

## Killing more than two birds with one stone: Teaching topical vocabulary through idioms

**Anastasia S. Syunina**, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Higher School of the Russian Language and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation

**Iskander E. Yarmakeev**, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Higher School of the Russian Language and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation

**Tatiana S. Pimenova\***, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Higher School of the Russian Language and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation

**Albina R. Abdrafikova**, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Higher School of the Russian Language and Intercultural Communication, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to monitor, analyse and assess the effectiveness of using idioms in mastering students' vocabulary knowledge and improving speech in EFL class. The leading research method was a three-stage experiment. To successfully conduct the experiment, there were compiled a list of an active vocabulary and a list of English idioms that contain this vocabulary. All these were to meet the syllabus topics. A total of 62 school students were observed in this experiment. The obtained results were positive, indicating the fact that teaching vocabulary in idiomatic expressions turned out to be more appealing to learners and more effective than 'teaching laundry lists of vocabulary alone'. The paper discusses issues and practices of teaching topical vocabulary in EFL class and offers general recommendations for foreign language instructors.

**Keywords:** EFL class, experiment, syllabus topics, teaching vocabulary through idioms, topical vocabulary.

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Tatiana S. Pimenova**, Kazan Federal University, Kremlyovskaya St, 18, Kazan 420008, Russia.  
E-mail address: [pimenova\\_ts@mail.ru](mailto:pimenova_ts@mail.ru) / Tel.: 8917 864 4846

## 1. Introduction

How to be a L2 person? How to learn piles of new words and collocations? 'Just start learning L2' answer does not work! This paper addresses the questions such as these and presents theory and research that explores how school students can learn and master topical vocabulary through idioms. Why idioms? In this study, it is claimed that learning idioms enhances vocabulary development. A great role of idioms in teaching foreign languages is underlined by many researchers and educators (Abel, 2003; Adkins, 1968; Asl, 2013; Bateni, 2010; Bobrow & Bell, 1973; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005; Cakir, 2011; Chuang, 2013; Cooper, 1998; Esayan, 2016; Gibbs, 1980; 1992; Grant, 2007; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Hamblin & Gibbs, 1999; Irujo, 1986a; 1986b; Kajumova, Sadykova, Gabdelganeeva et al., 2018; Kellerman, 1983; Khan & Daskin, 2014; Li, 2010; Liontas, 2003; Liu, 2003; Mercer, 2000; Mondria & Wit-De Boer, 1991; Nation, 2001; Richards, 1967; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994; Saiwuleshi, Bochina & Abakumova, 2017; Samani & Hashemian, 2012; Saragi, Nation & Meister, 1978; Solnyshkina, Solovova & Harkova, 2016; Tarcaoanu, 2012; Titone & Connine, 1994; Van der Merwe & Adendorff, 2012), which is a significant finding as it is, although none has dealt with the above framed topic so far. This paper attempts to fill an important gap in teaching and methodological literature and to arouse the interest of the academic community to further explore this field.

The main goal the authors set in this study was to prove that idioms can significantly increase students' interest in learning and improving vocabulary knowledge in a meaningful way.

One of the targets for the researchers in this study was to identify the most widely used vocabulary units; select the appropriate idioms to work them out and elaborate a series of training exercises aimed at consolidating the lexis. An experiment was chosen as a leading research method. A pedagogical three-stage experiment revealed the efficiency of teaching topical vocabulary through idioms. The techniques implemented in this study raised students' motivation and boosted vocabulary learning; as such, these teaching techniques can supplant or complement conventional practices of teaching topical vocabulary in EFL class. According to the reviewed literature, no study has investigated the use of idioms, in the classroom and/or over an entire course, to explicitly teach topical vocabulary. A tentative assumption that learning vocabulary in context is easier and more efficient, which was based on the evidence from the classroom, became a starting point for this study. So, this study is conducted with the aim of monitoring, analysing and assessing the effectiveness of using idioms in mastering students' vocabulary knowledge and improving speech in EFL class.

## 2. Method

Experimental research model was used in this study to determine the effectiveness of teaching topical vocabulary in EFL class through idioms.

### 2.1. Participants

The study groups of the research consist of 62 students who are 15–16 years old, mixed who made up four groups: 2 control (10 A/1, 10 A/2) and 2 experimental (10 B/1, 10 B/2).

Students' status: high school students. Briefly, 62 students took part in the experiment: 2 control groups—33 students and 2 experimental groups—29 students.

### 2.2. Data collection tools

The study materials included eight thematic blocks and lexical test was applied to students.

### 2.3. Experimental process

The experiment took place in Gymnasium # 19 of the city of Kazan. Gymnasium # 19 is ranked among 100 best schools of Russia. The priority direction of the gymnasium is the formation of the intellectual, moral and creative personality, freely adaptable to modern society. In accordance with the set objectives in the study, the experiment was conducted with the aim to monitor, analyse and assess the effectiveness of using idioms in mastering students' vocabulary knowledge and improving speech in EFL class.

The experimental training was conducted for students of the Tenth grade (2 control groups and 2 experimental groups) during two semesters: Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 in Gymnasium # 19.

In all, 62 students took part in the experiment: 2 control groups—33 students and 2 experimental groups—29 students.

The experiment consisted of three phases:

- i. Ascertaining experiment
- ii. Forming experiment
- iii. Control experiment

At the ascertaining stage, a questionnaire (list of themes) was offered to the students to reveal their attitude and readiness to master English vocabulary with the help of idioms. The questionnaire (list) included such topics as:

- Games and sport
- Literature
- Relationships—friends and family
- People—appearance
- Money
- Daily life
- Crime and punishment
- Films, plays and books
- Journalism
- Success and failure
- Work
- Animals

The most popular with students were: games and sport, relationships, money, crime and punishment, films (plays and books), success and failure, work and animals. The words given in bold are the ones that are to be learned due to the subject syllabus.

#### **Sample**

##### 1. *Games and sport*

Not pull any **punches**—to speak in an honest and direct way without trying to be tactful.

Move the **goalposts**—to change the rules in a situation in a way that is not fair.

It's just not **cricket**—not right or fair behaviour.

Get the **red card**—receive official criticism for bad behaviour.

Be/feel **punch-drunk**—to be tired and confused etc.

##### 2. *Relationships—friends and family*

A real **chip off the old block**—similar in personality to one of his parents or an older family member.

A **twinkle** in his father's eye—was not even born (humorous).

A **fair-weather** friend—someone who is your friend only when things are going well for you.

An old **flame**—someone you had a romantic relationship with in the past.

Your own **flesh and blood**—relatives etc.

### 3. Money

**Scrimping and saving**—live very economically.

Enter our **rags to riches**—from poverty to wealth.

Pay over the **odds**—pay more than something is worth.

No-**expense**-spared—luxury etc.

### 4. Crime and punishment

Be on the **fiddle**—get money in an illegal or dishonest way.

Have his hand in the **till**—steal the business's money.

**Line** one's own pockets—make money for oneself in a dishonest way.

A short sharp **shock**—a brief but severe punishment etc.

### 5. Films, plays and books

Roll in the **aisles**—laugh a lot.

Send **shivers** down one's spine—to be very moving.

**Tread** the boards—act on stage

**Crowd**-puller—attract a lot of attention and interest etc.

### 6. Success and failure

Win one's **spurs**—do something to show that you deserve a particular position.

Come up **trumps**—complete an activity successfully or produce a good result.

Go down like a **lead balloon**—people don't like it at all etc.

### 7. Work

**Slog** one's guts out—work very hard.

Do a roaring **trade**—sell a lot of goods very quickly.

Go **bust**—be forced to close because of financial problems.

**Cushy** number—very easy job etc.

### 8. Animals

**Flog** a dead horse—waste time doing something that won't succeed.

Be the cat's **whiskers**—better than everyone else.

**Shed** crocodile tears—upset about the situation.

Might as well be hung for a sheep as a **lamb**—might as well do something more serious as you are going to be punished anyway etc.

## 3. Results

A lexical test was offered to students to reveal their current knowledge on such topics.

The results of the test in the control groups are shown in Figure 1.

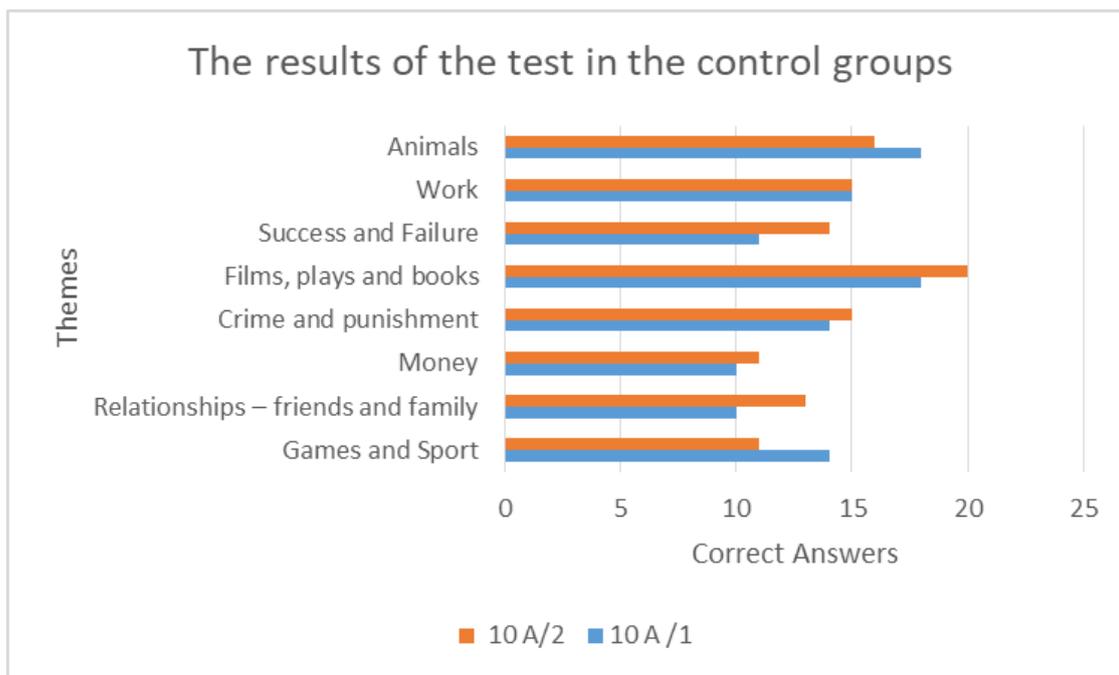


Figure 1. Results of the test in the control groups

The results of the test in the experimental groups are shown in Figure 2.

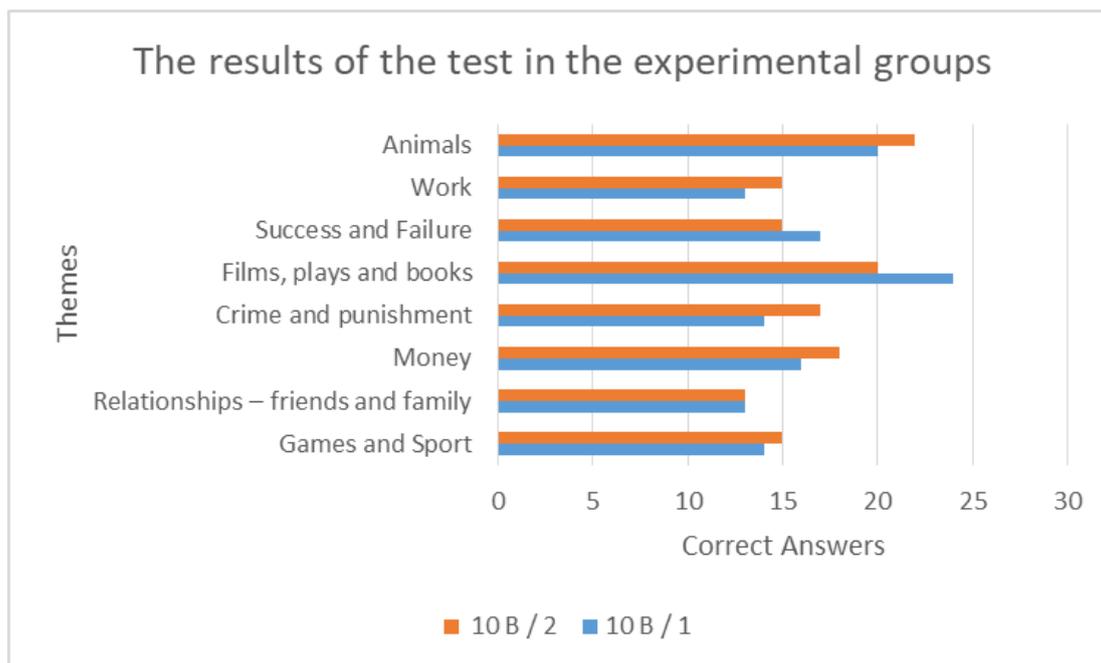


Figure 2. Results of the test in the experimental groups

All these data were taken into account during the experiment in the organisation of the educational process at the formative stage where various exercises proposed by the authors were implemented into EFL class. The following tasks were used by the students in working with the vocabulary units through idioms:

1. Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?
2. Complete each idiom.
3. Replace the underlined part of each sentence with an idiom.
4. Correct the mistakes in the given idioms.
5. Read the statements and answer the questions using vocabulary units.
6. Match the statements on the left with a suitable response on the right.
7. Rewrite the underlined part of each sentence using the word in brackets.
8. Complete the crossword.
9. Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.
10. Here are some errors made with idioms by candidates in upper-intermediate-level exams. Can you correct them?

The control experiment was aimed at assessing the effectiveness of using idioms as a teaching method to encourage and motivate students to acquire new vocabulary units and use them freely in EFL class. The control test was used to monitor and analyse the effectiveness of the used idioms in improving students' knowledge in the English vocabulary.

The results of the test in the control groups are shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Results of the test in the control groups

The results of the test in the experimental groups are shown in Figure 4.

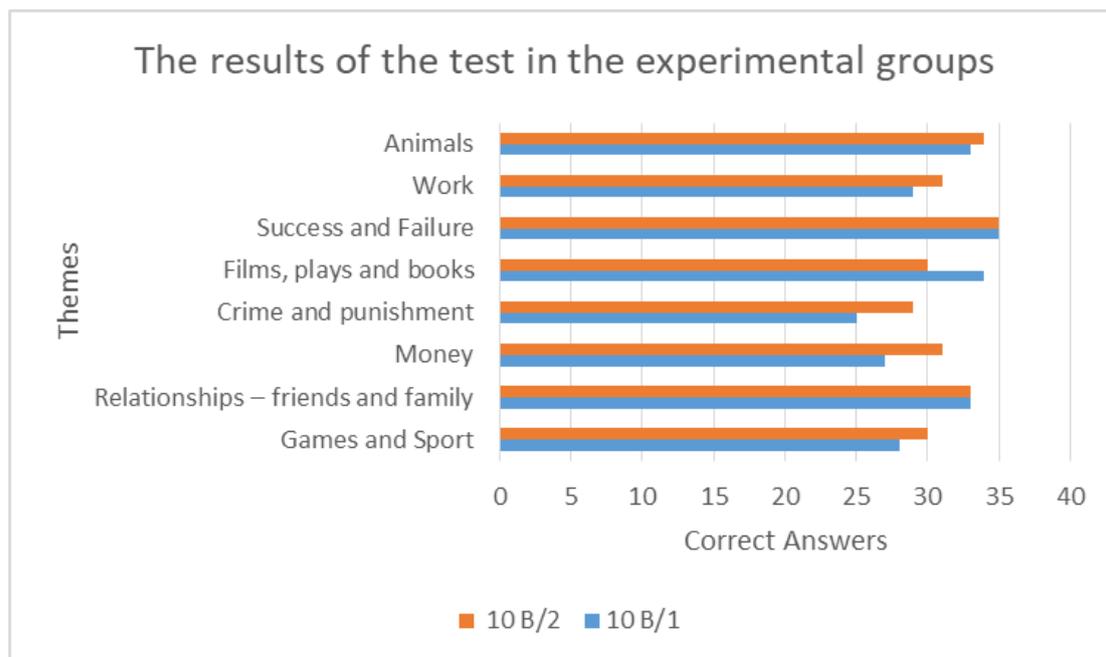


Figure 4. Results of the test in the experimental groups

Comparing the results of the control and experimental groups, we obtained discrepant results. Overall, they confirmed the positive trend in the change of students' vocabulary knowledge of English via idioms usage. Significantly, the quality of knowledge of students in the English language increased that, to some respect, can prove the formation of educational abilities and skills.

Anyone who works hard at enriching his vocabulary has every chance to achieve higher grades and results in acquiring English. The students with better vocabulary repertoire, undoubtedly, produce better quality of writing and speaking.

A bulk of new words can be perceived via learning idioms that serves to be a tool for consolidating lexis. What is more, the new words are learned effectively when the students are motivated and engaged into systematic practice. Thus, this paper proves the possibility of using idioms as a way to work out language means (in our case thematic blocks). With this skill, students are encouraged to improve their expertise.

#### 4. Conclusion and recommendations

'To kill more than two birds with one stone' in EFL class might seem impossible until you 'start the job'. In this study, there are described approaches and techniques with the aim in view to teach school students to 'kill two or even more birds with one stone', that is, to acquire topical vocabulary through idioms.

The authors of this paper suggest the following ways to make teaching topical vocabulary effective:

- create a psychologically positive vibe in the classroom
- encourage the students to read and listen a lot, specifically within the given topic
- let the students be more active in choosing the ways to consolidate the vocabulary
- provide enough training and interaction
- avoid continuous correction; let the students overcome the fear of speaking English, and assert that in these educational environments learners make far more rapid progress in topical vocabulary assimilation.

The goal in this study was to prove that teaching topical vocabulary through idioms in EFL class is resultant. This assumption turned out to be true for all steps of the pedagogical experiment, which was declared as the leading research method. What was observed at each stage of the experiment did not contradict the basic assumption. The approbation of the teaching techniques and study materials implemented into the experiment, proved itself positively. The obtained results indicated that teaching topical vocabulary through idiomatic expressions appealed to L2 learners. The chosen approaches, overall, did work. These can be considered the main conclusions of the study. English teachers can benefit from these materials and follow this or that teaching technique that best suits their teaching style.

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