

Iraqi EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Expressing Themselves in the English Language Using Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract:

This study investigated the attitudes of Iraqi secondary school EFL students towards expressing themselves in the English language using idiomatic expressions. The study sample consisted of a total of 27 EFL secondary school students studying in an Iraqi secondary school in Malaysia. Qualitative research methods were used to investigate the learners' attitudes towards English idioms. Three qualitative methods (students' learning journals (dairies), focus group interviews, and classroom observation) were used to collect data in this research. The results showed that the majority of these learners have negative attitudes towards learning English idioms. In addition, they were observer to be unable to use idiomatic expressions in their classroom speaking and writing. Moreover, the results revealed there are several educational factors that had negative impacts on learners' attitudes towards idioms. In the light of the results, the study presents some recommendations for teaching and learning idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: (idiomatic expressions, learners' attitudes, strategies, Iraqi secondary school EFL students)

وجهات نظر المعلمين العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة

أجنبية تجاه التعبير عن أنفسهم باللغة الإنجليزية باستخدام

التعبيرات الاصطلاحية

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وزارة التربية/ العراق

المخلص:

استقصت الدراسة وجهات نظر طلاب المدارس الثانوية في العراق الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للتعبير عن أنفسهم في اللغة الإنجليزية باستخدام التعبيرات الانجليزية الاصطلاحية. تكونت عينة الدراسة من إجمالي ٢٧ طالب وطالبة من المرحلة الثانوية في المدرسة العراقية الثانوية بماليزيا. تم استخدام ادوات بحث لاستقصاء وجهات نظر المتعلمين تجاه المصطلحات الإنجليزية. تم استخدام ثلاث طرق نوعية: مقالات الطلاب التعليمية (مذكرات) ، مقابلات المجموعات المركزة، والملاحظة الصفية) لجمع بيانات البحث. أظهرت النتائج أن غالبية هؤلاء المتعلمين لديهم وجهات نظر سلبية تجاه تعلم المصطلحات الإنجليزية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، لوحظوا غير قادرين على استخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في التحدث والكتابة. علاوة على ذلك ، كشفت النتائج أن هناك العديد من عوامل السياق التعليمي التي كان لها آثار سلبية على وجهات نظر المتعلمين تجاه المصطلحات. في ضوء النتائج، قدمت الدراسة بعض التوصيات لتعليم وتعلم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (التعبيرات الاصطلاحية ، وجهات نظر المتعلمين ، الاستراتيجيات ، طلاب المدارس الثانوية في العراق).

Introduction

Idioms are omnipresent icons in every language. They are pervasive in the process of developing a learner's understands of a language. Understanding idiomatic phrases can help learners express their ideas in a more creative way. The use of idioms as an essential part of figurative language can help EFL learners to improve their communicative competence (Khan & Can Daşkin, 2014). The use of idioms can play a superior role in the deep lexical knowledge enhancement of learners. Idioms are an intrinsic part of vocabulary learning and EFL learners need to master English idiomatic phrases to achieve native-like proficiency (Nation & Meara, 2002). Therefore, idioms are seen as an integral natural part of everyday discourse since they reflect cultural and linguistic sides and enable people to communicate appropriately with others from different cultures (Howwar, 2013). Idioms can broaden people's understanding and manipulation of a language since they share cultural and historical information (Ambrose, 2003).

It is agreed that every language has its own idiomatic phrases that cannot be understood literally from their individual words. Hence, using idioms seems to be a more complex issue. Idioms are one of these phrases which used in a wide variety of everyday life situations to share knowledge, culture, and literature among others. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 270) define an idiom as: " an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts." In other definition, an idiom is defined as a group of words that means something different than the individual words it contains (The Office of English Language Programs, United States Department of State, 2010, p. v). Similarly, Longman

Idioms Dictionary (1998) defined an idiom as “a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understood each word separately”. In another definition, Smith (2012) considered the lack of idioms as an obstacle that often puzzled non-native speakers in their use of language. He defined idioms as natural expressions used informally to convey information by native speakers of a language. This definition may be referred to the importance of idioms in the informal spoken language rather than academic writing. Moreover, Collins English Dictionary (2006) stated that an idiom is as a simile is a multi-word expression that acts as units and does not have its literal meaning.

In the big picture, these definitions indicated that an idiom is a complex lexical single unit, and its meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of its parts. From a semantic viewpoint, this research concentrates on an idiom as a multi-word expression that has a particular meaning to express certain ideas that cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual words. In other words, the current study concentrates on the Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes towards the figurative sense of idioms rather than the literal sense of idioms. For example, a learner could say “it’s raining cats and dogs!” to mean ‘It is raining very heavily’ or “you hit the nail on the head” to mean ‘you're correct’ and to “break a leg” means wishing you ‘good luck’ rather than revolves around the literal meaning of break and leg. These examples indicated that idioms are considered a source of perplexity for learners.

Problem Statement

It is known that idiomatic phrases are considered as one of the most challenging issues encountered by EFL Iraqi learners (Joodi 2012; Al-Rekaby 2008; Khalil 2010; Ali 2011; Abdulhsadi; 2014). As a result of this perplexity, the researcher has noticed that non-native students face serious difficulties in understanding the meaning of idiomatic phrases. They were observed to be perplexed when they deal with idiomatic phrases since these idioms are avoided in their classes. Therefore, they might receive negative attitudes towards learning idioms. Moreover, idioms are considered strongly culture-based; therefore, it may be challenging to be familiar with these idioms. Khalil (2010) and Joodi (2012) considered idioms as a thorny issue for EFL learners of English. Al-Rekaby (2008) related this thorny issue to the non-compositionality of idioms. Cooper (1999) stated that idioms present a problem for all language learners because of their figurative meaning which is unpredictable. As mentioned above, all the definitions of idioms indicated that acquiring idioms is a laborious and daunting task involving a very high conscious process.

One important issue of enhancing the depth of lexical knowledge is to investigate the learners' attitudes towards learning idioms. Therefore, much work on learners' attitudes should be focussed on understanding the nature of idioms. To get past this difficulty, exploring learners' attitudes towards idioms may determine their desire for expanding their lexical knowledge through studying idioms. In other words, attitudes are seen as important to shape learners' motivation towards learning idioms. Whether they are positive, natural, or negative, attitudes determine the ease or difficulty of learning (Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018).

Hence, identifying the Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes towards idioms considers an important area of inquiry. It can provide valuable teaching and learning suggestions and approaches for enhancing lexical knowledge. Identifying learners' attitudes towards language teaching and learning can be helpful in forming effective learning methods (Büyükyazi, 2010). Additionally, they can persuade teachers and students to take on the problems of teaching idioms. "Students work harder and persevere through challenges when they have concrete personal goals and motivation for mastering the subject knowledge" (Willis 2010, p. 11). A lot of researches were concentrated on the learners' difficulties, but very little ones were on the learners' attitudes towards idioms. Hence, the current study will investigate the Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes towards the importance of learning idioms and investigate the factors behind these students' attitudes in order to find possible solutions for the current problem.

Attitudes toward Learning Idioms

Determination of learners' beliefs in language teaching/learning process will be helpful in forming effective learning methods (Büyükyazi, 2010, p. 1). According to Alsalihi (2019, p. 376), "attitudes refer to the inside tendency and thoughts that reflect when a person is displayed to some phenomena ". In other words, attitudes refer to the views of a person towards certain phenomenon whether they are positive or negative. Learners' attitudes towards idioms play a key role in language learning and enhancing learners' deep lexical knowledge. De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor (2005) argued that high motivation and a positive attitude help SL learning. Similarly, Abdul Ridha (2014) stated that finding out hidden attitudes is one of the solutions to the problems in the English language. Learning idiom phrases

requires deep knowledge and positive attitudes to understand what people mean in their daily conversations.

Many previous studies have demonstrated the importance of attitudes as a key motivational component in lexical learning. These studies revealed that many EFL and ESL learners are motivated and have positive attitudes towards learning idioms. However, these learners have encountered many difficulties in their use of idioms. For example, in Taiwan, Ying-Ying Chuang (2013) explored the learning attitudes and the difficulties toward idioms among 107 EFL university English major students. The result indicated that the majority of these students had a positive attitude toward idiom learning and valued its necessity to improve their language proficiency. On the other hand, the result showed that 82.3 of the students face difficulties in learning idioms, while 17.7% did not show any difficulty in comprehending idioms. This indicted that idioms are a laborious task. This might indicate that learners lack sufficient knowledge about idioms.

In other two studies showed compatible results with Ying-Ying Chuang (2013), Tadayyon & Ketabi (2014) and Nasab (2015) proved that Iranian EFL undergraduate English major students considered idioms as an indispensable part of language learning and had very high positive attitudes towards learning idioms. In the same vein, Gahroei & Tabatabaei (2013) showed that Iranian students who are exposed to the idioms through using etymology and watching movie clips have positive attitudes towards learning idioms than their colleagues in the other group.

Similarly, in the Afghan EFL context, Orfan (2020) used a questionnaire to investigate the attitudes of Afghan university EFL

students towards learning English idioms. The results showed that these students had very strong positive attitudes towards the importance of learning idioms.

Khan and Daşkin (2014) investigated the Turkish EFL teacher-trainees' attitudes towards idioms learning. The result revealed that the teacher-trainees hardly used idioms in their teaching and those who used them usually did not have the sufficient way to help learners to enhance their communicative competence. In the same vein, Rizq (2015) investigate the perspective of native and non-native English teachers on idioms in language teaching and learning. The results showed that all teachers agreed that idioms play an essential role in ELT and there is a strong connection between idioms and culture. Regarding difficulties, 70% of the teachers agreed that idioms are difficult for ESL students; however, These studies emphasized the importance of idioms and their acquisition difficulties due to learners' lack of figurative awareness and lack of cultural connections. Therefore, the current study attempts to shed light on the attitudes that Iraqi EFL students have towards the importance of learning idioms and the factors affecting their attitudes.

Regarding the Iraqi EFL context, the research revealed that little research has been done focusing on the learning attitudes toward learning English idioms by university EFL students in the Iraqi context. There are relatively few studies conducted to investigate the learners' attitudes towards teaching and learning idioms. The studies had paid attention to the translation problems rather than focusing on attitudes on idioms as classroom problems. For example, Abdul Ridha (2014) explored Iraqi EFL university

learners' beliefs about translation and using it as a strategy. These learners showed a positive view towards studying translation to improve their English. In another study, Abdul hsadi (2014) investigated the difficulties of non-equivalence idioms in translating between Arabic and English. The results showed that learners faced potential difficulties in the process of translating idioms from Arabic into English and vice versa. Therefore, the current study will investigate the Iraqi EFL learners' towards the importance of English idioms. Identifying Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes on idioms seems to be a good reason to give idioms special attention in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

Aims of the Study

The present study aims to investigate the attitude of Iraqi EFL secondary school learners towards learning English idioms. It also investigates the factors behind these students' attitudes towards learning English idioms.

Research Questions

1. What are the EFL Iraqi students' attitudes towards the importance of learning English idioms?
2. What are the factors affecting these students' attitudes?

The Study

Methodology

The study paid attention to qualitative research since a lot of previous related studies (e.g., Chuang, 2013; Ying-Ying Chuang, 2013; Tadayyon & Ketabi, 2014; & Nasab, 2015; Orfan, 2020, and Khan & Daşkin, 2014) have paid attention to quantitative methods to investigate the learners' attitudes towards English

idioms. This study utilized qualitative methods to get more in-depth information on the learners' attitudes towards English idioms. 12 students were randomly selected and interviewed using the focus group interview regarding their attitudes towards learning English idioms. In addition, students' learning journals (diaries) were used as another instrument to investigate these learners' attitudes towards English idioms. Moreover, classroom observation was used as a third qualitative method through this research. Before finalizing the interview and learning journals' questions, the questions were given to two staff members at Anbar University to seek their advice regarding the validity of the questions. The gathered data was recorded, transcribed, and then divided into themes based on the students' responses to the interview and learning journal questions.

Participants

A convenience sample method was adopted in this research (conveniently available subjects). The sample who participated in this study was 27 Iraqi EFL 5th scientific-grade students who were studying during the academic year 2015 – 2016 in an Iraqi secondary school in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussion

The students' responses to the learning journals and interviews were analyzed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the EFL Iraqi secondary school students' attitudes towards the importance of learning English idioms?

RQ2: What are the factors affecting these students' attitudes?

In general, the results showed that just a few participants were able to recognize the importance of learning idioms. They were lack of sufficient knowledge of idioms to express themselves in English. The majority of them were seen to be unable to use idioms appropriately in their communication and writing through classroom activities. That is why they consider idioms an unimportant aspect in their learning, especially at their level of study, which is secondary school level. They might think that is too early to study such a complicated issue at their level of study. According to Al-Houti & Aldaihani (2018, p. 140) "Learning idioms is an uphill battle for many language learners". In particular, the results indicated that these students were not aware of the use of figurative language in their communication. This might give us an assumption that idioms are not useful at their level of study. The students reported their attitudes towards the importance of English idioms as follows:

Int.10

"ما عندي اي فكرة عن استخدام المصطلحات الانكليزية في تطوير مفرداتي والتحدث بالانكليزية بشكل احسن، اني اعرف الكلمات مهمة مو المصطلحات، لذلك نظرتي مو ايجابية حتى اتعلم المصطلحات بهاي المرحلة".

Translation:

(I have no idea about using English idioms that can improve my vocabulary and help me to speak better, I know only about the importance of English words but not idioms. Therefore, my

attitude towards learning idioms isn't positive at this level of study).

Int.6

"عرفت من المقابلة انو المصطلحات هيچ مهمة، قبل ما جان عندي فكرة شون المصطلحات تحسن تحدثي بالانكليزي، لذلك نظرتي جانت سلبية".

Translation:

(I knew from the interview that idioms are so important. Previously, I didn't have any idea how idioms can improve my English speaking. Thus, my attitude towards learning idioms was negative).

Lj. 18

"اعتقد ان مشكلتنا في التحدث مو بسبب تجنب دراسة المصطلحات احنا نعاني من عدم القدرة على التحدث بصورة عامة حتى بدون استخدام المصطلحات لذلك المصطلحات ما تساعدنا لان كثير من الناس تحجي انكليزي بدون استخدام المصطلحات".

Translation:

(I think that lack of our communication is not because of neglecting teaching idioms, our problem is that we are unable to communicate in general even without using idioms; therefore, idioms can't help us since a lot of people speak English without using idioms).

Lj. 7

"اعتقد انو المصطلحت تعقد علينا التحدث اكثر باعتبار صعب
نعرف معناها الحقيقي واكبر مشكلة تواجهنا هي الترجمة
"الحرفية".

Translation:

(I think idioms make our communication more complicated since it is difficult to know their true meaning (functional meaning). Our problem is the literal translation.

Lj. 11

" اكثر تركيزنا شون نعبر الامتحان اكثر من تركيزنا على
استخدام المصطلحات، المصطلحات مراح تساعدنا في عبور
الامتحان لان اساتذتنا تاركوها".

Translation:

(We focus too much on how to pass the exams rather than how to use the idioms; idioms are not useful to pass the exams since our teachers ignore them).

Int.2

"كتبنا هواي من الانشاءات ما بيها مصطلحات ولا مدرس اكدنا
اهمية المصطلحات لا بالكتابة ولا بحديثنا بالانكليزي".

Translation:

(We wrote many compositions without idioms, and no one of our teachers emphasized the importance of idioms in writing and speaking).

The quotes above indicated that students seem to not believe in the importance of mastering English idioms and act accordingly, this shows they do not value the importance of learning idioms and that is why they show negative attitudes about them. In other words, these quotes show the lack of students' interest in learning idioms. An explanation for these results may be because that little attention has been paid to idioms in their textbook; accordingly, they are neglected by teachers too.

The participants lament their teachers and curriculum designer since they did not pay attention to English idioms. This finding is inconsistent with the results of previous research by (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2005; Chuang, 2013; Chuang, 2013, Tadayyon & Ketabi 2014; Nasab, 2015, and Orfan 2020) who revealed that the majority of students have positive attitudes towards the importance of English idiomatic expressions. These studies might be showed general attitudes of learners towards idioms, but they did not fix the problem of learners' lack of communication and how idioms are avoided in their classroom speaking and writing. Whereas the current results investigated how these learners can express themselves using idioms, therefore even if some of them showed positive attitudes about idioms, they were observed to be unable to use idioms effectively in their speaking and writing.

On the other hand, several of the students have positive attitudes towards learning English idioms. They consider English idioms as a very important aspect as they believe that English idioms are an essential part of the English language to express themselves in English. For example, these respondents mentioned in their learning journal that idioms are very important to develop their speaking and writing and to comprehend the reading texts

better. The students reported their attitudes towards the importance of English idioms as follows:

Int.3

"بالطبع، المصطلحات الانكليزية مهمة لاي واحد يتعلم الانكليزي ونحتاجها للتحدث بشكل جيد لكن مشكلتنا ماعدنه خبره بتعلمها".

Translation:

(Of course, English idioms are important for those who learn English, and we need them to achieve better communication, but our problem we lack the experience of learning idioms).

Lj. 25

"اعتقد تعلم المصطلحات الانكليزية ضروري حتى يطورنا بالتحدث والكتابة بالانكليزية وحتى يطور الاستماع لكن تحتاج تركيز بالمنهج".

Translation:

(I think that learning English idioms is necessary to develop our speaking, writing in English, and listening skills but we need to focus on our textbooks).

Int. 4

"اني ما دارسها لكن عرفتها باليوتيوب لذلك حبيت اتعلمها".

Translation:

(I did not study them (idioms), but I knew about them on YouTube, therefore, I was motivated to learn them).

Int.12

" يمكن أن يؤدي فهم المصطلحات إلى تعزيز مهاراتي في المحادثة في اللغة الإنجليزية لكن المصطلحات معقدة وتربكنا بتعلمنا".

Translation:

(Learning English idioms is useful, understanding them can boost my conversational English skills; however, these idioms are complicated and confused us in our learning).

However, these students showed positive attitudes towards idiomatic expressions; it was observed that these students are still facing problems when it comes to speaking and writing in English, even with producing simple idioms. These students mentioned they lack experience, knowledge, and strategies to deal with idioms. This gives us an indicator that these students showed general attitudes about idioms without focusing on using idioms in their speaking and writing. This indicator was confirmed by many students when they mentioned they do not have in-depth knowledge about using idioms in their speaking and writing.

Regarding the second research question, the participants presented a host of factors that may justify their negative attitudes towards idioms such as lack of interest in idioms by their textbooks and teachers, to avoid failure in the exam, lack of

functional meaning, lack of efficient strategies, etc. The students reported their attitudes towards the importance of English idioms as follows:

Int.4

"ما درسنا المصطلحات ولا ركزنا على طرق تعلمها بدراستنا ولهذا السبب نشوفها مو مهمة وممتحفين نتعلمها".

Translation:

(We didn't study idioms or focus on learning strategies, for this reason, we see them as not important and we are not motivated to learn them)

Lj. 9

منهجنا ومدرسينا متركزين على تدريس المصطلحات، ما مطيها اهمية".

Translation:

(Our textbook and teachers are not focusing on teaching idioms; they didn't pay them attention).

Lj. 3

اذا المدرس يشوفها مو مهمة وميدرسنيهاها اكيد ميبقاننا اهتمام بيها، اضافة لهذا الشي عدنه طريقة نتعامل بيها وي المصطلحات بس نخمن المعنى، كذلك ولا واحد من المدرسين ارشدنا شون تطور مصطلحات الانكليزي من خلال الانترنت ."

Translation:

(If teachers see idioms as an unimportant aspect, and they don't teach them, surely we will not be interested in them. In addition, we don't have any strategy to deal with the idioms, we only guess the meaning. Additionally, our teachers didn't direct us to make good use of current websites to develop their idioms).

Int.1

"اكيد المنهج والمدرس هامليها وهذا خلانا نعبر عنها بشكل سلبي لو مهتمين بيها جان شفناها مفيدة "

Translation:

(Of course, the curriculum and the teacher neglected them (idioms), and this made us show negative attitudes. If they were interested in it, we would have seen it as useful).

Int.2

مثلا هاي مال تمطر قططا وكلاب تفاجئت من عرفت هيجي تترجم تمطر بغزارة لو جايتني جان ترجمتها حرفيا الخلل ممهتمين بيها بكتبنا".

Translation:

(For example, it is raining cats and dogs. I was surprised when I knew it would be translated into it rains heavily

Int.6 & 9

"ما عدنه طريقة تدريس واضحة شون ندرس الكلمات
الانكليزية انحة ندرس الكلمة معناه الحرفي بس".

Translation:

(There is no clear teaching method for
learning vocabulary; we studied only the literal
meaning of words by word)

" ترجمتنا حرفية ماعدنة طريقة نتعلم بيها المصطلحات".

Translation:

(Our translation is literal; we don't have any method to
learn idioms).

These quotes showed that there are many educational factors affected these learners' attitudes towards learning English idioms. Students complained of these factors: lack of interest in idioms by their textbooks and teachers, to avoid failure in the exam, lack of functional meaning, lack of efficient strategies and, lack of efficient methods of teaching vocabulary. This result indicated that these students do not have the necessary background knowledge to make them interested and show positive attitudes towards learning English idioms. These students attributed their lack of awareness of idiomatic expressions to the very little attention paid to teaching idiomatic expressions during the years of study at the secondary school level. Based on the researcher's observation, the teachers were observed teaching idioms incidentally when they come up with them. Sometimes, they noticed to ask students to give the meaning in Arabic through the context while reading passages. Additionally, the students

were seen unable to give the functional meaning for idioms. Moreover, it was noticed that teachers were unfamiliar with culture-bound idioms. Thus, these results suggested that learners need to be encouraged and have the opportunity to use idiomatic expressions in classroom teaching and learning. In this vein, they should be guided to know that idioms are one of the most important aspects of learning the English language.

However the majority of participants showed negative attitudes towards learning idioms, they were inspired to improve their English focusing on English idioms. The results suggest that learning and teaching idioms is as essential as teaching and learning other parts of vocabulary. Finally, the students reported their attitudes towards the importance of English idioms as follows:

Int. 5

صح لازم نجرب شي جديد بتعلمنا ومحتاجين حقيقة ان
ندمج نفسنا بتعلم المصطلحات حتى نطور اكثر
"بانكليزيتنا".

Translation:

Yes, we have to try something new in our learning and we need to immerse ourselves in learning English idioms to improve our English.

Int. 5

" فرصة زينة من خلال افقتهما اهمية المصطلحا تطور انكليزيتنا".
المقابلة

Translation:

(This interview is a good opportunity to understand the importance of idioms to improve our English).

In general, it can be said that the students have negative attitudes towards learning idioms. On the other hand, some of the students have more open ideas to learn idioms, but they also lack the knowledge that can help them to improve their vocabulary. Therefore, the students should be encouraged to use effective strategies they can use to push themselves towards better communication in English and a better career in the future. They got the advice that learning is not to pass the exam and quality over quantity. In other words, learning is to get better English and a better career.

Conclusion and Implications

In a conclusion, these results indicated that these students do not have positive attitudes towards English idiomatic expressions. As they claimed, their attitudes towards English idioms revolved around the lack of sufficient interest in idioms by their teachers and curriculum designers to teach English idioms. Therefore, they did not expose to interactive situations in which idiomatic expressions are used and that is the reason why they showed negative attitudes towards idioms. Within the light of these results, it is recommended to select the appropriate idioms expressions for students' level to include textbook information about the importance of teaching and learning idioms to increase students' motivation towards understanding the importance of idioms in enhancing their language skills, especially speaking and writing. Thus, as shown above, these results indicated that

teachers have to pay much more attention to making idiomatic expressions as more understandable to the learners as possible. They have to try their best to find efficient strategies to teach idiomatic expressions faster and better to their EFL learners. Additionally, idioms should be taught as early as possible in intermediate and secondary schools, and this teaching should be continued throughout the whole education process. Moreover, the current results may suggest that these students need to learn effective strategies to help them turn their negative attitudes about learning idioms.

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