engine's concordance function offers the ability to categorize the corpus into specific text types, a feature that significantly aids in addressing the second and third research questions. In this study, the British Academic Spoken English Corpus (BASE) was divided into

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[1] Link to the randomizer site: https://www.random.org/lists/

seminars and lectures, while the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE) was divided into humanities and STEM fields. The division of BASE was straightforward as the categories of seminars and lectures already exist within the text types. However, dividing the BAWE corpus required manual selection due to the extensive range of text type options. For the purpose of this research, disciplines such as anthropology, classics, English, history, law, linguistics, philosophy, publishing, and sociology were selected to represent the humanities. In contrast, fields like computer sciences, cybernetics, agriculture, mathematics, engineering, and physics were chosen to represent STEM. This methodical division allowed for a more focused and meaningful analysis of idiom usage across different academic domains.

The outcomes of this research might have differed if an alternative corpus had been used. This variation arises because each corpus consists of a distinct set of texts, reflecting a particular domain, genre, or time period. The corpora selected for this study were specifically chosen for their relevance to the academic environment, ensuring that the interpretations derived from the data are accurate and contextually meaningful.

## 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Following the analysis of thirty (30) idioms using Sketch Engine, the results will be presented through detailed tables that illustrate the frequency and distribution of the idioms. These tables will highlight some of the most frequently occurring idiomatic expressions from the list, thereby addressing the research questions outlined in the study. This presentation format will facilitate a clear and comprehensive examination of the data, enabling an in-depth understanding of idiom usage patterns within the chosen corpus. Additionally, the tabulated results will provide a structured basis for interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions about idiom frequency and distribution across different contexts.

The first research question (RQ1) asked: *How does the frequency of chosen idioms vary between spoken and written academic language?* Upon analyzing the frequency of idioms in both spoken and written academic language, the results indicate that idioms are more commonly used in academic spoken language. As illustrated in Table 1, the average score of frequency of idioms in the BAWE corpus was 3.22 (SD = 4.46), which is lower than the average score of frequency of idioms in BASE corpus with 5.05 (SD = 11.04). It is important to highlight the idiomatic expressions that exhibited the highest calculated frequency per million (FPM). Idiom *come up with* had the highest FPM at 56.93, while for BAWE idiom *take advantage of* had the highest FPM at 14.28.

**Table 1.** Distribution of idiom frequency in BASE and BAWE

|      | Valid | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|------|-------|-------|----------------|---------|---------|
| BASE | 30    | 5.048 | 11.036         | 0.000   | 56.930  |
| BAWE | 30    | 3.219 | 4.457          | 0.000   | 14.275  |

Of the thirty (30) idioms examined, seventeen appeared more frequently in the BASE corpus than in the BAWE corpus. Interestingly, among the thirteen idioms that were more frequent in BAWE, seven (*make up for, pay off, place importance on, out of sight, take a close look, turn a blind eye and be opposed to*) were entirely absent from BASE. The following table displays some of the idioms and FPM in both BASE and BAWE, while all thirty (30) are listed in the *Appendix*.

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**Table 2.** Comparison of frequency of idioms in corpora

| IDIOMS | BASE | BAWE |
|---|---|---|
| By and large | 8.53949 | 1.31954 |
| In a nutshell | 1.1386 | 1.19958 |
| Out of the blue | 2.8465 | 0.23992 |
| Bottom line | 11.38599 | 1.31954 |
| Call it a day | 0.5693 | 0 |
| Bear in mind | 20.49478 | 11.03612 |
| Break the ice | 0.5693 | 0.11996 |
| In the long run | 5.69299 | 13.19536 |
| Turn a blind eye | 0 | 0.8397 |
| Look after | 17.07898 | 10.91616 |

Even with just this sample, it is clear that frequency of usage of idioms in BASE is undoubtedly higher. It is important to mention that there was no case where any of the chosen idioms show the same frequency in both corpora.

The answer to the second research question (RQ2), *are idioms equally distributed in all event types of academic speech*, is illustrated in the table below.

**Table 3.** Distribution of idiom frequency across event types of academic speech in BASE

| | Valid | Missing | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SEMINAR | 23 | 7 | 1.906 | 3.786 | 0.000 | 17.079 |
| LECTURE | 23 | 7 | 4.653 | 8.703 | 0.000 | 39.851 |

After analyzing the frequency of idioms in seminars and lectures, the results show that the usage of idioms is more frequent in lectures, therefore, idioms are not equally distributed in both event types

of academic speech. As illustrated in Table 3, the average score of frequency of idioms in lectures was 4.65 (SD = 8.70), which is higher than the average score of frequency of idioms in seminars with 1.91 (SD = 3.79). It is interesting to note that the idiom *come up with* had the highest FPM for both event types of academic speech, with FPM at 17.08 in seminars and 39.85 in lectures. Out of twenty-three (23) idiomatic expressions found in BASE, fifteen show higher FPM in lectures and seven have the same FPM. A complete list of distribution of idioms across the event types of academic speech are provided in the *Appendix* section.

These outcomes align with the anticipated objectives of lectures and seminars within an academic setting. Lectures primarily serve as instructional sessions where professors convey course material, often prioritizing clarity and comprehension over rigid grammatical structure and sophisticated vocabulary to ensure students' understanding. This approach is conducive to facilitating learning, as it allows for the material to be accessible to all students. On the other hand, seminars are designed to assess students' comprehension and engagement with the subject matter, frequently through presentations. In this context, students may focus on demonstrating their knowledge and analytical skills rather than employing idiomatic expressions, which are often deemed less relevant in formal academic discourse.

The third research question was: *Are the idioms equally distributed in all discipline types of academic writing?* As previously discussed, idioms are divided into two discipline types of academic writing. Their distribution is calculated through frequency and is represented in the table below.

**Table 4.** Distribution of idiom frequency across discipline types of academic writing in BAWE

| | Valid | Missing | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HUMANITIES | 27 | 3 | 1.040 | 1.214 | 0.000 | 4.798 |
| STEM | 27 | 3 | 0.626 | 1.162 | 0.000 | 5.758 |

After analyzing the frequency of idioms in humanities and STEM, the results show that a usage of idioms is more frequent in humanities, therefore, idioms are not equally distributed in both discipline types of academic writing. As illustrated in Table 4, the average score of frequency of idioms in humanities was 1.04 (SD = 1.21), which is higher than the average score of frequency of idioms in STEM with 0.63 (SD = 1.16). *Bear in mind* was the idiom with the highest FPM (4.80) in humanities,

while *come up with* had the highest FPM (5.76) in STEM. Out of twenty-seven (27) idiomatic expressions found in BAWE, eighteen show higher FPM in humanities and six in STEM. Idioms *put on hold, give and take* and *keep up with* have the same FPM in both categories. However, idiom *break the ice* showed results in general calculations of frequency in BAWE but showed none in either of discipline types. This result shows that some disciplines which were not included in this research under categories STEM and humanities, such as business or economics, still hold idiomatic expressions. A complete list of distribution of idioms across the discipline types of academic writing are provided in the *Appendix* section.

The results align with expectations when considering the inherent characteristics of different academic disciplines. Disciplines within the humanities, such as anthropology and philosophy, tend to be more descriptive and explorative in nature, which allows for greater use of idiomatic expressions. This contrasts with disciplines such as mathematics or computer science, which fall under STEM and are characterized by a more precise and technical style of writing. As a result, the use of idioms is more prevalent in humanities, as reflected in the findings.

The fourth and the final research question was: *To what extent do EFL students use idioms in an academic environment?[2]*

To answer this question, I conducted a study on figurative idiomatic competence to assess language learners' proficiency and their perceptions of idiom usage. Research questions were designed to question students' proficiency in idiomatic expressions, the extent of idiom usage as well as the correlation between students' idiomatic competence and their grade point average (GPA). The independent variable measured is GPA, while frequency and proficiency serve as dependent variables. The data collection procedure was prepared and conducted in two stages. Firstly, fifteen idioms were collected to design the test. The list was compiled from songs, movies, TV series, or books I encountered over the course of one month. Two idioms (*in a nutshell* and *by and large*) from that list were also used in this paper. The questionnaire was administered among the students of English at the University of Zadar and was designed in a way that participants were required to state their final grades from four CEL classes, choose the correct definitions of the given idioms, and rate the likelihood of using them in an academic environment (including writing essays, oral exams, and interactions with professors and fellow students). Microsoft Forms, a web-based application, was used to create the

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[2] The data for this question was collected as a part of the course Introduction to English language research methods II with students of English from May 10th to July 5th

questionnaire because it automatically collects data and provides results in the form of graphs and percentages. Additionally, an open-source program for statistical analysis called JASP was used to calculate correlations between variables. A complete list of idioms and an example of the tasks from the questionnaire are provided in the *Appendix* section. After analyzing the data collected through the questionnaire, it was interesting to see that all participants scored above 70% when asked to choose the correct definition or synonym for the given idiom. Results show that 46.6% of students answered every question correctly. It is worth mentioning that there were four idioms with a 100% of correct responses: *in a nutshell*, *over the moon*, *get the picture* and *in your shoes.* The graph below shows the results of the extent to which students use given idioms.
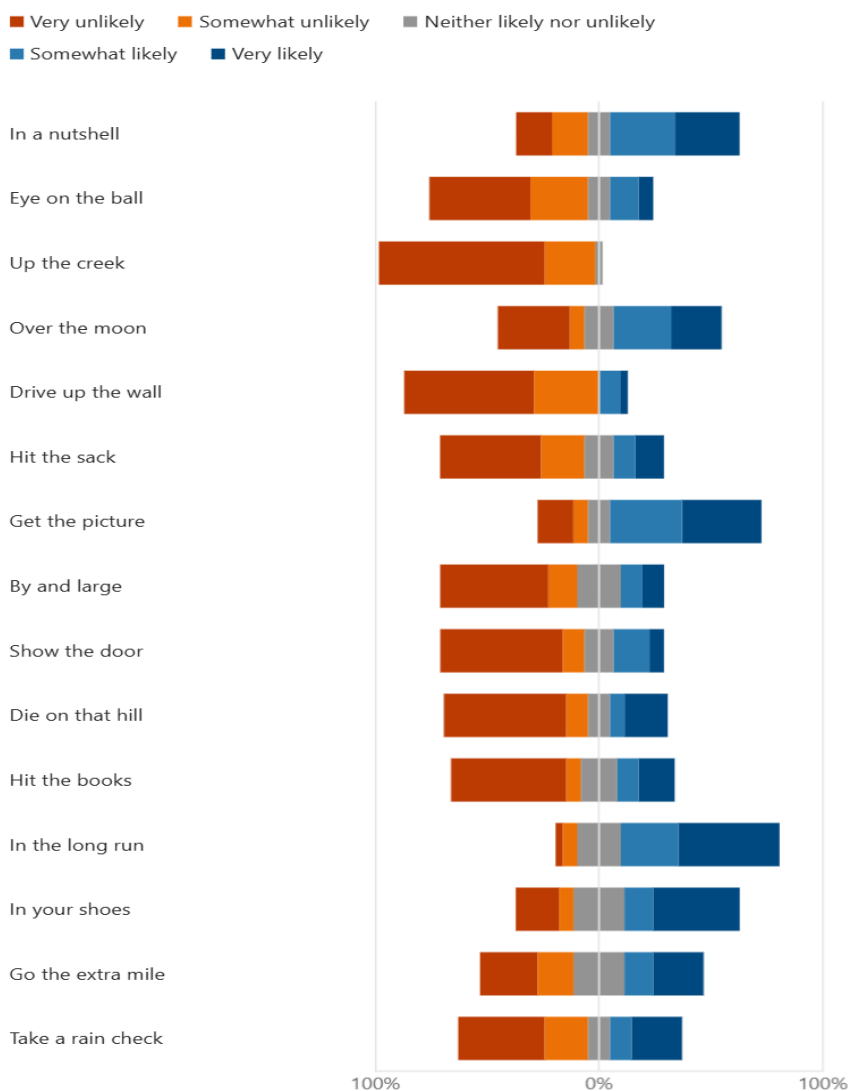


**Figure 1.** Frequency of idiom usage

After analyzing the students' perspective on their frequency of idiom usage, the results show that not all idioms are equally used in academic environments. Although students were familiar with the idioms presented, there were many more idioms which students marked as "very unlikely" to be used, which can be seen in Figure 1. This suggests a general reluctance among students to incorporate idiomatic expressions into their language use unless explicitly encouraged to do so. Such hesitation may stem from the inconsistent guidance received from various professors on the appropriateness and usage of idioms throughout their education. Given the previously discussed importance of idiom knowledge and usage as indicators of language proficiency, these findings are somewhat unexpected.

# 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has explored the multifaceted nature of idioms, examining various perspectives and classifications of idiomatic expressions in English. It has also considered their roles in conversation, writing, teaching, and learning. Building on extensive research into the concept of idioms, this study has been inspired by numerous previous works that emphasize the significance of idiomatic expressions in linguistic and educational contexts.

My primary objective for this research was to conduct a thorough analysis of idioms within academic speech and writing. The research methodology involved compiling a list of thirty (30) idioms, which were subsequently analyzed within the selected corpus to address the research questions. Four specific questions were formulated to guide the comparative analysis of idiom frequencies across the chosen corpus. The aim was to assess the validity of the hypothesis concerning the prevalence of idioms within an academic context.

The results indicate that the frequency of the selected idioms is higher in academic speech than in academic writing. The results confirm the initial hypothesis and are consistent with the findings of previous research. Within academic speech, lectures and seminars were analyzed separately, revealing that idioms are not evenly distributed across these event types—lectures exhibit a higher frequency of idiom usage. Similarly, in academic writing, the disciplines of humanities and STEM were examined, with findings showing that idiom frequency is not uniformly distributed across these fields. The results demonstrate a higher prevalence of idioms in humanities texts compared to STEM disciplines.

Several important limitations of this research warrant consideration. A primary concern lies in the categorization of disciplines within the BAWE corpus. As previously discussed, both the humanities and STEM fields encompass a wide range of disciplines with overlapping subfields. The selection of specific branches or a more comprehensive division of all disciplines could potentially influence the findings. Additionally, the limitation of corpus size presents another significant constraint. Utilizing a larger corpus or constructing a more extensive one could yield more precise and reliable results, thereby enhancing the validity of the research conclusions. Within the extensive body of literature on idiomatic expressions, it is significant to note that the majority of research has concentrated on learner-related factors or the idiomatic competence of individuals. However, there is a notable paucity of corpus-based studies that specifically address the usage of idioms within academic contexts. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further exploration into how idiomatic expressions are

employed in academic environments, including their prevalence, functions, and the impact they have on both spoken and written academic discourse.

In summary, idiomatic expressions are a significant component of the English language and can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Investigating idioms is essential for understanding how language learners interpret and utilize these expressions across various contexts. The results presented in this study highlight the diverse functions and frequencies of idiomatic expressions within different academic genres and disciplines. Although this paper may not present groundbreaking findings, it identifies several areas where further research on idioms could be expanded and enriched. Notably, areas such as the methodologies employed in teaching idioms, including an evaluation of current approaches and their effectiveness, warrant deeper investigation. Additionally, the differences in idiom acquisition between native speakers and foreign language learners present an important field of study. Furthermore, comparative analyses of idiomatic expressions across different languages could offer valuable insights into linguistic and cultural connections.

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## 7. APPENDIX

**Table 5.** Thirty idioms and their definition

| IDIOM | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| 1. In a nutshell | Briefly / in essence |
| 2. In the long run | Over a long period of time / eventually |
| 3. By and large | Everything considered |
| 4. Put on hold | Left until a later date |
| 5. Make up for | To compensate for something |
| 6. Out of the blue | Without warning / unexpectedly |
| 7. Bear in mind | To remember a piece of information when you are making a decision or thinking about a matter |
| 8. Give or take | Approximately |
| 9. Fall back on | Have recourse to something when in difficulty |
| 10. On the right track | Doing something correctly or well |
| 11. Set the scene | To describe a situation where something is about to happen |
| 12. Pay off | Succeed / pay a debt in full |
| 13. Keep up with | Move or progress at the same rate as someone or something else |
| 14. Branch off | To separate from something and move in a different direction |
| 15. Set about | To start dealing with or trying to do something that requires a lot of effort |
| 16. Look after | Be responsible for |
| 17. Place importance on | Think of something as important |
| 18. Out of sight | No longer visible |
| 19. A fine line between | Difference between things that is difficult to see |
| 20. Bottom line | Essential points in a discussion |

| 21. Play a part | Participate / be included |
|---|---|
| 22. Turn a blind eye | Pretend not to notice |
| 23. Take a close look | Look at or think about something more carefully |
| 24. Get away with | Escape undesirable consequences for an act that is wrong |
| 25. Call it a day | End an activity / used as a way of stating that enough has been done |
| 26. Be opposed to | Disapprove of something |
| 27. Face up to | Confront and deal with an unpleasant task, fact or situation |
| 28. Come up with | Produce something, usually under pressure |
| 29. Break the ice | Do or say something to relieve tension |
| 30. Take advantage of | Exploit or make us of something for one's own benefit |

**Table 6.** Distribution of idioms in seminar and lecture in BASE

| IDIOMS | SEMINAR | LECTURE |
|---|---|---|
| In a nutshell | 0.5693 | 0.5693 |
| In the long run | 1.7079 | 3.9851 |
| By and large | 2.8465 | 5.69299 |
| Put on hold | 0 | 1.1386 |
| Out of the blue | 1.1386 | 1.7079 |
| Bear in mind | 3.4158 | 17.07898 |
| Give or take | 0 | 0.5693 |
| Fall back on | 0.5693 | 1.7079 |
| On the right track | 1.1386 | 1.1386 |
| Set the scene | 1.7079 | 1.7079 |

| Keep up with | 0.5693 | 0.5693 |
| Branch off | 0.5693 | 0.5693 |
| Set about | 0 | 1.1386 |
| Look after | 8.53949 | 8.53949 |
| A fine line between | 0 | 0.5693 |
| Bottom line | 1.1386 | 10.24739 |
| Play a part | 0.5693 | 0.5693 |
| Get away with | 1.7079 | 6.26229 |
| Call it a day | 0 | 0.5693 |
| Face up to | 0 | 1.1386 |
| Come up with | 17.07898 | 39.85096 |
| Break the ice | 0.5693 | 0 |
| Take advantage of | 0 | 1.7079 |

**Table 7.** Distribution of idioms in humanities and STEM in BAWE

| IDIOMS | HUMANITIES | STEM |
|---|---|---|
| In a nutshell | 0.35987 | 0.23992 |
| In the long run | 0.59979 | 1.07962 |
| By and large | 0.71975 | 0 |
| Put on hold | 0.11996 | 0.11996 |
| Make up for | 0.47983 | 0.35987 |
| Out of the blue | 0 | 0.11996 |
| Bear in mind | 4.79831 | 0.8397 |
| Give or take | 0.11996 | 0.11996 |
| Fall back on | 0.47983 | 0.23992 |
| Set the scene | 0.95966 | 0.11996 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Pay off | 0.59979 | 1.67941 |
| Keep up with | 0.8397 | 0.8397 |
| Branch off | 0 | 0.23992 |
| Set about | 0.71975 | 0.11996 |
| Look after | 2.63907 | 1.07962 |
| Place importance on | 0.11996 | 0 |
| Out of sight | 0.47983 | 0 |
| A fine line between | 0.35987 | 0 |
| Take a close look | 1.31954 | 0 |
| Bottom line | 0 | 0.35987 |
| Play a part | 2.2792 | 0.8397 |
| Turn a blind eye | 0.59979 | 0.11996 |
| Get away with | 1.07962 | 0.23992 |
| Call it a day | 0 | 0 |
| Be opposed to | 1.67941 | 0.23992 |
| Face up to | 0.11996 | 0 |
| Come up with | 3.47878 | 5.75798 |
| Take advantage of | 3.1189 | 2.15924 |

**Table 8.** List of idioms used in the paper for RQ4

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Eye on the ball | Pay close attention |
| 2. Up the creek | Be in a difficult situation |
| 3. Over the moon | Joyous |
| 4. Drive up the wall | Be annoyed or irritated |
| 5. Hit the sack | Go to bed |
| 6. Get the picture | To understand the situation |
| 7. By and large | Everything considered |
| 8. Show the door | Remove someone from somewhere |
| 9. Die on that hill | Believe in your theory no matter what |
| 10. Hit the books | Start studying |
| 11. In the long run | Eventually |

| 12. In your shoes | In another's position or situation |
|---|---|
| 13. Go the extra mile | Make more effort |
| 14. In a nutshell | Briefly |
| 15. Take a rain check | To postpone or reschedule a plan |

**Table 9.** An example from the questionnaire used for RQ4

| Choose the correct synonym for the idiom in **bold**. |
|---|
| 1. What does **in a nutshell** mean?<br>o briefly<br>o in detail<br>o focused<br>o distracted |
| Choose the correct definition for the idiom in **bold**. |
| 2. What does **eye on the ball** mean?<br>o to confront the consequences<br>o to be annoyed or irritated<br>o something positive in a difficult situation<br>o pay close attention |

## IDIOMS IN ACADEMIC CONTEXT: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE –
## Summary and key points

The subject of this thesis paper is frequency of idiom usage in academic surroundings. While defining an idiom is inherently complex, their frequent use in everyday communication highlights their significant role in language. The primary aim of the paper is to investigate the presence and usage of idioms within academic settings, focusing on their representation in a selected corpus. The study specifically addresses the frequency of idiom usage in both spoken and written academic discourse. To achieve this, research was conducted using two different corpora within Sketch Engine. The key findings indicate that idioms are more frequently used in spoken academic discourse than in written discourse. Further analysis revealed that the distribution of idioms varies across different event types within each corpus. This paper will contribute to the understanding of the status and significance of idioms in academic context, providing insight in the challenges language learners face while also showing student perspectives on the matter.

*Key point: idioms, frequency, academic speech, academic writing, corpus*

## FRAZEMI U AKADEMSKOM KONTEKSTU: PERSPEKTIVA STUDENATA
## – Sažetak i ključne riječi

Tema ovog završnog rada jest učestalost korištenja frazema akademskom okruženju. Iako je definiranje frazema inherentno složeno, njihova učestala upotreba u svakodnevnoj komunikaciji naglašava njihovu značajnu ulogu u jeziku. Primarni cilj rada je istražiti prisutnost i upotrebu frazema u akademskim okruženjima, s posebnim fokusom na njihovu zastupljenost u odabranom korpusu. Rad se posebno bavi učestalošću korištenja odabranih frazema u govornom i pisanom akademskom diskursu. Kako bi se postigli ovi rezultati, istraživanje je provedeno korištenjem dva različita korpusa unutar Sketch Engine-a. Ključni nalazi ukazuju na to da se frazemi češće koriste u govornom akademskom diskursu nego u pisanom. Daljnja analiza je pokazala da distribucija frazema varira unutar različitih podskupina u svakom korpusu. Ovaj rad će doprinijeti razumijevanju statusa i značaja frazema u akademskom kontekstu, pružajući uvid u izazove s kojima se suočavaju studenti stranog jezika, kao i prikaz perspektive studenata o ovoj temi.

*Ključne riječi: frazemi, frekvencija, govorni akademski diskurs, pisani akademski diskurs, korpus*