

# The Impact of Context on Learning Idioms in EFL Classes

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a study that was carried out to investigate a) the effect of context on learning idiomatic expressions, and b) the long term effect of context on the learners' retention. Sixty upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. Twenty participants in the first experimental group (extended-context group) were taught the idiomatic expressions through brief stories, and twenty participants in the second experimental group (limited-context group) were exposed to individual sentences in order to learn the idioms, while the participants in the control group (decontextualized group) underwent the same process with only simple definitions. Results of the data analysis showed that the participants in the extended-context group achieved significantly higher scores on both immediate and delayed posttests than the participants in the limited-context and decontextualized groups. This indicates that context has a positive effect on learning idioms.

## Resumen

Este trabajo presenta un estudio que se llevó a cabo para investigar a) el efecto del contexto en el aprendizaje de las expresiones idiomáticas y b) el efecto a largo plazo del contexto en la retención de los estudiantes. En este estudio participaron 60 estudiantes iraníes en el nivel intermedio alto. A veinte participantes del primer grupo experimental (grupo de contexto extendido) se les enseñó las expresiones idiomáticas mediante historietas cortas y a 20 estudiantes en el segundo grupo experimental (grupo de contexto limitado) se les enseñó mediante oraciones aisladas para aprender los modismos. Mientras que a los participantes del grupo de control (grupo descontextualizado) pasaron por el mismo proceso con solo definiciones sencillas. Los resultados del análisis de los datos mostraron que los participantes en el grupo del contexto extendido lograron calificaciones significativamente más altas tanto en las pruebas dadas inmediatamente y las dadas posteriormente que los grupos de participantes en el contexto limitado y descontextualizados. Esto indica que el contexto tiene un efecto positivo en el aprendizaje de idiomas.

## Introduction

In any research of idioms, an important initial question is what constitutes an idiom. It is important to understand what an idiom is because it is often not well-defined. The definition of an idiom varies considerably from scholar to scholar and from context to context. The fact that a variety of definitions exists illustrates the lack of a consensus regarding the term 'idiom'. In other words, the result of this lack of a clear-cut definition is that teachers and learners must cope with a hodgepodge of items which cannot be treated uniformly as part of the learning/teaching task (Grant & Bauer, 2004). A quick examination of the second language acquisition literature on idioms reveals an ongoing debate over the way in which to define them (Abel, 2003; Cooper, 1998; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Kömür & Çimen, 2009; Moon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). According to Grant and Bauer (2004), the term idiom has been used to encompass a wide variety of different types of multi-word units (MWUs). Grant and Bauer (2004) describe a MWU as a "fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage" (p. 38). Moon (1998) points out that an "idiom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways" (p. 3). As Cooper (1998) points out, comprehending, as well as producing, idioms presents language learners with particular vocabulary

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learning problems as they are figurative expressions that do not mean what the individual words literally state and they are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse. Simpson and Mendis (2003) define an idiom as "a group of words that occur in a more or less fixed phrase whose overall meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its constituent parts" (p.423). They also state that "the word '*idiom*' conjures up language that is thought to be entertaining, engaging, casual, charming, colorful and memorable" (p. 419). The definition followed in the present study is "an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements. It is hard to tell from the literal meaning of the individual words" (*Webster's Dictionary*, 1994).

Cooper (1998) contends that idioms belong to the category of non-literal or figurative language that also contains metaphors, similes, and proverbs. He claims that these forms of language are not easy to understand and to learn since they do not mean what they literally state. Of the four kinds of non-literal expressions, idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse. Native speakers undoubtedly use numerous idioms during the course of each day.

Since idioms are figurative expressions that do not mean what they literally state and since they are so frequent in spoken and written discourse, understanding and producing idioms cause a vocabulary learning problem for L2 learners (Cooper, 1998). It is evident that teaching idiomatic expressions deserves an important place in developing a higher proficiency level for language learners. Wray (2000) suggests that mastering idioms is required for successful language learning and native-like command of language. However, the idioms of the English language are often skipped over by EFL teachers in an attempt to simplify things for their students. In other words, according to Lazar (1996), figurative expressions (i.e., idioms) have perhaps been given less attention than they deserve. The fact is that few native English speakers use Standard English; they frequently use words and phrases that make little sense when the literal definition is used. Moreover, Mola (1993) mentions that the emphasis on mastery of grammar allows little time for the other aspects of language competence, such as the ability to understand idiomatic phrases. Historically, the acquisition and teaching of idioms have not received adequate attention in L2 research because of what Ellis (1985) considers to be a traditional emphasis on the acquisition of "grammatical systems" and a lack of emphasis on the acquisition of the lexis. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, while some idiomatic research has focused on the study of the frequency of English idioms (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1994; Grant, 2007; Liu, 2003; Moon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003) only a few studies have examined the important question of using a suitable method in teaching idiomatic expressions (Levorato, 1993; Liontas, 2003, cited in Kainulainen, 2006). Thus, as idioms are commonly encountered in daily speech, the teaching of idioms should begin to draw much more attention. Second/foreign language learning/teaching is a complex process. The use of a proper approach or method in language teaching has always been a matter of concern among language learners and teachers. The present study aims at finding a suitable method for teaching idiomatic expressions. Many of the previous studies have investigated the effects of context on the idiom comprehension process, i.e., idioms were presented within a context as well as alone, outside a context (Adkins, 1968; Levorato, 1993; Liontas, 2003, cited in Kainulainen, 2006). Results of such experiments showed that when idiomatic expressions are encountered in a context, participants perform better. In addition, there has been a great amount of research carried out concerning

vocabulary learning in context in general (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Cohen & Aphek, 1980; Mondria & Wit-De Boer, 1991; Saragi et al., 1978). Saragi et al. (1978) researched about the amount of new vocabulary that could be incidentally learnt through context, and came to the conclusion that a large number of vocabulary items could be learnt in this way. Many of these studies concentrated on examining the effectiveness of contextual learning. All these studies emphasize strongly the preference of vocabulary acquisition in context. Thus, until now the previous research has studied the differences between the use of context and non-context in teaching idioms. However, the researcher in the present study also presents the idioms in a limited context (i.e., at sentence-level), and compare the differences between extended context and limited context.

One of the prime questions concerning the acquisition of idiomatic expressions (or vocabulary acquisition in general) is finding the most efficient way of helping learners with their long-term learning. According to Mondria and Wit-De Boer (1991), the best way of learning words is with the aid of context. In other words, a wide range of vocabulary can be learned as a result of having words in a specific context, from which we can infer the meaning (Sternberg, 1987, cited in Mondria & Wit-De Boer, 1991). Since the learner performs a mental action of the word-form, making connections between the context and his/her own prior knowledge, s/he will establish a cognitive foothold (Mondria & Wit-De Boer, 1991). However, according to Mondria and Wit-De Boer's (1991) study, a context does not necessarily result in improved retention. Their study revealed that context may impede the learners' progress in imprinting because they may think that they already know the word and there is insufficient attention to the connection of word and meaning because of the strong association of context and meaning. Thus out of context, they cannot perform perfectly in the long term. On the other hand, Widdowson (1983) mentions that schemata can allow for the organization of information in long-term memory, namely the learner makes associations between the idiomatic expressions included in a context and his/her personal knowledge. In other words, the meanings of words that are learned from context have a clearly positive effect on retention.

### **The Present Study**

The present study attempts to provide empirical evidence on the effect of context on idiom teaching/learning. It compares three types of idiom teaching. The researcher intends to investigate the differences between context and non-context on the one hand and the differences between context types (extended versus limited) on the other hand. Group 1 (the extended-context group) received idiom instruction through context, Group 2 (the limited-context group) received idiom instruction through sentences and had no opportunity to learn idiomatic expressions through extended context, and Group 3 (the control group) had no opportunity to learn idiomatic expressions through any context and, thus, were exposed to the same idioms only in a decontextualized form simply through definitions. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the participants in the extended-context group (Group 1) perform better than the participants in the limited-context group (Group 2) on the immediate posttest?
2. Do the participants in the extended-context group (Group 1) perform better than the participants in the control group (Group 3) on the immediate posttest?

3. Do the participants in the extended-context group (Group 1) perform better than the participants in the limited-context group (Group 2) on the delayed posttest?
4. Do the participants in the extended-context group (Group 1) perform better than the participants in the control group (Group 3) on the delayed posttest?

## Method

### *Participants*

Three classes of 20 upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners (both males and females) with an average age of 15 participated in this study. Two classes were randomly assigned as the experimental groups (Groups 1 and 2) and one as the control group (Group 3). There were sixty participants altogether. Group 1 (experimental group, the extended-context group) was taught idioms through context, specifically brief stories, and Group 2 (experimental group, the limited-context group) was exposed to individual sentences which illustrated the use of the idiomatic expressions. Finally, Group 3 (control group, the decontextualized group) received the same idioms in only a decontextualized form through definitions.

None of the three groups had been exposed to any specific previous instructional emphasis on teaching idioms in an organized way. The three groups were considered to be equal in terms of English language proficiency and knowledge of idioms. It should also be mentioned that the participants in all three groups were taking regular English classes using the *Topnotch* series. The idiom work was done at the end of each class period for approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

### *Materials and Instruments*

Based on the learners' interest, 40 idioms were selected (see Appendix A). During each of the four sessions, ten idioms were presented to the participants in each group. Context-based instruction was employed with Group 1 (see Appendix B). The context-based idioms were extracted from <http://www.english-listening-world.com/idioms.html>. The same idioms were applied in individual sentences to the limited-context group, namely Group 2 (see Appendix C). Finally, the participants in Group 3 were simply given the same idioms with definitions (see Appendix D). Needless to say, since not all definitions and examples offered on the above website were clear enough, the researcher extracted related examples and definitions from *the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009). In order to practice the target idioms, the same written follow-up activity was administered to all groups (see Appendix E). At the end of each session, the participants were given ten gapped sentences to fill in the blanks with an appropriate idiom. In order to examine the effect of the three instructional treatments on learning idioms in an EFL context, a 25-multiple choice item test was developed by the researcher (see Appendix F). It was administered immediately after the instructional session was completed on Day 4. In addition, the delayed posttest was administered to investigate the long term effects of the three treatments on the participants' retention. They were given this posttest two weeks after the instructional period ended. In developing the posttests, fifty items were first prepared and then randomly assigned to either of the two administrations. Both tests were prepared by the researcher.

### Data Collection Procedure

The initial data were collected during a 4-session period. The participants in Group 3 (control group) were exposed to the idioms through definitions only, without any context. In Groups 2 and 3 (experimental groups), however, the idioms were embedded in context: some brief stories and individual sentences, respectively. They worked with the target idioms during every single session. In order not to deviate from the specified treatment, the instructor, the researcher of the present study, did not provide further explanation for the participants. In many cases, the participants were asked to seek peer feedback when it came to figuring out the definitions of idioms from the context or later when they were doing the gap-fill exercise. After each instructional session, the participants in all groups were given the gap-fill exercises to practice the day's ten idioms. They were provided with the correct answers immediately after they finished the task. The entire process was repeated during four instructional sessions. After being exposed to the whole forty target idioms, the immediate posttest was administered to all the participants in order to see whether the various kinds of instructions had any effect on the process of learning the L2 idioms. The immediate posttest consisted of 25 multiple choice items covering 25 idioms of the entire 40. The next day, the participants were informed of their scores. However, there was no additional feedback provided on the immediate posttest in order not to deviate from the intended treatment.

Additionally, the participants were given the delayed posttest two weeks after the entire instructional period was over to find out the long term effects of the different instructional treatments on learning the idioms. Both immediate and delayed posttests were equal in format but not in content (25 multiple-choice items).

### Results

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations of the control and the two experimental groups on the level of learning the target idioms at the two different testing periods.

	Immediate Posttest			Delayed Posttest		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Group 1	20	21.95	1.73	20	22.90	1.61
Group 2	20	15.30	3.59	20	19.80	1.73
Group 3	20	13.30	3.82	20	11.70	4.05

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of both posttests

In order to compare the treatment groups' test scores, one-way ANOVA (Analysis Of Variance) was used. As illustrated in Table 2, the degree of variability between the groups clearly indicated that there is a statistically significant difference among the three groups on the immediate posttest ( $F(2, 57)=40.21, p=.001$ ). This suggests that different instructional types played a major role in learning the idiomatic expressions.



Source	df	MS	F	Sig
Between Groups	2	410.15	40.21	.001
Within Groups	57	10.19		

*p*<.05

Table 2. One-way ANOVA analysis for the immediate posttest

The results of one-way ANOVA for idiomatic expression scores on the delayed posttest (see Table 3) showed that the number of idioms learned varied as a function of instructional treatment ( $F(2,57)=90.94, p=.001$ ).

Source	df	MS	F	Sig
Between Groups	2	668.86	90.94	.001
Within Groups	57	7.35		

*p*<.05

Table 3. One-way ANOVA analysis for the delayed posttest

To answer the research questions regarding which group best benefitted from the instructional treatments, a *post hoc* Scheffé Test for the three groups was employed. Table 4 shows the results of these tests both on the immediate and delayed posttests.

	Immediate Posttest		Delayed Posttest	
	Mean Difference	Sig	Mean Difference	Sig
Group 1 vs. Group 2	6.65	.001	13.10	.001
Group 1 vs. Group 3	-8.65	.001	-11.20	.001
Group 2 vs. Group 3	-2.00	.15	1.90	.001

*p*<.05

Table 4. The *post hoc* Scheffé test for the three groups

As Table 4 shows, regarding the immediate posttest, the participants in Group 1 significantly outperformed the participants in Group 3 (mean difference=-8.65,  $p=.001$ ). Similarly, Group 1 performed significantly better than the Group 2 on the immediate posttest (mean difference=6.65,  $p=.001$ ). Therefore, the first two research questions were answered positively, suggesting that the participants who were exposed to the idioms in brief stories significantly outperformed those who were exposed only to individual sentences and those who learned idioms in a decontextualized form through simple definitions.

The same phenomenon was also observed on the delayed posttest. In other words, Group 1 performed significantly better than both Groups 2 and 3 (mean differences=-11.20, 13.10,  $p=.001$  and  $.001$ , respectively). Thus, the third and the fourth research questions were answered positively as well.

## Discussion

The researcher was interested in the effects of various kinds of instructions on learning idiomatic expressions in EFL classes. Three groups were compared simultaneously to see if there were any meaningful differences among them. The analysis showed that the participants who were exposed to brief stories were more successful and performed better than those who were taught the idioms simply through definitions or individual illustrative sentences. Thus, the first two research questions were answered in the positive.

Additionally, this study explored the long term effects of these three various instructions of learning idiomatic expressions. The analysis showed that similar to the immediate posttest, the extended-context group outperformed the limited-context group and the decontextualized group as well. The second two research questions were therefore also answered in the positive.

The results of this study, thus, support the notion that context has a significant effect on learning L2/FL idiomatic expressions. The findings of this study corroborate the findings of Liantas (2003) in that the presence of context does significantly affect the learning and understanding of idioms. He mentioned that the absence of context does put a serious constraint on learning and comprehending idioms. Kainulainen (2006) also pointed out the role of context in learning and comprehending idiomatic expressions. His study further showed how idioms are far more easily understood and learnt within a context than without one. The presentation of idioms in brief stories provided a great help for the participants. The result of the analysis of the long term effects of context when learning idioms indicated that the extended-context group outperformed the other two groups, since the clues in the context could easily help the participants remember the idioms vividly. Ortony et al. (1978) suggested that "processing the context activates adequate appropriate schemata to enable an idiomatic expression to be arrived at quite readily" (p. 474). Training students to infer meaning from context and to deal with figurative speech enables them to generalize beyond those idioms which they have learned and to understand and learn idioms which they have never encountered before (Adkins, 1968).

In the limited-context condition, things are rather different. Certainly fewer appropriate schemata can be activated (Ortony et al., 1978). A sentence is not enough for the mastering the idiomatic expressions. When the idiomatic expression is encountered in a context, learners use "an already constructed representation of what has gone before (the context) as a conceptual framework for interpreting a target sentence, or any other linguistic unit" (Ortony et al., 1978, p.467), hence it helps in mastering idiomatic expressions. In individual sentences, however, the target idioms are presented with minimal or no preceding context. Without adequate contextual support, the learners are not able to activate the schemata. It is essential to engage in additional inferential procedures to generalize beyond those targeted idioms in order to learn them well.

One limitation of the present study is that the results pertain only to sixty upper-intermediate EFL learners. The results may change if studies are conducted on larger number of participants, or on participants at different proficiency levels. Moreover, all the findings are based on specific kinds of texts and specific idioms, thus they may not be relevant to other (kinds of) texts or idioms.

## Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest the positive effect of context on learning/teaching L2/FL idiomatic expressions and the positive long term effect of context on participants' retention as well. The researcher's findings are in line with those of Liantas (2003) in the sense that the context can effectively facilitate understanding and the learning/teaching of idiomatic expressions. And it further supports the argument that the learning of idiomatic expressions can be enhanced through systematic instruction within the context of meaningful-authentic language use (Liantas, 2003). The investigation carried out by Li (1988) indicated that the participants scored significantly higher on learning and remembering the meaning of unfamiliar words in context. In other words, those participants who learnt the meanings of unfamiliar words through context performed better in remembering the meanings of those words. Additionally, research ( Craik & Tulving, 1975) has shown that memory performance enhances to the extent that vocabulary items have been learned through context.

The researcher also argued that a large number of schemata were activated in the longer context. Thus, in the longer context most of the schemata employed in processing the context can also be used while administering the posttests, especially those schemata which turn out to be helpful. In the limited context, however, not enough schemata are available. Therefore, this cannot help learners master the idiomatic expressions in the long term. This finding is not consistent with the findings of Ortony et al.'s (1978) study. There were significant differences between the two context lengths (short vs. long). They have shown that fewer suitable schemata would be activated in the comprehension of the shorter context, consequently not resulting in the mastering of the idiomatic expressions. Meanwhile, in the longer context, learners performed better because of the higher number of activated schemata. This is because context provides many points of reference for the retention of the new words--in the case of the present study, idiomatic expressions. Consequently, it facilitates the retrieval of information from one's memory.

The findings of the present study, though not generalizable due to the limited number of the participants, indicate the superiority of longer contexts, defined as brief stories in this study, to individual sentences in teaching idioms. This is a point that both teachers and materials writers need to think twice about.

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## Appendix A: List of the Idioms used in the Study

[www.english-listening-world.com/idioms.html](http://www.english-listening-world.com/idioms.html)

- |                           |                                  |                                     |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Turn a deaf ear to     | 11. Be a bundle of nerves        | 21. Shake in one's boots            |                            |
| 2. At sixes and sevens    | 12. At the crack of dawn         | 22. Scare someone out of one's wits | 31. Down in the mouth      |
| 3. All in                 | 13. Foot the bill                | 23. Have the bottle                 | 32. In the red             |
| 4. Lie low                | 14. Put sth on the backburner    | 24. Put a brave face on it          | 33. Teething troubles      |
| 5. In someone's bad books | 15. Hit the nail on the head     | 25. Bite the bullet                 | 34. Get sth off the ground |
| 6. Set one's heart on     | 16. Turn sth upside down         | 26. Be sitting pretty               | 35. Go to the wall         |
| 7. Screw up one's courage | 17. Make oneself scarce          | 27. Be in a cold sweat              | 36. In the long run        |
| 8. A piece of cake        | 18. In hot water                 | 28. In the nick of time             | 37. Hit the roof           |
| 9. With flying colors     | 19. Like a cat on a hot tin roof | 29. Laugh one's head off            | 38. On tenterhooks         |
| 10. Grin from ear to ear  | 20. The coast is clear           | 30. Take the mickey out of          | 39. Above board            |
|                           |                                  |                                     | 40. Tighten one's belt     |

## Appendix B: Group 1 (sample texts)

[www.english-listening-world.com/idioms.html](http://www.english-listening-world.com/idioms.html)

### Sample Text 1: Late Homework

Tom attends a very strict school. The teachers give a lot of homework and they get angry if it is not done. One day Tom lost his homework. He **turned his room upside down** looking for it. He couldn't find it. He was **in hot water**. On the way to school he thought, 'I'd better **make myself scarce** today!' In class, he was **like a cat on a hot tin roof** waiting for the teacher to ask for the homework. About half way through class, there was a fire drill and the whole class had to go outside. The **coast was clear**! He was safe for another day. Later on, Tom did find his homework and he handed it in with pride.

### Sample Text 2: An Honest Boy

George is getting ready for a parade with his school. He was playing in his uniform and got it dirty. He knew his mother was going to **hit the roof**, and he was **on tenterhooks** on his way home. At least he was **above board** when he came in, because he knew that **in the long run** honesty is the best policy. Now his whole family will have to **tighten their belts** so they can buy material to make him a new uniform for the parade.

### Appendix C: Group 2 (sample)

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009)*

**1. The coast is clear**

*You can come out of your hiding place now. The coast is clear!*

**2. In hot water**

*She was in hot water since she didn't do her homework.*

**3. Like a cat on a hot tin roof**

*He was like a cat on a hot tin roof waiting for the teacher to ask for the homework.*

**4. In the long run**

*My uncle is losing money on his stocks but in the long run he should make money.*

**5. Tighten one's belt**

*In the new economy, we all have to learn to tighten our belts.*

### Appendix D: Group 3(sample)

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009)*

**1. The coast is clear**

*There is no longer any danger or difficulty present*

**2. In hot water**

*In trouble*

**3. Like a cat on a hot tin roof**

*Very nervous and restless*

**4. in the long run**

*Eventually, in the end, after a long period of time*

**5. Tighten their belt**

*To economize greatly, to spend a great deal less money*

### Appendix E: Sample gap-fill exercise

Fill in the blanks with appropriate idioms.

1. His whole family will have to ..... so they can buy material to make him a new uniform for the parade.
2. He ..... his room ..... looking for keys.
3. Moving to Spain will be better for you .....
4. You can come out of your hiding place now. ....!
5. John's parents told him to take a rest, but he .....to them and kept on working.

## Appendix F: Sample items from the immediate and delayed posttests

### Identify the choice that best completes each statement

1. I was ..... that I would fail the driver's test.
  - a. scared out of my wits
  - b. sitting pretty
  - c. biting the bullet
  - d. tightening my belt
  
2. A: Have you talked to Randy lately? He just got a new job and a raise.  
B: Yes, I've heard. He sure is .....
  - a. sitting pretty
  - b. in the long run
  - c. hitting the roof
  - d. on tenterhooks
  
3. In theory, good companies will grow and prosper and bad companies will .....
  - a. foot the bill
  - b. hit the nail on the head
  - c. go to the wall
  - d. screw up their courage
  
4. A: Did you miss your flight?  
B: No, fortunately, I got to the airport .....
  - a. in the red
  - b. in the nick of time
  - c. in hot water
  - d. in the long run
  
5. The thieves are trying to ..... for a few days in the farmhouse and then they will escape.
  - a. go to the wall
  - b. hit the roof
  - c. foot the bill
  - d. lie low